New Chapters posted here now! Commander Jane Shepard. Colonist, War Hero, smart ass. When Spectre Nihlus Kryik says he is leaving the Normandy to investigate on his own, Shepard stops him. From that moment, ripples move out through the fabric of the reality we're familiar with, changing everything. Well, almost everything. The Reapers are coming.

In this first volume, Saren and the geth race to find the Conduit, starting the new cycle. Can Shepard beat them to it? Will this new reality be better equipped to deal with the Reaper threat, or will everything crumble to ruin? Canon-divergent where one small decision changes everything. Rated for language and smart assedness. Sexy times much later on.

Something AO3 doesn't do is make contacting people very easy ... outside of comments, of course. If you ever want to contact me privately, you are more than welcome to do so at cbdsw2@gmail.com. :D
The adventure begins with a turian Spectre and a pickup. Rewritten Aug 12, 2016 to give a better introduction to Jane "Sassy" Shepard.

**Torin** - Turian male the age of majority. (15)

**Buratrum** - In turian mythology, the realm of the spirits of dishonourable association.

The wind roared past the open ramp, only the kinetic barrier keeping the giant's fingers at bay as it swiped at the little frigate, eager to grab anyone careless enough to get too close. Commander Jane Shepard lifted her chin and took a deep breath to calm the troop of elcor gymnasts performing cartwheels in her belly.

_Not today, fee fi fo fum. Not today._

"Nihlus, you're coming with us?" The voice of the eager corporal to Shepard's right dragged her attention back where it belonged. Shepard shook her head, a combination of amusement and dread meeting the kid's enthusiasm. The fresh face beaming through the faceplate of his helmet screamed greener than grass, and when she'd spoken to him before suiting up, every other word out of his mouth had been about finding adventure and being a hero.

She couldn't remember ever being that eager. Of course, her CO, Captain David Anderson, probably recalled her first few years out of the academy a little differently. No doubt, she'd made the kid look positively reserved. Amazing how much a little time and experience kicked the crap out of that lust for adventure. She glanced over at the captain in time to intercept the eyebrow-raised glare of warning he sent her way. Or maybe not. Anderson knew her too well.

A smile goaded one corner of her mouth as she nodded in reply. "Behave yourself, Shepard," she said under her breath, imitating his gruff rumble. "Yes, sir. Warning received. Roger that, sir."

Anderson scowled without any heat and shook his head. Yep, he knew her too well.

Beside her, Jenkins bounced on the balls of his feet, his hero-worshipping gaze riveted to the turian Spectre standing a few metres away. Shepard pressed her lips together in a thin smile and gave her head a firm shake that felt far too similar to Anderson's.

Council Spectre Nihlus Kryik. She glanced at the turian. To Jenkins, having the Spectre along on their mission meant adventure, the romance of the lone space warrior righting great wrongs and accomplishing great deeds. To her … well, she had a slightly different view of the *torin*. A couple of years before Elysium, she'd seen him on the news, and developed an … interest. She'd met him once, but he probably didn't even remember. He'd spoken a single word to her, then returned to the party.

When she heard that he'd be coming along on the *Normandy*'s shakedown cruise, she'd looked forward to getting to know him. However, since he'd boarded, despite being everywhere she was, watching … always watching—her favourite had been waking up in the night to see him standing
over her, staring at her like she was some mystery he needed to solve—he hadn't spoken to her until the mission briefing a half hour before.

You really do pick the worst candidates to develop cru—

Shepard stomped on the end of that thought. The last thing she needed to do was start glowing like some neon strawberry. She took a deep breath or four and forced the taiko drummers in her chest to take a break before she looked up at the torin again. At least knowing that he'd put her name forward to join the Spectres lent context to his stalking.

Staring while you slept was still damned creepy.

The next day, she'd talked Anderson into letting her clean out a supply closet to use as a private cabin. It was tight, but at just a hair under five feet tall, she didn't need much space.

"Nihlus?" the kid asked again, raising his voice.

"I move faster on my own," Nihlus said, arching his neck a little as he replied to Jenkin's query. He cut a glance across at Shepard before jogging down the ramp toward the barrier.

What was that? Shepard shook off her distraction, her gut tying itself in a knot. Had Kryik said he was going in without backup? She leaped forward, racing after him. "Hold on a second." She caught his arm. "This isn't just a coffee and cake run any more. As much as I appreciate the whole army of one mystique, going in separately risks both the mission and our colony."

She squared her shoulders and met his wall of confident condescension without flinching. Yes, he was a Spectre. And yes, the Alliance needed her to pony up, to carry the banner and become their token first Spectre, but two young men and the folks on Eden Prime didn't need a kiss-ass, they needed Commander Shepard, freakin' hero of Elysium.

Nihlus tugged at her grip, but Shepard just stared back. "I'm going in against a hell of a lot of unknown enemies with a three person squad, one of whom acts like he graduated the academy three days ago." She glanced back at Jenkins. "Sorry kid." She saw Alenko grip the kid's shoulder, but focused back on the Spectre. "I'd like to bring them both back, and I'd like the kid to still have a family when we're done. Your experience—and your gun—could be the difference."

The Spectre's mandibles flared a little as a harsh laugh rumbled out of both larynxes. "I don't think so, Shepard. I'm a Spectre, and I don't answer to you." He yanked on his arm, but she held fast, forced to follow closer to the edge of the ramp. He stopped and stared down at her, looming with very real threat in his piercing green eyes. "Let go before I put you on your ass, Shepard."

Piercing green eyes? Really, Janey? Would you like me to get you a piece of paper so you can write him a note? I can pass it to him while the teacher isn't looking. You're an N7. Act like it.

Sometimes, she really wished she could slap her inner voice. Refocusing, she clenched her teeth and met the anger and arrogance in his stare with a resolute challenge, her heart thumping double time against her ribs. "You can try." She raised her eyebrows and met him head on, challenge to challenge.

No one got where Kryik had in life without a spine of pure steel, but neither had she. Presumably that was why he'd recommended her to the council.

"Approaching drop point two," the pilot called over the comm, his voice almost lost to the wind.

Shepard took a deep breath, her back straightening, her whole body vibrating with exhilaration as
the kinetic barrier dropped and the giant snatched at her. "Make your move, Nihlus. It's a good day for a throw down." Taking a deep breath, she tilted her head a little, her eyes wide but not challenging him any longer.

Captain Anderson, her CO, stepped up beside them. "Shepard, stow the pissing contest! We all know you're the big dog. You don't have to prove it every two minutes," he shouted over the roar. He buttressed a hand into her shoulder. "Let this one go."

Shepard tossed him a crisp nod. "Glad to, sir, as soon as our guest comprehends that I don't need a loose cannon messing up my theatre." She winced a little at talking back to Anderson. She'd put him through a lot over the years, but never talked back. Surely, he'd understand. If she let the seven-foot tall, armour-wrapped pile of attitude and condescension get away with anything unchallenged, he'd walk all over her. That was not acceptable. Not if her people were backing him up, and certainly not if partnership loomed in their future.

"Kryik," Anderson said, hollering over the wind, his face twisted into the 'trust me, I've dealt with this crap for over a decade' grimace, "she's not going to back down. Not when her squad is at risk."

The Normandy cut off the rest of the Captain's advice, the frigate dropping a couple of metres. At that moment, the Spectre stepped back and yanked hard on his arm, sending them both crashing to the deck. For one, seemingly endless second, Shepard thought for sure that she could save herself, but then ... gut freezing, limbs flailing, her grip slipped and she tumbled helplessly down the ramp and dropped off the edge. Twisting, she tried to contort her body around to roll through the landing, but gravity and her own gracelessness conspired to splat her against the earth like a ball of dropped clay.

Flopping on her back, she heaved, sucking vacuum for thirty seconds before she managed to drag what felt like a length of razor wire down her windpipe. Black spots and white sparks danced across her vision, but she bullied herself through the pile of invisible varren gnawing on her body parts and rolled over onto all fours. Looking over at the Spectre, she saw him staring back.

"You okay?" she asked, wincing when her voice came out reminiscent of a munchkin with an elephant sitting on its chest.

A grunt and pointed glare accompanied his nod. "You're a pain in the ass, Shepard." He sat up, legs loosely crossed, his eyes searching the ground around them.

"Yeah, it's sort of my thing." She spotted what he was looking for a couple metres off to her right and crawled over, picking his shotgun out of the weeds. Returning to his side, she passed it to him. "You're no bucket of charm yourself, by the way."

He chuffed and stretched backward, his spine cracking like someone walking on dry twigs. "I don't have to be. Army of one, remember?"

Squinting against the brightness, she sat back on her heels and looked over the area. "How could I forget?" Wincing a little, she stretched her neck then looked up. The Normandy had continued on to the second drop point and then headed back into orbit. No sign of the rest of her team, either. Damn. Well … it gave her a few moments to settle a couple of things with the Spectre.

"Look, Kryik," she said, a wheeze still laced through her words, "I know you're used to being that 'who gives a shit about the rest' sole operator. And I respect that, but as long as my people are on the ground backing you up, getting them out alive has to be my priority." She used her rifle to help lever herself to her feet and stumbled back a step before offering him a hand up. "And that means no wild cards running their own plays. I'm asking you to stay with the squad. Have our backs, and
we'll have yours."

"I'm a Spectre for a reason, Shepard," he replied, a lot of growl mixed into his subvocals. Still, he took her hand, accepting her help up onto his feet. Once on his feet, he cracked his neck and shrugged his armour up his shoulders.

"Yeah, and I'm an N7 for a reason, but I'm here, leading this squad." A faint sigh tumbled between her lips, belying the grin that kept trying to creep across her face. Stubborn as hell. She could work with that.

Gunfire, and not too far off, diverted her attention from arguing with the Spectre.

She turned back to stare into his eyes, eyebrows raised. "Do you have the slightest idea what that thing was on the feed? Whoever is attacking here, they tore through a platoon of Marines like they were fruit flies." She reached out, pressing her fingers against his gauntlet. "If you know anything about what's going on, you'd better spill it, right here, right now."

"I don't have to share anything. It's called Spectre authority." He stared down at her hand for a second before he stepped away. "And while I might be here to observe you in the field, on missions, you're my backup."

"Good luck with that." Shepard clenched her fists and looked out over the colony, keeping half an eye on the Spectre. Something about his reactions to her registered on an even stranger level than her reaction to him. She couldn't tell if he was just thrown off by her naturally abrasive charm, or … what … ?

Leaving worrying about Kryik's weirdness until they were far away from the colony crawling with unknown enemies, she turned a slow circle, trying to orient herself. They had a job to do … and the faster the better, before Eden Prime became a former human colony.

He turned toward the road and cracked his neck again. "Where in the name of buratrum are we? You landed us in the middle of nowhere."

A whole lot of nothing lay before her, stretching for klicks in all directions … well, nothing but trees, swamp, and floating things that looked like brains. She raised her hand to her ear, but before she could call for her squad, they jogged around a bend in the road. She waved to beckon them over, wincing as pain lanced down through her shoulder. Gripping it, she rolled it in the socket, trying to work out the kinks.

"Thank god, you're okay," Alenko sighed, stopping an arm length away. He reached out, patting her shoulder, an absent sort of caretaking gesture, as he checked her over. "Are you all right? We didn't …"

Shepard stepped back, answering his query with a curt nod. "Yeah, five by five. I stuck the landing like a pro." Shepard ignored Kryik's snort and jerked her head toward the colony, limping a few tentative steps. Her body felt as though everything had been shaken loose and reassembled just off plumb. Oh well, the kinks would work out once she started moving.

"Come on, let's save the day, gentlemen." Lifting into a jarring jog, she ran past the Spectre. "You coming?"

"I wouldn't push it, Commander," Alenko whispered, casting a dubious glance over his shoulder. "He looks about ready to plug you."

Shepard nodded, cutting the thread of regret that spooled through her guts at that. "Yeah well, he
wouldn’t be the first. And at least, now he knows what to expect.”

Alenko tilted his head a little, one eyebrow cocking at a decidedly smartass angle. "You do have a very … "

A crooked grin pulled up one corner of Shepard's mouth as the lieutenant searched for a diplomatic word.

"... colourful reputation, ma'am." His eyes roamed the right side of the road, his gait easy, gun held at low ready.

She could only imagine the scuttlebutt that circulated about her. A few percent of it might be true. The rest … well … . She looked back at the Spectre, a grim smile slicing across her face. She was a Spectre candidate, so who gave a fuck what anyone thought?

Think it a few more times. You’ll believe it one of these days.

Slapping duct tape over her inner voice, Shepard slowed a little to cast weary eyes at the buildings rising out of the landscape like strange megaliths, completely out of place, almost obscene in such an idyllic landscape. She’d seen ten colonies just like it on planets that ranged from nearly as beautiful and suitable as Eden Prime to frozen wastelands in the middle of being terraformed. Each one could only be described as an abomination. At least this planet made for a pretty backdrop to civilization's grotesquely inappropriate architecture.

Tracers fired back and forth, showing that the Alliance Marines stationed on the planet remained in the fight. Shepard felt a disconnected sort of pride in her fellow soldiers, having fought in their boots. Enemies advancing, civilians panicking . . . nothing she ever wanted to live through again. She sped back up. The best thing she could do for her brothers and sisters in uniform was find out what was going on and then put an end to it.

A blur of black and red in her peripherals, the turian Spectre ran past her. Shepard nodded to herself as he settled into a quick jog. Kryik certainly didn’t lack for spirit—not that she expected any less from a Spectre—their partnership might prove entertaining. Or they’d end up killing one another. Either way … good times.

Shepard waved to the Marines. "Come on, gentlemen, let's step it up before he leaves us behind."

She dug in, working out the last of the aches from the fall. "Alenko at my seven, Jenkins at five. Five metre spread and keep your eyes open."

They found the first bodies fifty metres along. Burned to unrecognizable husks, civilians and soldiers alike sprawled along the road like litter. Shepard winced, her gut twisting into a knot as she spotted a child half-covered by her mother. She wrenched her eyes away, concentrating on the pounding of her feet against the ground.

One … two … three … four. Breathe through it. It's nothing you haven't seen before. Just keep moving and do your job for these young men and for the colonists.

"God, what is going on here?" Alenko asked. The lieutenant moved up a little on her right flank, his gaze and assault rifle sweeping the forest on that side of the road. Jenkins just made a sorrowful sort of strangled moan.

Shepard knew far too much about how the young corporal felt and glanced his way. "Hold it together, Jenkins," she said, keeping her voice firm but empathetic. "You won't be any good to anyone if you lose it."
"Yes, ma'am." The corporal squared his shoulders and rolled his neck.

Shepard gave him a tight-lipped smile. "Good man, now let's speed up before Nihlus hogs all the bad guys." She didn't have far to go before she saw Nihlus take cover further up the road.

A half breath later his voice came through on her radio. "Drones up ahead, Shepard."

Finally, some damned answers. Maybe.

"Roger that." She gestured for Alenko and Jenkins to move up and take cover, then crouched low and ran forward. She pressed her back against a boulder then peered out. It took a moment, but then she spotted them. Three small, blue metal drones.

"Recon," she whispered into her radio. She switched her assault rifle for her sniper rifle and eased it open to its full length. Resting the weapon on the rock, she sighted down the first drone. A gentle squeeze on the trigger, and it exploded. She let the recoil settle, then sighted the second. Her shields let out staccato complaints as the remaining drones opened fire on her, but she fired and then only one remained. Nihlus finished it off before she could line up the shot.

She gave the Spectre a cocky half-smile as she switched to the assault rifle again. Glancing over her shoulder at the Marines, she called, "Come on, let's get moving, gentlemen. We're hell and gone from the beacon yet. Try to keep up, Nihlus." She grinned at the closed-dialect curse he spat her way.

"Not sure smacking the seven foot hornet's nest with a stick is the best plan," Alenko whispered from behind her. He moved up to her four o'clock and cut a sharp glance across at her that screamed, 'I'm just looking out for your ass, ma'am'.

"Neither is letting one get himself or my squad killed," Shepard countered. "Come on, let's keep moving before whoever is attacking does any more damage."

"Yes, ma'am," Jenkins said, his voice tight with grief and anger. "We can't let them get away with this." He appeared at her eight, his entire body trembling.

"Keep cool, Jenkins," Shepard warned. "We do this by the numbers." Watching him through narrowed eyes, she searched for the small signs and signals that he'd flipped his shit, but he settled.

"Yes, ma'am." His tone smoothed out some of her scowl.

She let out a breath and set out. Their mission couldn't stand many more delays.

"I'll scout ahead," the Spectre called, taking off. He held his shotgun confidently at low-ready and loped across the uneven ground with an ease that made her hate him a little. He had to be hurting, but it sure didn't show.

"Stay in sight." She let out a semi-exasperated sigh and stepped up to a ground-eating run. She hadn't really expected a Spectre with as many awards and citations as Kryik to bend to her, but she'd wanted to know how far she could push before he pushed back. He hadn't let her down. Heaven knew she loved a challenge.

They took out another small squad of drones as they rounded a shallow bend in the road through the open forest, but must have covered a kilometre of ground before sound of a real gun battle tore through the air. Finally, some enemies to sink her teeth into. Shepard stepped around a huddle of burned bodies on the road, making a beeline up the grassy slope. She held up a fist to halt the two marines then waved them into cover on her flanks. Once they took their positions, she moved...
forward, keeping her profile low and sticking to the shadows under the massive trees.

Gunfire meant survivors, and survivors meant answers.

Peering around a conifer analog, Shepard spotted a soldier in pink and white armour race around a boulder. Her breath caught as two strides out, rounds peppered the Marine's back, knocking her flat. Letting off curses that made Shepard's ears burn, the soldier rolled over, firing at enemies the commander couldn't see. Unwilling to take any chances losing her one witness, Shepard ran out, ignoring Alenko's shouts of protest, and grabbed the Marine's arm.

"Come on, soldier!" the commander hollered, "give me a hand here." With Shepard hauling and the other woman scrambling between shooting off rounds, they made it behind the nearest cover.

"You okay?" Shepard barked without looking down. Rifle-first, she peered out around the rock. Three … machines … with flashlights for heads walked up the path, guns, the like of which Shepard had never seen before, at the ready. "Shit, what the hell are these things?" Lifting her hand to her ear, she opened a channel. "Kryik, where in fuck's name are you? Could those be geth?"

"Your eleven o'clock, thirty metres."

Shepard looked out. When the machines opened fire, she returned bursts of three rounds, taking out one. The other two fell a half-second later as Nihlus and her boys opened fire. After ensuring that the field was clear, she glanced back. "Name, Marine? Are you okay? Do you know what the hell these things are?"

The soldier scrambled to her feet and snapped a quick salute. "Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams, ma'am, and I'm fine, just singed. And yes, I think they're geth," the Marine said. A heavy flush burned her cheeks a blotchy red, and her chest heaved as she struggled to catch her breath, but the chief's hands remained steady on her rifle as she moved to cover Shepard's six.

"Geth. Shit." Shepard shook off the gelid, superstitious fingers that crawled down her spine. It didn't matter. Incredulity could wait. If Eden Prime was being attacked by fluffy pink bunnies, they could stop to ponder it once the furry bastards were dead.

She rolled her shoulders and nodded to Alenko and Jenkins. "I'll take point with the chief, gentlemen. Watch our flanks." She leaned out, taking fire against her shields as one of the machines appeared around a cluster of rocks. All four of them opened fire. It went down, letting out a short burst of squealing and chattering like a bad extranet connection.

"I'm moving out ahead again," Nihlus called, sprinting across the grassland toward a series of walls.

"Damn it, Kryik. Hold up for five bloody seconds!" Shepard let out the foulest curse she could think of and took off, waving to the chief. "Come on, Williams. We'll give you the 411 after I shoot that turian in the ass. Double time people, we've got a runaway Spectre on our hands." She set off, moving quickly, her rifle up and in constant motion as they crossed a cleared area, dotted with crates.

Partway down the slope, she stopped and looked up at a huge, metal spike. Near the top, a person dangled, the spike rammed straight through his gut. "What in the name of sweet baby Jesus is that?" A clammy salamander of that superstitious fear wrapped itself around her heart. After fighting on countless worlds for more than a decade, she knew only one thing for sure: Sapient beings possessed an infinite imagination when it came to new and horrific ways to kill each other.
Impalement is actually a really old way to kill people, Janey.

Williams shuddered and glanced up, but quickly away. Her throat worked for a long time before she spat out, "The geth have been impaling any prisoners they take on these things. I don't know why."

Shepard watched the chief out of the corner of her eye even as she forced herself to look at the details of the spike just in case it became important. As an engineer, she might be able to sabotage them . . . something . . . anything to give the colonists a better shot.

"Psychological warfare, maybe?" Alenko offered, his face twisting behind his helmet's half visor. "Would geth care about that?" He moved to cover the road ahead, Jenkins following him.

Shaking her head, Shepard finished her scans of the spike. Without commenting, she closed her omni-tool and started back up the road, not wanting Nihlus to get too much of a lead on them. Suddenly, she very much wanted his unflappable, stubborn, arrogant ass at her twelve. "Lovely planet you've got here, Williams."

"Yes, ma'am, until this morning, it sure was." Williams said, her face contorted with an expression of combined nausea and rage.

Shepard only made it a few more metres before stopping in a semi-sheltered area that looked as though it had seen some heavy excavation. Brisk hand signals sent Alenko and Jenkins to watch the road ahead and behind. "This the dig site?" she asked, tossing the question over her shoulder. Squinting thoughtfully, she crouched to examine the ground. Lots of heavy, two-toed tracks everywhere.

Williams stepped up beside the commander, her gun sweeping around her in ceaseless arcs. "They must have moved the beacon to the spaceport. It was right there last I heard, but the other squads … they were taken out right away. The rest of my squad … ." She swallowed hard, her words dragging to a halt when Shepard looked up at her. Williams gestured to an open spot in the walls. "The spaceport is up those ramps, ma'am."

Shepard stood and laid a heavy hand on the chief's shoulder for a moment. When Williams nodded that she had her shit together, Shepard mirrored it, then headed out, jogging past Alenko through the gap. Beacon moved, only a few drones and a small number of clean up troops in the way ... she didn't have much time before she was stuck explaining to the entire galaxy how her team let the geth steal the beacon and destroy Eden Prime. "Let's keep moving." She raised her fingers to her ear and opened a channel even as she hoofed it up the ramps. "Kryik, where the hell are you?" She looked to Alenko. "I swear if I have to ask that question one more time, I'm going to plug him myself."

"Closing in on the spaceport now, Shepard. There are a lot of spikes down here, bodies hanging from them. Not many geth. I'm moving forward."

"Wait for us. We're two minutes behind you." She slowed as they reached the top of the ramps, the area opening up into a camp made from prefab trailers. She crouched low, moving at a quick walk. As much as she didn't want Nihlus to get too much of a head start on her, she wasn't about to charge in like an ass, either.

"No wonder Spectres have such short life expectancies," Alenko muttered, his voice a little breathy from the climb. He settled into a slightly crouched walk, a vigilant, professional presence on her flank.
Shepard nodded and motioned for him and Jenkins to check out the trailers ahead. "Williams, stay on my six. Keep your eyes peeled. We'll move up to have eyes on that space port, gentlemen. Join us when you've cleared the trailers."

"Yes, ma'am." The two men jogged toward the first trailer.

Shepard and Williams worked their way forward, sticking to the cover provided by the rocky shelf on the left-hand side of the road. Up ahead, Shepard heard a terrible screeching sound, metal sliding over metal, and looked out. The spikes lowered, folding into themselves. The bodies stuck at the point began to move.

"They're still alive!" Williams called out, jumping forward to help.

Shepard grabbed Williams and dragged her back. "They're not people anymore. Look at them. The geth have turned them into some sort of machines." She brought her assault rifle up, firing on the dessicated-looking machine creatures as they detached from the spikes and lurched toward her position.

*Robot zombies, Janey? There's a good chance you cracked your head on a rock falling out of the ship. What's next? Vampires?*

Shepard groaned and hit one of the ex-humans with an overload. Her first adventure as a Spectre candidate was supposed to have been all coffee and cake. She peppered them with three round bursts from her Mattock. Coffee and cake run? Bullshit! 'Yes, sir, I'll pick up your beacon for you. No problem.' Throw in a side order of geth and robot zombies. Why not? Fuck.

"I so didn't need this today," she grumbled.

Williams leaned out, firing. "Don't think you've got much choice, ma'am."

"I never do." Shepard took one of the husks down a couple of metres away, then staggered back as it let out a blast of energy. The jolt tore down her shields and sizzled along her skin like someone had dumped a bucket of angry wasps into her armour. 'Ouch! Fuck that. Okay, important note. Don't let them do that." Keeping low, she ran forward, taking cover behind a trash can. She took down another robot zombie and dashed forward again when the way was clear. "Why don't I ever get the cushy pick ups? Shepard, the asari councillor left her poodle on Illium. Swing by and pick it—"

Shepard stopped mid-rant as a screeching roar, like a thousand metal banshees being ripped apart by dreadnoughts, tore through her head. She reached up to turn down the ambient on her aural implants, but it didn't help nearly as much as she hoped. The horrible, mechanical cacophony burrowed straight through her like a case of auditory insanity.

"Sweet baby Jesus, what the fuck?" She pushed forward, her limbs moving with all the ease of rusted iron.

"Holy shit!" Williams squawked, her rifle dropping to her side as her jaw hung slack, her eyes looking up and up.

Shepard looked up, understanding the Marine's reaction as a massive ship blasted off the surface, taking her stomach and all the strength in her knees with it. It stood at least two kilometres tall and looked like a cross between a cuttlefish, a cockroach, and something that would have made her wake up from the nightmare covered in sweat. "What the fuck?" she whispered slowly. Horror stole all the air from her lungs and replaced it with ice. "Kryik, you seeing this?"
"I see it, Shepard. I'm just about at the spaceport. There are a few geth between my position and the platform."

Shepard frowned, tearing her stare away from the massive dreadnought, if that was what it was, seeing the Spectre moving toward the wreckage of a loading dock. He flattened a geth with a blast from his shotgun, seeming very cavalier about the largest, most terrifying ship ever seen. "Do you know what that thing is?"

"No. Stop gawking at it, and get your ass down here." She saw him cast a glance over his shoulder toward her position.

"No need to be a jackass. I've got your six." Grabbing Williams's arm, Shepard gathered all the frayed ends that the space-bound nightmare had unraveled, and moved forward. "Come on, let's keep going."

Alenko and Jenkins appeared at the top of the rise, both stopping, their jaws dropping in unison as their gazes followed the monstrous ship back to space. Shepard caught their attention with a quick jerk of her hand, motioning for them to cover Nihlus's right flank.

Shepard traded back to her sniper rifle. "Okay, my lovely, let's clear the dock for the good Spectre." She scoped the closest geth. The first shot tore down its shields, the second laid it out. She moved forward until the next geth appeared in scope and dropped it as well, clearing the way for Nihlus to move onto the platform. He advanced cautiously, shotgun sweeping the area.

Shepard began to lower her gun, ready to head down and join up with the Spectre. Movement between a couple of tall crates snapped the rifle right back to her eye. Through the scope, she identified the movement as a second turian. The second one wore weird looking silver armour and moved with the same loose-jointed confidence as Nihlus.

Nihlus talked to him. They seemed friendly. Raising her finger to her ear to ask for a situation update, Shepard saw Nihlus turn his back on the other turian to look over the devastation. She relaxed and released the breath she'd been holding.

_Nihlus knows him. It's cool. We're all friends._

She began to lower her gun, aiming to get up and join them, but stopped as the second turian moved. The alarm at the base of her skull went off, sending sharp spines of warning burrowing into her brain.

_Watch him, Janey. He's off._

Slick as shit, the other turian raised a pistol, pointing it at the back of Kryik's head. "Shit!" Shepard's hand snapped to the trigger, but in her haste, the shot went wide, just nicking the second turian's shields. Still, it alerted Nihlus, who spun around and saw the gun. The pair went down in a tangle of limbs, completely destroying Shepard's chance of getting off a deadly shot. Switching out her guns, she leaped up and raced for the dock.

A single shot tore through the air, and the turian in silver scrambled up, running across the platform. Shepard's heart stopped as her eyes locked on Nihlus. The Spectre lay sprawled on his back, unmoving. She bolted to the end of the walkway and leaped down, her ankles and knees letting out yelps on impact.

"Don't you dare die on me, Spectre," she growled under her breath as she sprinted across the grass. "I'm not explaining that to the damned council." The air burned her throat as she forced her legs to
move faster, leaping over the wreckage in her way.

"Move in, people," she called, between breaths. "Nihlus is down!"
Saren has tried to kill Nihlus. Shepard winged the silver turian, but was it enough to save Nihlus?

**Torin:** A male turian of the age of majority. (15)

A fly in amber, held prisoner between horror and rage, Shepard stared. Three, then four, heartbeats surged through her veins, slow and sluggish, before she shook off the shock and charged. Blind fury thrust aside her annoyance with Nihlus, a slick, bile-sour sludge of certainty crawling up the back of her throat. She'd just witnessed the worst sort of betrayal.

*Betrayal is betrayal, Janey. If Nihlus trusted that bastard—his friend—that just makes him a fool.*

Her eyes riveted to the fallen Spectre, Shepard pushed harder. He'd better damned well be alive just so she could kick his ass. If he'd just stayed with the squad … . She shoved that thought aside and let the nitrous of adrenaline surge through her muscles. Heart pounding hard and steady, she sprinted onto the dock, leaping all four stairs in one stride. As she ran past a pile of crates, she saw the other turian disappear around yet another stack of shipping containers at the far end.

"You think you can destroy a human colony ... take down one of my team and just run away?" Shepard shouted, bringing her assault rifle to bear on the turian's back. "Oh no you don't! No one shoots my people ... not even the annoying-as-shit one!" She pelted across the dock, gaining on him a little as he dodged crates.

Then the other turian reached a down ramp and hit full speed, a hail of bullets chasing him across the platform. He slid around the corner onto the cargo train, going down on one hip before his talons caught hold, and he scrambled up. Bullets chased him the length of the train, but then a large shadow blocked out the sun, slapping Shepard out of her rage-fugue. Looking up and shading her eyes against the brilliant sky, she watched as a ship shaped like a giant bug flew overhead. Geth dropped from it, sending her into a full retreat.

"Shit. Too many." Shepard held her arm out, backing Williams up as well until the wall of crates covered their backs. Spinning around, Shepard turned her attention to the fallen Spectre. They needed him up, gun in hand, to get through the next part alive. When she saw Nihlus sprawled on his back, unmoving, bile began to burn the back of her throat once more.

As she ran, she gestured for the others to follow the fugitive. "Damn it! Williams, Alenko, Jenkins … see where that bastard went. Watch each others' backs." She knelt next to Nihlus, concern replacing her fury. "Hey, Kryik, come on, get your ass up." Squinting a little, she looked him over for blood, but only a thin stream trickled from a graze on his crest. Relief settled back into antagonism. If Nihlus hadn't insisted on running ahead, they'd have nailed that other bastard. Tapping the turian's cheek with the back of her hand, she tried to rouse him. "Come on, damn it, that other guy is getting away."

"The other one took off on the cargo train, Shepard!" Williams called appearing at the end of the wall of crates. "There's a hell of a lot of geth covering his trail."
Shepard looked up without raising her head and snapped a quick nod. Damn, if the day just didn't keep getting better and better. "Understood, Chief." Shepard dropped her stare back to the Spectre's face. Winding up a little, she slapped him, her hand cracking hard and sharp against the tough plates of his face. "Get up, damn it, or I'm leaving your lazy ass behind."

The Spectre stirred, a long groan spooling from his throat as he raised a hand to press against the wound on his head. "Saren ... ."

"Is getting away while you lie there." Shepard leaned a hand on his chest, holding him down as she slapped his medigel. Better safe than sorry. She stared into his eyes, searching for signs of concussion. But both pupils seemed even and reacted to the light. She let out a long breath. "Are you seriously injured?"

He shook his head and pushed against her a little. "No, let me up." His eyes flashed with fury, easing her concern. Good. Anger she could work with.

"Then up and at 'em, Spectre." She stood and offered him her hand, pulling him to his feet when he took it. She made sure he could stand on his own, then trotted after her team. "Let's move, Kryik. I've already spent too long wringing my hands over your fragile bod." Grinning at the muttered curse he sent after her, she nodded. Definitely okay.

Shepard skirted her people, moving down a long ramp. Risking, and taking, a great many hits to her shields, she traded cover for a better sight line and bolted across the train's loading ramp to duck behind cover on the cargo train. The geth had dug into positions further up, the train's sectional dividers providing good cover. In addition, portable barriers glowed here and there. "The invitation didn't say anything about BYOB." She changed guns yet again. "One day, I'll remember to strap these beauties together."

Lifting the sniper rifle, she couched it against her shoulder. A long, slow breath blew between softly pursed lips as she centred her cross-hairs on the flashlight head of a massive green unit barrelling down the train at her. "Come now, Ingrid, me luv," she whispered. "Let's show 'em how we do it sniper style."

"Seriously?" Williams said, a sharp bark of laughter slicing the air. "Ingrid?"

Shepard flattened the green unit, its head erupting in a spray of white fluid. She moved on to a white unit pinning them down with a barrage of rockets. It's head exploded a half second later, giving her a moment to breathe. "What's wrong with Ingrid?" she asked, lining up her next target. "My nan's name was Ingrid." In her peripherals, she saw Nihlus ducking into cover on her flank. Once he took position, she rolled out from behind her barrier and sprinted forward four metres.

"I'm still too stuck on 'do it sniper style' to be worried about the thing's name," the turian grumbled, moving up to take cover at her side. He didn't glance her way, but she saw his mandibles flutter. He peppered two trooper units with shotgun rounds as they closed.

"You're all just jealous ... " Shepard chuckled then waited for a break in a second rocket trooper's fire to send a round through its head. "... but I've gotten used to that." She took out another couple geth and moved forward, keeping herself low. "Alenko, Jenkins, Williams, keep moving up, people. Camp on your own time."

They fought their way up the train, covering one another as they moved. Shepard grumbled the entire way, muttering every time another geth appeared. The other turian's lead grew every second they spent dancing with his geth peons. Finally, the last flashlight exploded in a shower of white crap, and she ran to the train controls. The muscles in her thighs and lower back trembled with
fatigue, but she just kicked her feet and shook them out as she brought up the interface.

Her fingers and gaze slipped over the haptic controls, familiarizing her with them. "All right. If I were the 'go' button on a cargo train, I would be ... ."

Nihlus pushed in, his towering bulk shoving her off to one side. "I'm beginning to have major doubts about your general competence and sanity, Shepard," he muttered. The next second, he grunted, the air whooshing from him as she smacked her rifle butt into his stomach.

Remorse smacked satisfaction on the head at his reaction. "Oh, don't be such a baby. I barely touched you. Sensitive there, huh? Good to know since you seem prone to shoving people around." She pressed the control, activating the train. "I could have done that without giving your buddy an extra thirty-second head start if you'd just left me alone." She glanced over her shoulder, meeting his glower and raising him a scowl. "Did they teach you to be a bully in Spectre training?"

"Yes. Did they teach you to be an obnoxious, abrasive ass in N7 training?" he grumbled, rubbing the armour over his stomach.

Shepard stifled a genuine grin, keeping anything real crammed behind her professional, smart ass soldier mask. "Nope. That's an inborn gift right there. Now, go relax until we catch up with your friend." She patted his cheek, a starched smile ironed onto her face. She'd started pressing his buttons to learn what sort of person he was. She'd heard all about his heroic, bad-ass Spectre side on the news over the years, but what he'd accomplished as a Spectre didn't interest her nearly as much as much as the torin, himself. She wouldn't be trusting his medals or citations to have her back when they went into battle. She knew from long years of experience that people like Nihlus didn't give anything away for free; keeping everything locked tight behind heavy barriers. And she knew that she'd have to work to knock clues free.

But that was before the other turian shot him.

Her priorities needed to change. She needed to keep him functional, to beat that dull fog of shock and betrayal out of his eyes. The only way she knew to do that was to piss him off, turn him against her, keep him externalizing the anger and hurt. Others could, no doubt, perform the same task with greater finesse and compassion, but Nihlus was stuck with her. So ... .

He grabbed her wrist and leaned in close, his nose touching the end of hers. "We're going to have some things to settle when we get back to the ship, Shepard." Despite his words, she didn't feel anger coming off him, at least not any aimed at her. She made a convenient target, but what had happened on the platform had shaken him far deeper than he let on. "Stop with the mockery, or I'll put you on your ass."

One corner of her mouth twitched. Good, some fire remained under the brittle glassiness. She didn't know who the other turian was, but she prided herself on knowing betrayal when she saw it. Okay, mission priority shift: keep the Spectre from committing suicide by bad guy ... preferably without angering him to the point of murdering her.

She grinned and reached up to tap the end of his nose with her fingertip. "Oh yeah, I like you. You've got promise. We're going to get along just fine." She winked, backing him off, then shot a glare at the Marines that told them to stow their chuckling.

"So, who's your buddy?" she asked, turning to see how close they were to their destination. They still had a way to go yet. She kept her back to him, removing the pressure of her stare and leaving a vacuum for him to fill. "Another Spectre?"
Nihlus sighed, a low reverberation following it. "Yes. His name's Saren. He was my mentor when I was a recruit." He chuffed as if dismissing the entire thing.

Shepard scowled. Ouch. She policed her voice, keeping her tone even. "Any idea what he's doing here?" Damn, his mentor. It'd be like Anderson trying to kill her. She shuddered, not knowing if she'd still be standing.

She heard Nihlus move to the gate off to the one side, ready to disembark. "None, but I think the conclusion to be drawn here is pretty clear. He wouldn't have tried to shoot me in the head if he was here to stop the geth." His tone clearly declared the conversation concluded. Instead, Shepard turned to face him on a oblique sort of angle.

Shepard shrugged, an empathetic ache coiling in her chest at the rounded set of his shoulders, the way his mandibles hung a little. "We'll see. Conclusions can be drawn hastily. Let's finish clearing out these metal bastards and secure the beacon." She slapped his back as the train ground to a halt. "Come on, Kryik. We've got work to do."

Work, which started the moment she stepped off the train, nearly tripping over a demolition explosive. Her heart stopped, then kicked straight into third gear. "Oh, good, because my day just wasn't nearly fucked enough." She crouched down over it and cracked open the panel. "The rest of you, go ahead, see if there are others. Move!" Her omnitool sparked to life. "Okay, Instructor Myers, let's see if you knew what you were doing in Ordinance Disarming 403."

She pulled a panel, staring for one helpless second at the foreign mass of wires, circuits, and electronics before her engineer mind began to follow the connections and put together the picture. "I really hope I didn't sleep through this module." She pulled the main circuit board and flipped it over. "Okay. Pull wire A, cross it with ... ."

"More disarming; less senseless chatter!" Nihlus said, his voice practically barking in her ear. "There's another one up here."

"And another here," Williams called.

"I've got this one, Shepard," Nihlus said. "Take care of Williams's."

Shepard finished disarming the first device, picked up her rifle and ran after them. She dashed across a short bridge, geth rounds peppering her shields, and slid into cover behind a giant crate. Peeking out, she took stock, just to find another of the green destroyer barrelling down the walkway.

"What is it with the suicidal ones?" She swung out, pounding it with three round bursts from her assault rifle until it went down, along with her shields, and slid into her feet. Stepping over and around it, Shepard strode forward, looking for any more devices, taking a couple of bullets before she stepped behind cover.

"Williams, where are you?" she called, homing in on a waving arm from an alcove ten metres ahead. "Gotcha."

Kaidan hit the wall next to her and gave her medigel. "You're shot, Commander. Do you have some krogan in you?"

She leaned out around him and took out a trooper. "I don't know, I might. Mama was a big woman." With their tell-tale buzz-zap, her shields alerted her to their recovery, and she bolted forward to disarm the next device. "If someone could watch my ass while I disarm this—"
metaphorically, not actually Alenko—I'd appreciate it."

He took cover just ahead of her, sputtering. "What? Ma'am ... I'd never! I ... can't ... ."

Nihlus chuckled as he ran by. "You're going to have to throw up some shields there, Lieutenant."

Jenkins took cover across from Alenko while Ashley trotted past, laughing the whole way. "Wow, I've never seen anyone go that red, LT. I think your face might be hemorrhaging."

"Why is everyone joking?" Jenkins hollered, his voice strained and high, almost hysterical. "People are dying! My folks could be dying!"

"Hey, kid," Alenko said, stepping up and allowing Shepard to concentrate on her work, "it's just a coping mechanism. We're still working as fast as we can to make sure Eden Prime stays standing. Breathe and relax a little. We'll get it done. The commander and Spectre Kryik are pros. They've seen a lot worse than this and kicked its ass."

Shepard didn't know if that was true, but let the rest of the banter wash over her as she pulled apart the third of the devices. The timers ticked below two minutes, her heart slowing until it pounded in time with the countdown, each beat thumping heavy and sonorous in her ears. Glancing up, she looked for the Spectre. Where was Nihlus? He needed to find the last one, and quickly. A second later, the sound of his long, heavy stride hammering down the metal walkway eased the breath from her lungs.

The timer in front of her died with the faint, doppler-esque whine of electronics powering down. "Praise be to the great, glowing asses of the Enkindlers," she said, the words tumbling out alongside a sigh. Leaping to her feet, she chased after the Spectre, sliding into cover behind the railing as several geth dropped in on the other side of the bridge. The enemies' angle negated Nihlus's cover as he worked over the last device.

"Damn!" he cursed, a bullet hitting the panel he was working on.

Shepard winced as he snatched his hand back, giving it a reflexive shake. "You okay?" She jumped into the line of fire, using her shields to protect him. Even as she switched guns, one eye kept watch on her shield indicator. Hopefully the damned things held long enough.

"Yeah," he said, sounding grumpy and embarrassed. Poor Spectre, having to depend on someone to cover him. How it must burn.

A slightly manic, battle-high fueled grin answered that idea. "Just keep working." She caressed the rifle's long barrel on her way to the trigger. "Ingrid and I have your back." She couched the stock in her shoulder, and, sighting with practised ease, sent bullets ripping straight through the flashlights on each head. "Bulls-eye, Ingrid sweetie." She kissed the rifle and traded it out. "Kryik, you done back there? Please tell me you're not just crouching there staring at my ass."

Nihlus swung past her, strong and confident. The earlier fog of shock had evaporated in favour of a much more productive, diamond-hard rage. "I was wondering if it came in adult size."

A startled laugh escaped; some fire left indeed. Shepard grinned and hefted her assault rifle, jogging down the remainder of the walkway, cackling to herself. "Come on, people, let's get moving. We've got a beacon to secure."

The familiar screeching of the husk spikes greeted them when they ran out onto the docking platform. Shepard groaned, and started backing up to buy some room as the husks scrambled toward them, dodging and stumbling all over the place.
"It's like that damned retro game at the fairs," Jenkins said, then cursed as he peppered the dodgy things with lead.

"Whack-A-Mole," Ashley called back, "yeah. Could someone tell these buggers to stand still?"

"Or at least run in a straight line, Williams?" Shepard laughed, pounding one down, but close enough that its dying discharge shredded her shields and seared along her skin. "That's going to leave a mark," she muttered between clenched teeth.

"Weren't you supposed to remember not to let them do that again?" the gunnery chief asked, her voice sharp.

"Yeah, and damn, it stings." The last husk down, Shepard traded guns, able to see three geth taking cover behind crates.

"You'll never hit them from here, Shepard," Nihlus called, moving up, trading his shotgun for his HMWSR X.

As she pulled her much older version of the same gun from her back, Shepard didn't bother replying. She preferred to let her bullets do her bragging. Nestling Ingrid into her shoulder, she sighted down the four inches of flashlight head sticking up above the crate. One shot, down. Next. One shot, down. She moved up a couple of feet to get a better angle on the last one, sighted it down. Crack. Ingrid sent a bullet splitting the air, right into the back of the geth's arched neck. Crack. The second one sent it sprawling across the dock in a shower of white fluid.

Shepard sighed, the corner of her mouth lifting, the heady satisfaction of three targets in four shots warming her through. "God, I love you." Trading Ingrid for her equally ancient Mattock, she said, "Come along, Roger, old bean. Let's get this done. Glory hallelujah."

She said nothing to Nihlus as she passed, feeling no immediate need to rub his face in her marksmanship. Surely, if he'd given her a Spectre-candidate recommendation, he'd dug deep enough into her record to know about her one great talent. Well, one of her great talents. She'd yet to find a use or need for cross-country skiing in her work. As exciting as her life could be at times, it wasn't a Bond film.

Movement at the far end of the docking floor caught her eye, apparently at the same time it caught Nihlus's. The Spectre spun around to face the flash of silver armour racing along the walkway between platforms. Fury sizzled through the torin, lightning striking close enough to raise the hair on her arms.

"Saren!" The Spectre raced off in hot pursuit, Alenko and Williams following. Shepard almost called them back, but then just let them go. At least Nihlus would have backup if he actually caught the other Spectre, and chasing Saren around would keep Nihlus busy.

She focused on the tall, slender piece of technology standing ten metres away. Her priority had to be getting the beacon onto the Normandy. The pillar of gunmetal grey glowed with green energy. Something about the fine, emerald nimbus drifting from it stabbed skeletal fingers of dread into her guts. A long, slow scowl pulled her brow into a knot. "Hey, Williams, was this thing glowing before?"

"No, ma'am." The chief's voice wheezed a little over the sound of her boots pounding against the metal decking. "Damn, turians are fast."

Shepard glanced toward the chase, bringing Roger to her shoulder. The second Spectre paused in
her sights for the barest moment, glancing back. When he saw Nihlus gaining on him, Saren jumped over the railing, disappearing into the tops of the trees below. Shock paralysed Shepard for a half second before she lifted her scope to her eye and scanned the trees. Nothing. No sign of a mangled corpse tangled in branches. Rushing forward, she scanned the ground. Still nothing.

What the hell? A jump like that could easily break his legs, if it didn't kill—

A thick, metal surfboard zipped up out of the canopy, the silver-armoured Spectre standing on it. Letting out a jagged cough, she stared, jaw hanging. "Great glowing ... Well, isn't that slick as shit?" Shepard lowered her rifle, the all too familiar, toxic sludge of defeat slithering through her gut as she watched Saren fly off over the colony.

"Damn, why don't I have one of those?" she muttered under her breath. She glanced at the young Marine standing just off to her left, his face frozen in a comical mask that shifted between horror and awe. "Jenkins, I have a birthday coming up. I want a flying surfboard."

The corporal gave himself a shake, then nodded as the shock drained away. "Understood, ma'am."

Movement at the far end of the dock, drew Shepard's attention. Sucking in a quick, gasping breath, she braced herself to yell at Nihlus as he raced up to the railing and grabbed it, coiling to leap after Saren. The damned fool would kill himself and for nothing! Then, using a biotically enhanced surge of speed, Alenko lunged, grabbing the Spectre with both hands. Throwing himself backwards, the LT yanked Nihlus away from the long drop, the pair of them tumbling to the deck.

Nihlus leaped to his feet, talons poised to kill and aimed at Alenko.

**What did I do to get saddled with this turian and all his fucking drama?**

She opened a private channel to the Spectre. "Hey! Kyrik! Stand down. Alenko just saved your fucking life." She hawked up the smoke coating the back of her throat. "Your lover's spat will keep until we get this beacon secured." She shook her head and turned back, joining Jenkins over by a bank of lockers. "Hack these, will you kid? See if there are any mods or ammo."

"We need to know why Saren was here and what he was doing, Shepard!" Kyrik shouted back, his voice a vicious growl. He spun away from Kaidan, turning all his rage on her, and damn, it burned, even across a hundred metres of dock.

"And how does you leaping down thirty metres to break both legs while he flies away on the magical surfboard get us any answers? Stand down. We'll deal with your boyfriend once we get this thing on board the *Normandy.*" She winced as she continued, knowing she was pushing into the truly insensitive. "Come on, get back here, and I'll give you a kiss to tide you over until you get that sweet, sweet turian ... whatever it is you do ... again."

"Fuck you, Shepard!" She jumped at the vehemence behind the swear. He'd been hanging around humans too long. "Don't you know when to just shut up?" His volume practically ripped out her eardrum, the subvocals promising evisceration.

She just smiled despite the grip his rage squeezed around her heart, and closed the channel. As flippant as she behaved, she knew that anger meant that Saren had truly been someone important ... that Nihlus's heart lie in pieces, rattling around the floor of his chest. "That's a boy, get good and furious with me."

Jenkins looked at her and shook his head. "You trying to get shot, Commander?"
"No, but if he's yelling at me, he's not ripping himself apart over Saren betraying him. I can take a little rage if it helps him hold it together until we're back on the Normandy." She slapped the kid on the shoulder and turned toward the beacon, taking a few steps toward it. "That glow can't mean anything good," she grumbled, mostly to herself.

Opening a channel to the Normandy, she called them to come in for pickup.

The hollow, gong-thump of heavy steps on metal alerted her to Nihlus storming up to her, closing on her left ... fast. She waited until the last second to turn. His entire body trembled with fury, murder screaming at her from the brilliant, predatory green of his eyes. He shoved his shotgun into its spot at the small of his back. His fists clenched convulsively, obviously wanting nothing more than to grab her and slam her into the lockers behind her until they reduced her to paste inside her armour.

Shepard just lifted her hand to press against his shoulder, meeting his fury with soft eyes and silent understanding. After a moment, he let out a breath that seemed as though it might deflate him completely. He reached up to remove her hand then stalked off toward the beacon.

"Commander Shepard?" Joker, the Normandy's pilot called. "Incoming for pickup."

"Roger that, Normandy. On my signal. Ground team leader out." Shepard turned to the other three. Alenko and Williams ran up, panting like they'd sprinted three klicks. "Come on, people. Let's get this package ...."

Shepard caught movement out of the corner of her eye, instinct sending her bolting forward. An energy field erupted from the beacon, grabbing hold of Nihlus and dragging him forward. Damn it, she knew that thing meant trouble. Sprinting across the metres that separated her from the Spectre, she launched herself at him. Before she could throw him clear of the field, it grabbed her as well.

"Crap!" She didn't have the momentum to get either of them loose. Then a bolt of electricity seared through her body, jerking her rigid, her teeth clenching together so hard it felt as though they'd shatter, wiping out any thoughts but for the pain. Her nervous system erupted in blinding flashes of agony that carried with them images too horrific to truly comprehend. Screams ripped from her throat despite the paralysis, screams that shattered into silence upon touching the pure, cool air.

Flashes of death at the hands of an impossibly powerful foe tore through her mind, lightning scorching her synapses, feeling as though it burned the images onto her soul. Born of nightmares that left the dreamer mad and drooling, synthetic monsters ripped through the galaxy, leaving planet after planet desolate and bare. Absolute desolation. Utter annihilation. They corrupted everything they touched.

A second, massive blast of energy ripped through her, incinerating the images and the agony, allowing merciful darkness to fall.
Mass Effect - Future Imperfect Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Nihlus saved, beacon destroyed. What else could happen.

The world came into focus in starts and fits. Standard-issue starship ceiling blended into the nightmare visions then back. One hand lifted to her temple as she squinted up at the concerned face of a standard-issue Alliance medical officer. "Lights … in my eyes," she grunted, shifting her hand to cover the piercing glare. Oh wow, her head … . She squeezed her eyes shut, the pain easing back once the light wasn't stabbing her, but then the vision from the beacon invaded.

Despair ... terror ... screams beyond counting .... 'No hope. The cruel gods have abandoned us'. Endless slaughter ... brutality ... corruption. Running towards an embrace once loved ... then pain ... sorrow …. 'What have they done to you?'

'Four of us remain. Only four, and you get too close. After so many missions, after all your training, you panic and step into an indoctrination field. Foolish ... careless .... Now, die with your masters, traitor.'

Preferring pain to the nightmare downloaded into her head, Shepard opened her eyes again, blinking slowly. "I'm back aboard the Normandy?" she asked, keeping her voice low.

"You are, Commander," the doctor said, her voice harsh and clipped. Shepard winced at the volume as Chakwas continued, "How are you feeling?"

Shepard held up a hand, waving a little to try to back the doctor down a couple of notches. "Like I tried to cure the worst hangover ever by lobotomizing myself with a coat hanger. Show a little mercy, Doc … whisper? Please?" She let her hand drop across her stomach, her eyes defying her to sag closed again.

"Apologies, Commander. Would you like something for the pain?" The doctor appeared in Shepard's field of vision, omnitool active, face professionally concerned.

Cool relief and gratitude washed through her at the significantly lowered volume. Painkillers? Images splashed crimson with blood flashed through her mind, pulled forward by the sudden yank and twist in her guts. Fuck yes, she wanted drugs. Enough to send her into sweet, pain-free, nightmare-free oblivion. "I'd send you flowers every week for the rest of your life." Shepard hesitated, chewing on her bottom lip a little.

You know you can't, Janey. Just grit your teeth and bull through it.

Shame and embarrassment tangled up with the need. "But um, non-narcotic, please, Doc?" Damn, she hated this part of a new assignment. That and explaining the scars when anyone saw them for the first time.

"Of course, Commander."

Shepard let out a long breath and relaxed into the gel mattress as she heard the clipped, efficient stride cross the medbay. Wait … she was forgetting something. Eden Prime, beacon, nightmare …
oh, sweet baby Jesus … the pain in the ass Spectre … . She opened her eyes and lifted her head to find the doc. "How's Spectre Kryik? Is he okay after the whole beacon incident?"

A dual toned rumble answered instead of the doc. "I'm fine." Ah yes, there it was, the stick-driven-so-far-up-my-ass-it-rattles-against-my-back-teeth attitude she remembered so fondly.

Shepard's head flopped back onto the mattress. A heavy thump of feet hitting the floor was followed by three strides and then the very pissed-off face of a turian shoving itself into her field of vision. Shepard let out a long, moaning sort of sigh. Kryik had to be seriously furious for his temper to show through the rigid plates. She wondered vaguely if his eyes were loaded … probably best to check the safety was still on, or that glare was going to put thirty holes in her.

"You're welcome," she groaned. Pressing her palm against his brow, she pushed him back, buying herself enough room to sit up. "Back up, big fella." The agony in her head trickled down her spine and into her limbs as she settled into a sloppy pigeon pose to stretch her back and hips.

Nihlus jerked back violently enough to throw himself off balance. "What?" The word hit her like a slap, along with some spit.

Gross. Wouldn't have pegged him as a spitter.

A sarcastic, disappointed sigh preceded her reply, "Sorry, just figured the reason you were hanging over me is that you couldn't wait to thank me for saving your ass when the beacon grabbed you." She swung her legs off the side of the bed, her head falling like she'd dropped it. She caught it in her hands, her elbows hitting her thighs before she stopped collapsing. It felt as though a hundred squirrels had gone rampaging through her brain searching for nuts. Normally she wouldn't have minded. Nuts … oh yeah, everyone agreed she was nuts, so normally she had plenty to spare. But whatever the beacon had done to her had replaced all her lovely nuts with nightmares.

"Well, at least you know you're still insane. That's a start.

Shepard slapped duct tape over her internal voice's mouth and tilted her head a little to look at the doctor. "How long have I been out?"

"Fifteen hours," Nihlus supplied, bristling until he loomed like a giant vulture waiting to attack. "The beacon exploding overloaded both our systems. I regained consciousness a half hour ago. What happened to you in those seconds, Commander?"

Shepard stared at him from under heavy-lidded eyes for a moment before she shook her head, more trying to sort out the mess in her head than anything. "I saw things, flashes of death and terror. Then I blacked out. The rest … maybe it was a dream? But I saw synthetic soldiers … abominations … killing organics. Mass slaughter. There were also organics being fit with cybernetics or something. That part was … gooey." She winced and let her hands take the weight of her head again. "I don't know, it's all a jumble. All I can tell you for sure was that there was a terrible sense of doom and terror." She pressed the heel of her hand against her right eye. "Except … it feels like there are huge pieces missing. Blank spots."

A noisy breath whistled through the Spectre's nose as he nodded. "I experienced much the same thing. Nightmarish visions but large blank spaces." Nihlus grumbled and paced a few strides one way and then back, his agitation growing rather than abating. "You should have just left me alone. Maybe it would have been just fine."

"Yeah, if I'd left you alone, you would have woken up with all this crap in your head. Can't say I'd complain about that." She sat up straight, shoulders squared and pointed, pain and annoyance
throwing up a forest of pikes all pointed his way. "Oh, wait ... no, you wouldn't, because if I'd let you have your way, Saren would have blown your head off before we got close to the beacon. So, maybe get off my back a little." She slid down of the table, bracing herself against the edge until she could be sure her legs intended to hold her.

Nihlus let out another long sigh, her shot hitting true, chipping away some of his arrogance. "Saren was my mentor. He saved m—" He shook his head. "I never imagined ... . Afterward, I needed to catch him and find out what he was doing there ... put a bullet in him."

"Yeah, well, we don't always get what we want, do we?" She kept her tone soft.

"Great!" Nihlus spun on his heel and strode to the door. He turned back before walking through. "You interfere with the beacon, get it blown to hell, and that's what we have to show for your incompetence? A vision of ... nothing."

"Me? My incompetence?" Shepard stormed after him, pressing in on him. "You're the idiot who charged ahead again after I saved you from the fuckup you caused when you charged ahead the first time. Did it hurt your ego that the little, fragile female human had to save you? Hurt that bloody stick-up-your-ass pride that Saren completely pulled the wool over your eyes?" She backed up a step, glad to see some fire kindle behind the dead shock in his eyes.

Nihlus drew himself up taller and broader, and she could see the iron set along his spine. Wouldn't hurt to push a little harder. At least anger wasn't flailing, and she knew that in his place, she'd be flailing if she didn't have somewhere to focus the energy.

A cold, hard smile cut across her face. "Let me guess? You're so supremely confident in yourself that it never occurred to you that Saren might be able to trick you?" She scoffed and turned away. Despite her back being turned, every sense remained fixed behind her, partially to keep a read on his emotions, partially to know if a punch flew at her. "My incompetence?" She flung a disgusted gesture as if tossing the idea to the other end of medbay. "I spent the whole damned mission saving your ass."

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Shepard stalked back to the table and moved to hop up on it, but a large, long-taloned hand grabbed her arm, jerking her around to face the Spectre. He pushed in on her, trapping her up against the table. She stared into his eyes for a second, not knowing what she saw in them. It looked like she'd hurt his feelings. Yeah, he looked like she'd slapped him.

You aren't thinking that Nihlus actually likes you, are you? Don't be stupid. Stop projecting. Just because you had a—

She doubled up the duct tape and catalogued the Spectre's expression away for later as it disappeared, seven feet of fury looming over her.

"Watch yourself, Shepard. I have a limit to what I'll tolerate." His voice rolled low, the sub-vocals pounding against her chest like a jackhammer covered in cotton-batting.

She pushed back, forcing her voice down into her chest then channelled it so that it resonated through her head as she replied, "And you've reached mine." He might tower two feet over her, but when it came to intimidation, she'd learned to make up in attitude what she lacked in stature.

"Unless you want to find out what it feels like to have a tiny, human female peel back your plates, you'd better be hitting on me, Kryik," she continued, keeping her voice to the low, dangerous growl. As intended, her remark startled him enough that he backed up a step.

"You just need to keep your mouth shut sometimes," he grumbled, then released her and turned
away. With each step, his shoulders slumped a little more, the anger fading far faster than she'd thought it would. "I'm used to working on my own, not sticking with a squad. Saren … ." What came out of his throat sounded like the bastard child of a growl and a keen. "I screwed up, bought what he told me about why he was there. I never thought … ."

She watched him from under half-closed eyelids as he gathered the shreds of his dignity tight around him. He expected a great deal from himself. She could see that plain as the mandibles on his face. One corner of her mouth twitched up in a reluctant smile as the pieces fell into place, and she understood. She amounted to little more than a stranger. Saren had been his mentor and friend nearly as long as she'd been alive. Way easier to blame everything on the new guy. Yeah. She got that, and she could bear that for him until he reached a place where he could take the blame back and put it where it belonged.

Still, she couldn't resist the urge to prod him a little. "You going to blame the beacon being destroyed on me, Nihlus? Make sure I never become a Spectre?" She hopped up onto the side of the bed, allowing the disappointment to hit home as she heard the words out loud. "I think that's pretty much covered, don't you?" Damn it. Being the first human Spectre would have been something. Shepard shook her head and reached up to run her hand through her short, red curls. Oh well, it didn't really matter in the grand scheme of things. The vision from the beacon … what happened to the protheans … Saren … that mattered. "Oh well," she said, "Look at the bright side. If the council rejects my Spectre candidacy, at least you won't have to deal with my incompetence as your partner."

He stared at her, his mandibles dropping and flicking. For a moment, she thought his expression might be disappointment, as if he hadn't considered that their mentoring relationship would die before it began. Then the heartbeat passed, and he chuffed a little, his mandibles pulling tight before he turned and walked out the door.

"Don't leave it on that note, Janey. Throw the torin a bone for pity's sake."

"Hey, Kryik ... you're welcome. It was my pleasure to have your back," Shepard called after him. "Just so that you know ... you can count on me having it, no matter how big an ass you are." She softened the last sentence, taking the sarcastic edge out of her voice. She did want him to know he could trust her to have his six. "And for what it's worth, I'm glad Saren didn't kill you." The corner of her mouth tugged into a fleeting, crooked smile.

He glanced over his shoulder, his mandibles fluttering a little, and he rumbled low in his throat. After a moment, he nodded once, then continued toward the stairs up to the CIC.

Shepard slumped, the headache pounding like a prisoner trying to smash its way out of her skull. "Hey, Doc … about those meds?" She collapsed down until her head rested in her hands again. Damn, they'd gotten so wrapped up in beating one another, they'd forgotten about the vision from the beacon. Somehow, between them, they'd have to figure out what that thing packed into their heads.

"Apologies, Commander," the doctor said then administered the injection, "but I didn't think it was safe to step between you."

Shepard tilted her head and glanced up, catching the glint in the doctor's eyes. She gave Chakwas a tired smile. "Probably wise, Doc. Probably very wise."

A moment later, the doors opened, Anderson striding through, all hard-edged efficiency. "What the hell happened down there, Shepard?" Despite his tone, he walked right up to her and reached out to grip her forearms. "Are you all right?" Turning to look over at the doctor, he levelled his worry on
"Is she all right?"

Shepard smiled and nodded. She squeezed his wrists before pulling away. "I'm fine … Dad." Grinning at his expression, she continued, "The mission however, went completely FUBAR thanks to our resident Spectre and his buddy." Shepard slid off the table. "I spent the whole time chasing Kryik, and when we got to the colony, it was swarming with geth, all working for another Spectre." Cocking a hip, she leaned against the bed, the hard edge digging into the bone. "He almost killed Kryik … tried to shoot him in the back of the head. I sniped him, but he bolted before I could take him down. By the time I got our Spectre back up on his feet, Saren had a massive head start."

Anderson bristled. "Saren?" He shook his head and paced back to the door. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. He's always been news of the worst sort." Turning back, he gestured for her to continue. "Sorry, Shepard. Go ahead."

"Saren slowed down our pursuit with enough demo charges to flatten the colony. By the time we reached the beacon, he'd activated it … used it as far as we know." She pantomimed the adventure in miniature as the adrenaline gripped her again. "While I was calling for pickup, Kryik got too close. The damned thing grabbed a hold of him and started pulling him toward it." Her right hand drifted back up to hold her brain in as it made a break for her eye socket. "I grabbed him, tried to throw him loose, but then the fucking thing hit me with some sort of mind blast. It left a vision of a synthetic-led armageddon behind." She shrugged and tried to drop her hand, but it just migrated back to her eye. "Some seriously crazy shit is going on here, sir. Seriously crazy shit. Kryik seemed just as blind as we were, but that other Spectre … ."

Anderson nodded and paced back and forth across the narrow medbay. "Yeah, Saren Arterius. Powerful—damn near untouchable. One torin black ops squad." He chuckled but it came out cold and hard enough to raise the hackles on the back of Shepard's neck. "As you may have guessed, I've had some experience dealing with him. He hates humans. He thinks we need to be sent back to Earth like unruly children."

Shepard watched her oldest friend and adoptive guardian stride back and forth for a moment, as agitated as she'd ever seen him. Whatever their history was, it wasn't pretty. It was also a matter for another time. "He wanted that beacon in the worst way. He wasn't there to spank some humans. That was just a fortunate side effect."

She shook her head and let her hand drop to her side. "We're so screwed, Anderson. Forget the crazy shit inside my head and what it means … because that is a string of 100,000,000 christmas lights that will need an asari matriarch or someone close to untangle … ." Both hands lifted in a small hiccough of a shrug. "The council's going to be pissed as hell over the beacon blowing up. Kryik might be able to mitigate that a little, but they're going to use this to slap us back as hard as they can."

Uttering a grumbling sigh, Anderson stopped pacing and returned to stand, facing her. He looked old and tired, and for a moment, her throat tightened up. What in hell's name had happened between him and Saren? He took a deep breath, cracking his neck to either side, then the age and weariness disappeared back behind the mask of rank and duty. "All right. Politics, topic A. Now for B … the beacon vision? Of what?"

Shepard reached up and rubbed the back of her neck. Her ears still rang, and she wished the large group of taiko drummers would move on and take up residence inside someone else's skull. "I saw synthetics butchering people. It was a slaughter, literally billions dead. I saw other images, cybernetics being implanted into flesh … people turned into monsters … it's all just a jumble of horror." She stretched her neck, trying to ease the ache. "It's not all there, though. I think Kryik and
I split the information."

Anderson stepped forward to squeeze her shoulder. "That's probably why the beacon exploded as well. The both of you being caught in it overloaded it. But, at least you seem all right." He ducked down to look her in the eye. "Are you? Don't lie to me."

Shepard gave him a lopsided grin and nodded. He couldn't help being the dad. He'd stepped into that role in a heartbeat that day on Mindoir, and refused to put it down regardless of her age. "About as all right as usual." She let out a long breath, her shoulders collapsing a little. "Don't worry, I'll shake this off."

*Like we shake everything off given enough time or mass quantities of illegal substances.*

How had the voice gotten out of the duct tape? She slapped it back on and forced herself to focus. "Regardless, we need to tell the Council. If Saren wanted this information, there has to be a reason."

Anderson nodded to himself, and she could see the wheels turning as he set their course. "Head up to the bridge, and tell Joker to bring us in to dock with the Citadel."

Shepard let out a long sigh and nodded, straightening to give him an affectionate salute. "Yes, sir. I don't suppose now is a good time to ask you to send someone else to do your pickup on Eden Prime?"

Anderson chuckled and returned her salute before reaching out to squeeze her shoulder. "Way too late for that, Shepard." He strode to the door, then stopped and turned around. "Besides, if everything had to go tits up, I'm thankful as hell that you're on it. Just ... for the love of God, try not to torture Kryik any more than absolutely necessary." He winced in the way only a father can when thinking of his daughter dating the local bad boy. "I know he's got that whole tough guy, army-of-one thing you can't resist, but if he shoots you, there's going to be paperwork til doomsday."

"No promises, sir, but I'll do my best." She reached out to snag his hand, giving it a quick squeeze. "I'm fine. I've got this under control."

"Sure you do." He walked out the door, back straight and shoulders square. "I'll start the paperwork now."

Shepard grinned and leaned back against the bed as the door slid shut. "Weird fuckin' couple of days, Shepard. Weird fuckin' couple of days." She looked over at Dr. Chakwas. "Am I free, Doc?"

The handsome woman straightened from her 'carefully not paying attention to the conversation' hunch over her computer. "As the proverbial bird, Commander. If the headache persists, come back. I'll give you another analgesic."

"Yes, ma'am." Shepard tipped an invisible hat brim to the lady and headed out the door into the mess. Spotting Alenko sitting at the dining table across the room, she detoured his way.

When he saw her coming, he moved to stand, but she waved him back down. She never could stand the useless ceremonies of command.

*Probably why you make such a good N7. No pesky people cluttering things up with interaction and feelings. Gross.*

Sometimes she wished she could slap her inner voice. Instead, she plastered on a smile and sat
across from the LT.

Alenko returned the smile. "Glad to see you're going to be okay, Commander," he said, sounding genuinely glad. That alone was noteworthy.

Could she even remember the last time someone didn't have a heavy layer of false give-a-damn coated over everything they said to her? It felt … odd, but sort of nice at the same time.

And then … "Yeah, the crew would have cried endless rivers of tears had I bought the farm," came out. She winced.

Way to make friends, Janey.

She leaned back and folded her arms. "So, you came back okay? No undue trauma?"

"Yeah." A wide smile spread across his handsome face. What was going on? A genuine smile to go along with genuine concern? "Can't say a mission under your command is boring, ma'am. Probably take Nihlus the better part of a week to file his report. You sure gave him a run for his money." The smile disappeared as the lieutenant flinched and reached up to rub his brow. He squeezed his eyes shut and rolled his neck, obviously in pain.

"Headache?" Shepard asked, a concerned scowl forming. "Maybe you should go see the doc. Did you hit your head or anything during the fight?"

Shaking his head, he looked up and gave her a weak smile. "It's no big deal, just a side effect of my amp." His hand fell back to his side. After a moment of silence, he said, "Shame the beacon got blown to hell. Council's going to use this to beat concessions out of the Alliance. Wouldn't be surprised if Kryik helps them along, even though he totally dropped the ball turning his back on Saren."

Shepard shook her head, surprising herself as a spark of protective pique flared behind her sternum. "No, Nihlus is a good torin, an honourable soldier. And, give him a break over what happened with Saren." She shrugged. "Saren was Nihlus's mentor back in the day. Kryik had just as much reason to trust him as I do Anderson." She shrugged, that pang of empathy echoing through her again. Damn, it would sting … no, it would cut the heart straight out of her. Maybe she should search out the Spectre and check on him.

She stood and gave Alenko a genuine smile in exchange for his. "Oh well, I'd better check on Williams and make sure Jenkins's stories don't get too wildly removed from reality. See you later, Alenko, and take care of that headache."

Williams stood by herself over against the wall by the door to the Captain's cabin looking awkward and about as uncomfortable as Shepard had ever seen anyone look. She walked over. "Hey, Williams. Welcome to the Normandy. How are you holding up?"

"Thanks, Commander. It feels a little strange being here, leaving Eden Prime behind." The Marine straightened and shook her head. "Sorry, Commander, don't mean to grouse. You saved my ass and the colony."

Shepard cocked a hip and crossed her arms. "Don't worry about it, Williams. Hell of thing you did, staying alive with geth blasting their way through the colony. You come back okay, no major holes?"

Williams nodded. "Yes, ma'am." A small sigh escaped, giving Shepard some insight into the Marine's emotional state under the professional decorum. "A lot of good people died down there."
Shaking her head, she squared her shoulders and clenched her jaw as if needing the mask to keep herself under control. "I've lost squadmates and friends. It's part of the job. You deal, and you do better the next time to honour them." The mask cracked a bit. "But civilians... Aren't we supposed to be out here to keep them safe?"

Shepard nodded. "We do the best we can, Williams. We don't always succeed the way we'd like, but there are a lot of people still alive on Eden Prime because of you and the rest of those Marines." She saw a glimmer of an expression cross Ashley's face—one she knew all too well. Sometimes the suffering of the few felt as though it outweighed everything else.

The chief slapped the mask back in place, a bitter smile cracking it. "The bird sure fucked things up. Thought you might plug him yourself."

Shepard straightened, her empathy for Nihlus outstripping her previous annoyance and turning her spine into a rod of molten fury. "That 'bird' has saved thousands of people and kept the galaxy safe from a hell of a lot over the years," she said, her voice snapping a little more harshly than she would have liked. "I never want to hear a turian, particularly one serving aboard this vessel, referred to in that manner again, understood? We all fuck up. The day we forget that and stop forgiving other people their fuckups... well, that's the day to pack it in." She leaned closer to the Marine's face. "Is that understood?"

Williams paled, her lips pressing together, angered, but seasoned enough to know that the next slap would be right off the Normandy. "Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am."

Shepard nodded and relaxed, respecting both the chief's anger and her control. Shepard had never really learned the second. "We're coming into the Citadel. If you've never seen it, you should get somewhere with a view. It's something to see." She gave Williams a smile that amounted to a quick press of her lips and headed for the stairs to the CIC, calling back, "I still remember my first time. Not something easily forgotten."

Greeting people as she passed them by, Shepard made her way to the bridge to find Nihlus already there. He stepped back as she stopped behind Joker.

Joker glanced back over his shoulder. "Hey, Commander, just in time. I was just bringing us in," the pilot reported.

Shepard didn't respond, stepping to one of the ports to look out at the nebula. "It's beautiful."

"It's the most impressive structure in the galaxy," Nihlus said, his voice echoing the pride of someone who made it his home.

Shepard threw a quirky smile over her shoulder and shook her head. "I meant the nebula. The Citadel is just a very large chunk of metal covered in people." She blinked in the face of his surprise. "A city is a city, Kryik. This one is just a little more impressive than the others." Looking back out the port, she sucked in a delighted breath and grinned. "Now, there's a thing of beauty."

"Destiny Ascension, flagship of the Citadel Fleet," Alenko said from the co-pilot seat. When she looked at him, her eyebrows raised in a silent query about his headache, he nodded. He did look better.

Shepard listened to them discuss the asari dreadnought, and to be sure, it was impressive, but like most asari ships, something about it made her uncomfortable.

"You weren't talking about the Ascension, were you?" Nihlus asked from just behind her ear. He
pressed close enough that his heat envelope warmed the left side of her back and the heady scent of his cleanser or turian deodorant, or whatever filled her nose, making it hard to think.

_Damn, he smells good. What is that? Sandalwood and some sort of spice?_  

She chuckled and shook her head. "No, it looks like something that should be trying to eat us." Her smile widened as he chuckled, and she ducked her head a little, sheepish. "I was talking about the _Normandy_. Look." She stepped back so that he could see the _Normandy'_s faint reflection on the nebular dust.

"You've been to the Citadel before, Commander?" Alenko asked, glancing over at her.

"Yeah. Quite a few times. I have family here. Well ... of a sort." She smiled and looked past Nihlus to watch the light play on the dust. Space formed the ultimate dichotomy. Such vast, empty, terrifying darkness, sprinkled here and there with a beauty that made her heart stop and her eyes refuse to blink for fear of missing even a second of it. She loved it and hated it in equal measure. _Just chalk it up to the crazy._

"You have a problem with civilization, Shepard?" the Spectre asked, pulling back and facing her. Unlike before, his eyes had lost some of the predatory gleam. In fact, his expression could best be described as lost.

She softened in kind, a smile just brushing over her lips as she shrugged. "Not at all. The great loves of my life are Roger and Ingrid, and without civilization there wouldn't be all the things necessary for their creation." She looked into his eyes, eyes travelling along the strong lines of his face and the brilliant white of his familia notas. A proud beauty arched through the curve of his neck and angles of his body even under, or maybe because of, his armour.

"Ingrid's the sniper rifle, so Roger must be the assault rifle?" He shook his head a little, some spark returning to his gaze. "You're a strange human." He smiled, and there it was. Again. Warmth in his stare, and an expression that seemed to be saying that he wanted to tell her something, but couldn't find a time or a place or a way to say it.

Okay, fine, you aren't making it up. But don't lose your mind until you know what it's about.

"Yes, yes, I am," she said, forcing herself to focus on his words rather than the way he looked at her. She sighed, giving a weak, little shrug. "I don't hate what people build, I just think a lot of beauty gets trampled over in our attempt to show how impressive we are. I prefer things a little more understated." She laughed, the sound coming out more like a cough, as a wide grin erupted at her own hypocrisy. "Well, except for me. I'm far too amazing to go low key."

Straightening, she turned toward the door. "Might as well get ready for the firing squad. I can work on my report until we dock." Nodding to him as she passed by, it occurred to her for the first time that maybe, just maybe, having to work with the Spectre might turn out all right … if the council didn't crucify her over the beacon fiasco.

_Way to stay positive, Janey._

She managed to get her report nearly complete by the time Anderson called her on the comm, tracking her down in her hidey hole in the back corner of the small gym.

"Shepard. Grab the ground team from Eden Prime and meet me in Ambassador Udina's office."

"On my way, sir." Shepard extricated herself from the corner behind the mats and headed to her
locker to suit up.

*Don’t forget to pack your cigarette and blindfold.*
Chapter Summary

What could make meeting with Udina and the Council even more fun? Probably nothing, but if anyone can find a way, it's Shepard.

"The beacon destroyed, rogue Spectres, geth attacking human colonies outside the Veil." The human ambassador threw up his hands and stormed away a few metres. "You were sent on a simple pickup run with what we were assured was one of the council's best Spectres aboard. How did you manage to screw this up so completely, Captain?"

"Hey!" Despite all her assurances to both Anderson and herself that she'd hold her temper, Shepard stepped forward, unable to let the ambassador's diatribe go on unchallenged. "The captain didn't screw anything up. Nihlus didn't screw anything up. If anything intel screwed up. We went in to be completely blindsided by that other Spectre." Try as she might, she couldn't keep the sneer of distaste off her face.

His cologne, expensive and liberally applied, turned her stomach. No one who played people like chess pieces the way the ambassador did should smell that good. She controlled her urge to punch him, helped along by seeing how hard he was fighting the urge to haul off and deck her. She narrowed her eyes and stared at him until he backed away. They'd been down the bitch-slapping road before. Admiral—then Rear Admiral—Hackett hadn't been amused when their brawl spread until it spilled out of that bar on Arcturus Station into the corridors. It had taken nearly two squads of Marines to break up the resulting furball. Good times.

"Above and beyond?" The ambassador's voice derailed her trip down memory lane. "And yet the beacon is destroyed, and Saren escaped without any proof he was even there, is that about right, Commander?" His voice dripped disdain. Her hands balled into fists.

"Yes, that's about right, Ambassador." She made a show of flexing her hands, earning a grumbling sigh from Anderson. She relaxed and shook her fingers out. "When the beacon overloaded, it put out an EMP that wiped the recorders in our hard suits. However, we do have five people who witnessed the entire thing."

Udina's oily stare slid over the others. "Brought your entire crew, Anderson?"

"Just the ground crew from Eden Prime in case you had any questions for them, Ambassador." The captain kept himself so cool that Shepard both envied him and felt the sudden urge to smack him. She held the last one in check. Her history with Udina wasn't Anderson's fault.
"I have their reports. I assume they are complete?" Udina looked at Shepard and curled his lip. She wondered if he'd 'lose' her report just to spite her.

"Actually, Ambassador, I broke my giant pencil while I was writing mine up. Can I borrow the one stuffed up ...." Anderson thumped her from behind, and she stumbled forward, almost landing with her face in Udina's chest. She reeled back. Everything about the man dragged her back to Elysium, and she had no desire to return there in any form. Once more, she shoved down the rolling of her stomach.

Udina's eyes narrowed with enough hatred that Shepard checked her armour to make sure his scorching-laser glare wasn't burning holes through it. "You've done more than enough to endanger your candidacy for the Spectres. I suggest you stop while you're ahead, Commander."

The ambassador pressed in on her again. "I wish Spectre Kryik had seen what a monumental mistake putting your name forward would be before he'd done it." He shoved her back a half step. "Try to rise above your base nature, Commander, before you embarrass humanity any further." His voice lowered to a bare whisper. "I know how difficult it will be for you." He spun on his heel and strode to the door, a lightning storm in a suit. "Meet us in the council chambers within the hour. I'll be sure you have clearance."

Shepard swallowed the knot of rage, humiliation, and bitter memory that tied itself in her throat. Acid burned up her esophagus. "I embarrass Earth? Ambassador, I go out there every fucking day. I bleed and I sweat, trying to keep all the bad things in the galaxy away from our people, but inevitably, I end up walking through wastelands where good men and women ... innocent children have been taken by slavers or slaughtered by pirates." She took two steps toward him, her entire body bristled, blades set to cut and cut deep. "You do your job, and you do it pretty damned well, but until you're prepared to go out there and take my place instead of just taking the applause for what I accomplish, you have no right to call me an embarrassment to Earth." Shepard bit her tongue as soon as the words came out, but then of course, they'd already escaped.

"For God's sake, Shepard," Anderson said, growling the words out between his teeth. "Can't you leave Elysium behind long enough to avoid screwing this up?" He let out a sharp but understanding sigh and pressed his hand down on her shoulder. "Find a way to stow the attitude before you get to the council chambers."

"Anderson!" The ambassador's call sent the captain hurrying, rigid and furious, out the door.

"Crap, I shouldn't have let him get under my skin." Shepard sighed as the rest of the team walked up beside her. "I hate that man so very much, and I don't hate many people. I'm cheerful, easy to get along with ... work and play well with others." She sighed again.

"Yeah, that's the exact description I was thinking, Commander," Ashley said, a sardonic grin on her hard, pretty face. She stepped up beside Shepard. "So, we head for the council chambers?"

Shepard raked her fingers through her hair. "Nah, Nihlus and I can handle that mess. You guys go do something that doesn't involve listening to pontificating politicians. Take Jenkins to a club, get him loaded, and take vid." She grinned at the young Marine as his face turned scarlet, then reached out and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Go to the embassy staff, see if they can help you find out if your folks are okay. Yeah?"

He nodded, a slow, relieved smile replacing the stark terror of a moment before. "Thanks, Commander."

"Come on, Jenkins," Alenko said, clapping him on the back. "We'll come with you. Can't hurt to
Shepard gave Alenko a grateful smile as the three headed out. When the door closed behind them, she walked to the balcony railing and looked out over the presidium. It would be beautiful if it didn't all reek of artifice and politics. She closed her eyes, tilting her face up toward the fake sky. Even the sun on the Citadel was a lie. It didn't bode well. She felt Nihlus walk up beside her but didn't look at him. Anderson was right. She needed to find a way to avoid going off during the meeting with the council.

"Are you going to stick with that story through the council meeting?" Nihlus asked from just behind her left elbow. He pressed in, turning a little to lean against the balcony railing.

Shepard opened one eye to look at him, then closed it again. "What story? Oh, you mean the one where I didn't chase you halfway across Eden Prime and save your ass twice?" She smiled to soften her words as his mandibles fluttered and dropped. "Nah, I figure that I'll retract it at the last second and let you swing. I just want to see Udina's face when I change my tune. It'll be a moment to treasure." She dropped her chin and pushed away from the railing, suddenly weary all the way down to the marrow of her bones. "Let's go get this over with. My rejection as a Spectre candidate awaits."

"I sent my report on Saren back as soon as we got off Eden Prime. Hopefully they've started investigating him," Nihlus muttered as he followed Shepard to the door. "I'd be willing to take the hit for letting my guard down if it meant having hardsuit data to prove he was there and what he was doing."

Shepard shrugged as she stepped over the threshold and turned down the corridor. "Fall on your sword on your own time, Kryik." She trotted down a short ramp. "While I'm thinking about it, it's probably best you don't mention getting half the vision."

His scowl deepened, but then he nodded. "They don't need any more reasons to suspend me."

"Exactly, and it's always good not to throw all your cards out on the table. For now, pull your balls out of your designer handbag, gird your loins, and man up." She turned to look him up and down. "Where do you keep your balls, anyway? Do you even have any?" The adorably bashful look on his face told her all she needed to know. "Hm. Interesting. Note to self: research this at a later time." She chuckled, a possibility occurring to her. "Ooo, is that why it hurt so bad when I hit you in the gut?"

Nihlus just sighed and fell in beside her as she trotted down the stairs toward the embassy lobby. "You and Udina have a history, don't you?"

"Picked that up did you?" She led the way down the presidium, eating up the distance to the massive tower at a smart jog. "Yeah, we do, including at least one brawl at a memorial ceremony and a bar fight." Cutting off his comment with a slice of her hand, she shook her head. "And no, neither time did I take the first punch. He quite possibly hates me more than I hate him. I represent everything he had to fight in this galaxy." A small shrug dismissed it. "I don't even blame him, really. Every time a major catastrophe has befallen a human colony, I've been it's poster girl."

She stiffened, hoping he'd take the hint as she slapped up an invisible wall between them. Some things she just didn't talk about.

Sighing, she looked up at the tower. As much as she hated the idea of having to suck up to the council all the time, being the first human Spectre would've been something. And, despite the fact that she knew Udina had been trying to land a solid blow below the belt, the fact that she might
have embarrassed humanity stung.

*You've got bigger concerns, Shepard. The petty war between you and Udina, even being made a Spectre is nothing compared to Saren, so take your own advice and suck it up. You can flagellate yourself later.*

Right. She threw the past into a crate in her brain-attic and focused on Eden Prime. Whatever Saren had been up to on the colony, she doubted it stopped there. Why would he recruit the geth to steal a beacon? It didn't make any sense. Maybe he wasn't the one in charge. The geth could be controlling him somehow.

She stopped at the base of the tower, a big green bug with huge eyes catching her attention. "Ooo, check out the green cutie. I take it this is a Keeper?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder at Nihlus. At his nod, she leaned closer. "I've been here dozens of times, but have never seen one before. I guess we don't have the same hangouts."

"Please do not disturb the Keepers," the Avina terminal next to it said.

Shepard ignored it. "Hey there, little guy. Dear, sweet baby Jesus, you are just the cutest." She giggled happily. "Look at the purple backpack. Okay, I just died a little. Damn, he's—"

"Please to not disturb the Keepers," the terminal said again.

Shepard stepped around the Keeper and crouched next to the terminal. "This thing's annoying."

"Shepard, what are you doing?" Nihlus stepped up and grabbed her shoulder. "Leave it. It's just an automated message."

"Yeah, and … ?" Shepard glanced around to make sure she wasn't being watched before popping open a panel and tinkering for a moment. She activated her omnitool, hacking into the terminal. The Spectre pushed in closer, as if trying to hide her from view. "You're going to get arrested. There are a dozen C-Sec in the area."

"Yeah, and if you push your groin any further into my face, we're both going to get arrested for public lewdness, so back up a bit." She finished and closed the panel. Standing, she stepped around him and bent over to look into the Keeper's eyes, just barely managing to control her urge to hug it. "Don't worry, little buddy, I've got your back."

"Can we just get up there?" Nihlus grumbled, holding out an arm to usher her away from the scene of the crime.

"Sure."

Shepard led the way to the elevator. "They really are cute. Think I could convince one to come back to the ship with me?" Glancing over at him, she met his glare with a wide-eyed, guileless smile and a shrug. "What?" Nihlus just shook his head and looked front.

After a minute or so of silence, Shepard cleared her throat. "So, Nihlus … the night I woke up to find you peering at me while I slept … what was that about?"

He looked down at her and frowned. "Peering?"

"Yeah. I woke up, and you were standing right over me, staring." She bristled. "It was sort of creepy."

He laughed and shook his head. "I was walking by to get some sleep myself, and you were kicking
at the blankets and muttering. I shook you awake." He shrugged, his head doing the odd little neck bobbing thing that made up for lack of shoulder mobility. "It seemed like a terrible nightmare. I apologize if I offended."

Shepard chuckled and gave a stout nod. "Thanks. Okay, so in hindsight, not creepy. Good to know."

What felt like a lifetime later, they stepped off the elevator and through a small room into the council chambers. Shepard whistled softly as her eyes traveled up past the fountains and rock gardens. Despite its beauty, the entire place gave off bad vibes. She didn't belong in a place like that. Hell, she didn't belong within thirty klicks of a place like that. It took all her pride and every ounce of self-confidence to stop herself from shrinking down into her armour. Instead, she took a deep breath and puffed herself up.

"I like it," she said, nodding as she looked around. "I'll take a room on this floor, concierge." She strode between the glowing, blossoming trees and up a set of stairs. She could see Anderson waiting at the next set of stairs and locked onto him, using him as an anchor in increasingly heavy seas.

"They sure want you winded when you get there, don't they?" she grumbled, trotting up next to him, covering her nerves with surliness. Butterflies fluttered through her guts, trying to gnaw their way out into the world. Damn things. She really needed to switch them out with acrobatic elcor or vorcha ballerinas.

"Please try not to be yourself," Anderson said, keeping his voice low. "Your Spectre candidacy is nearly dead in the water as it is." When she didn't reply, he stopped and turned to grip her elbow, as close to a hug as he got in public. "I mean it, Shepard. Keep the smart-ass shit tied down. These people don't give a crap, and they won't hesitate to eviscerate you."

"Fine," she said and growled. "I do have a small measure of self-control, Captain." Despite the rumble in her voice, she felt affection rather than annoyance. For almost a decade and a half, Anderson had proven to be her only shelter in a cold, brutal galaxy. No matter how brusque he got with her, she knew it originated from wanting the best for her. It wasn't his fault that he hated watching her follow a course destined for self-destruction.

"Really? So, you've just been hiding it the last thirteen years?" He sighed and let his hand drop. She saw a smile flirting with the idea of appearing before he killed it.

Grinning, she took a deep breath and turned toward the long gangplank to the council. "Well, yeah, of course. I've been waiting for the perfect time to spring it on you." She gave him a wink and strode up the walkway to stand just behind Udina.

The council stood across a wide gap from the platform that supplicants stood on, presumably to keep from being throttled by the aforementioned supplicants. Shepard glanced at the guns on her back, taking a buffet to the shoulder from behind. Apparently, either Kryik could read minds or he'd had the same thought about a few metres not making any difference to a bullet.

"Our colony was all but destroyed by the geth!" Udina protested, the pitch of his voice setting all the hair on the back of Shepard's neck on end. "Geth led by one of your Spectres!"

Shepard looked up at a large holo of the Spectre in question. Saren didn't look like other turians. His hips and waist were all wrong, his fringe crazy long, and what was with the glowing eyes?

"Do you have evidence that Saren was behind the attack?" the asari councillor asked. "All these
reports say is that another turian was present in the colony." The councillor's composed regard
turned to Shepard. "All the reports other than yours seem to indicate that Spectre Kryik was
culpable in his own attack, and thus for the suspect escaping."

Shepard stepped up. "I was a great deal closer to the incident than the others, Madame Councillor. Spectre Kryik approached the platform at the docks. Saren stepped out from behind some crates. They spoke, and there was no indication that Saren presented a threat at that time. I saw him raise a pistol, but instead of firing, I moved to radio Nihlus to ask for confirmation. When it became apparent that Saren intended to kill Nihlus, I fired, but it was in haste and my shot went wide." Shepard took a deep breath and squared her shoulders, clasping her hands behind her back. "It's my responsibility that he got away and that Spectre Kryik was injured. By the time we caught up with him again, Saren had activated the beacon, but he escaped."

"Isn't this charming? Couldn't find anyone else willing to join your conspiracy, Captain Anderson? Had to pull in the adopted delinquent?" Saren asked, his voice one part barely controlled rage, one part condescension. "Why is it that every time humanity accuses me of something ridiculous, you're behind it, and there is never any proof?" He threw a dismissive gesture at Shepard. "It's this human's word against mine, unless Nihlus has anything to say."

"You leave Shepard out of what's between us, Arterius." The captain moved to stand just in front of Shepard. "You and I know the truth, and one of these days, I'm going to prove you're dirty." The tone of Anderson's voice sent shards of ice and splinters of steel ripping down Shepard's spine. She'd never heard him speak with such vehement hatred and rage.

Saren just laughed.

Shepard touched Anderson's arm, moving him off to the side. She glanced over her shoulder, then backed up so Nihlus could approach the end of the platform. God, she hoped he didn't do anything stupid, not after she'd just thrown herself on his sword.

"It happened as Commander Shepard stated. I turned to find a gun pointed at my head, Saren and I fought, and he escaped. We followed him to the docking platform and discovered that he'd activated the beacon. Saren was just leaving the area. I pursued, but he eluded me." As he said the final words, Nihlus looked up at his old mentor with a cold fury that curled the corner of Shepard's mouth into a grudgingly appreciative smile.

"And what of the beacon?" the salarian councillor demanded. "We sent two competent agents to retrieve it and somehow it ended up destroyed."

"When we approached, Saren had already activated it, Councillor. When I walked over to investigate, an energy field began to pull me in. Commander Shepard threw me clear, but was caught in the blast."

"The beacon gave Shepard a vision," Anderson called out.

"A vision of what?" the turian councillor asked. He glanced up at the holo then shifted from foot to foot and clasped his hands behind his back. Shepard scowled as she watched his mandibles flutter. They dropped which usually meant suppressed emotion of some kind, and the quick flutter … . A knot tied in her gut, her stare sharpening, looking for more clues as she wondered just how much the council knew about Saren's activities.

Shepard looked from councillor to councillor for a moment, getting the distinct impression that telling them meant throwing good energy after bad, but she related what she could of the nightmarish images. A vacuous silence filled the gap between them as she finished.
Shepard studied their faces, her blood turning to sludge in her veins. What she didn't see concerned her more than what she did, and what she didn't see was surprise. They knew. She and Nihlus hadn't presented a single piece of evidence that the council didn't already know. Damn it. She forced herself to stay still and appear as calm as possible. If they were involved with Saren, she certainly didn't want to let them know she'd guessed as much.

"Am I to try to prove my innocence against dreams, now?" Saren's mocking laughter dropped down on her like sleet. "There is no proof of anything other than the fact that Spectre Kryik has been spending too much time around humans, and that his little protege isn't suitable to be a Spectre."
The corrupt Spectre stared over Shepard's head at Nihlus. "Your feelings overrule your head far too often, old friend. I hope you clear your vision where that one—" Those eerie eyes turned to Shepard, snap-freezing her in place. "—is concerned."

Shepard shook off the momentary terror and smiled, as warmly and sweetly as she could manage while shooting him with mental death rays. Even though she and Saren had never met, she felt a sort of betrayal at his words, maybe on Nihlus's behalf, or maybe on behalf of her species.

Udina jumped forward, a furiously petulant finger rising to jab at them. "That is not his decision to make."

Her stomach dropped as she looked back to the council to see them glancing back and forth, all of them waffling. She shouldn't have expected anything different from politicians. Every single stupid, FUBAR thing in her career traced its origin back to a politician. Cutting a sharp glance over at Udina, she swallowed a lead billiard ball's worth of hatred. Nothing ever changed.

The asari councillor held up her hands, and Shepard was pretty sure Tevos rolled her eyes at Udina—she empathized with the impulse. "This hearing is not to decide Commander Shepard's candidacy for the Spectres." She glanced to the salarian on her left and the turian to her right, both shaking their heads in a way that told Shepard everything she needed to know. The moment she and Nihlus set foot on Eden Prime, they'd been shot down. The only mistake they had made was not dying there.

Tevos gave her lovely head a firm, decisive nod. One Shepard recognized well from her childhood—that 'I don't want to hear another word on the subject' nod. "We find that there is not sufficient evidence to prove that Saren had anything to do with the attack on Eden Prime or the destruction of the prothean beacon. This hearing is adjourned."

Shepard let out a long breath and looked up at the gloating holographic turian, holding the electronic blue gaze that drilled into her. Fury poured down her spine, setting like cement. Oh yeah, they'd meet again. Next time, he wouldn't get away. She gave him a slow, exaggerated wink and turned away before the hologram vanished.

"Well, that went awesomely, didn't it?" Shepard sighed looking first to Nihlus then Anderson. She edged toward the elevator, every nerve ending prickling as though someone had stuffed her clothing full of nettles. None of them could let their guard down. Lies hung heavy, tangled, and deadly in that nest of vipers dressed in fine clothes and genteel manners.

"We've got to find proof that Saren's dirty," Anderson fumed. He strode for the elevator, a storm gathering along the horizon, all barely contained thunder and lightning. She snagged his hand, holding him back, and gave his fingers a quick squeeze before releasing him. Spinning around, he met her eyes, then let out a sharp breath through his nose and nodded.

Her lips pressed thin in a tiny smile before she turned her attention to the ambassador.
"You don't have to do anything, Captain," Udina said, even more pompous for having been summarily dismissed. "Anything you found would be ignored as part of your grudge against Saren." He twisted his face into a grimace that said he'd rather tongue-kiss a crocodile than speak his next words, and looked at Shepard. "We have one chance to see you made a Spectre, Commander."

"Prayer?" She nodded and glanced around. "Sure, there's got to be a church here somewhere."

"I'll speak to Alliance brass, but I'm fairly sure I can convince them to go along with my plan. You'll be promoted to Captain and placed in command of the Normandy. Hopefully, if you look the part, and actually manage to discover some evidence against Saren, the council will forget this entire debacle."

"Captain?" Shepard laughed. "Oh yeah, the brass will love that. Most of the admirals would have busted me down to serviceman third class by now if it wasn't for my frackin' Star of Terra." She looked to Anderson, quite proud of having managed to substitute for the curse. He just shook his head. She cast an accusatory glare at the ambassador. "Although, that bloody medal was your idea as well, wasn't it? Slap a pretty, heroic face over what happened on Elysium."

She pushed that aside and started toward the elevator. "Besides, you can't just cut Anderson out of this." She glanced to her CO. "What's the deal between you and Saren, anyway, sir?"

He sighed and shook his head. "That's a story for another time and a lot of alcohol, Shepard. The ambassador is right. I need to step aside, and the Alliance needs to get you accepted as a Spectre."

Shepard scowled, but choked back her arguments. She'd dumped enough crap on Anderson's shoulders already. Time to grab a shovel and start digging her way out of the ruins. "Okay, so where do we start looking for evidence against Saren?"

"I'll approach C-Sec," Nihlus said. "I have contacts who can tell me who was working on their investigation."

Anderson nodded. "Talk to Barla Von, a financial advisor here on the presidium. He owes me a favour, and he might have some information that will help."

"He's an agent for the Shadow Broker," Nihlus confirmed.

"Shadow Broker?" Shepard grumbled, looking from one to the other. "You all need to stop talking in code. It's getting annoying, and my inner bitch is starting to get twitchy."

Anderson chuckled and reached out to squeeze her shoulder. "Shadow Broker is an information trader. Very powerful. Talk to Barla Von, he might be able to help."

Shepard stepped into the elevator, the three males following. No one spoke on the way down. Udina busied himself sending messages back and forth with Alliance command. By the time the door opened, he turned to Shepard.

"Congratulations, Captain Shepard. You've just been given your first command."

Shepard shook her head, nearly choking on the urge to kick him in the ass. "In the time it took to ride the damned elevator. Back at Arcturus, Mikhailovich is going to be having so many kittens, they'll need to call animal control." She sighed. "God, I hate politics. I don't want promotions I haven't earned, Udina."

Udina struck out toward the embassy, his back stiff, shoulders puffed out. "Perhaps if you played
nice once in a while, you'd be … ."

Shepard ignored him, deking over to the keeper. She leaned down and whispered. "I think I love you, cutie."

"Please do not disturb the keepers," Avina said, "or Ambassador Udina will spank you like a bad, bad monkey."

Shepard managed to hold in her smirk and keep walking, but she was pretty sure she heard Nihlus chuckling as she passed him.

Shepard stopped next to Anderson and gave him a quick, tight hug. "If I don't see you again, sorry about the Avina terminal." She stepped back and gripped his arms. "Watch Udina. I wouldn't put it past him to keep you here as a leash on me." She shot a glance at Kryik that turned the Spectre's back to them, then kissed Anderson's cheek, flushing a bright red as she did. "Take care of yourself, Anderson. I'll see you."

He nodded. "Just bring yourself home, kid. The galaxy needs you."

She grinned and shook her head. It had been the same line since he pulled her out from under her father's corpse. The Alliance or the galaxy … or hell, the consumer economy needed her. Never him. Still, she knew the truth, and that was all that mattered. "I'll do my best, sir."

Spinning on her heel, she strode off, trying not to grin too widely as Udina shouted into his omnitool, his arms gesturing madly. All she made out from that distance was the fury, and she sent a mental apology to the poor tech person on the other end of that call.

"Proud of yourself?" Nihlus asked as he fell in step beside her.

She nodded. "I am, in fact. Damn promotion." She shook her head. "I bet the brass back on Arcturus are all having litters of kittens about this. Well, except Hackett. He's probably grinning from ear to ear, but he always did have a slightly off-kilter sense of humour." A faint nausea rolled through her guts. The elcor troupe bringing in their gear?

Captain? You can barely remember to brush your teeth, Janey. How the hell are you going to captain a ship? You're the lone operative ... the rogue wolf who needs no pack ... you know, all that romantic shit you con yourself with. Are you really up for this?

Nihlus stared at her for nearly a minute, the expression on his face almost comical as he very obviously tried to figure her out. In the end, however, he just shrugged. "Why are you so unpopular with your command structure? You've been awarded almost every medal, award, and commendation the Alliance gives out. Your record is exemplary."

Shepard stopped at the cab stand. "They don't have any issues with my abilities; it's my abhorrence of being paraded about like a show poodle that sticks in their gullet. That's the short of it. For the long version, we'll have to get to know one another a whole lot better, and I'll have to be a whole lot more shit-faced." She looked into his eyes for a few seconds then nodded her head toward the cab behind her. "I'll meet you back aboard the Normandy."

"You're going somewhere? Alone? Now?" He frowned, his mandibles fluttering in a very uncertain way. "You saw what was going on in there, didn't you? We were never supposed to come back from Eden Prime."

Shepard nodded. "Yeah, I did, and I have no illusions about my odds of making it through this thing, so I'm going to go take care of a little personal business before we have to bug out of here.
I'll be aboard within the hour."

He nodded and backed away. "Very well. Keep sharp."

"You too." She opened the cab and climbed in, watching until he ducked into an alley, heading for the wards and the C-Sec Academy. Her trip took just under eight minutes, soaring along unfamiliar traffic routes. Whenever she'd been to the Citadel before, she'd stuck to the wards.

The cab settled into a parking spot out front of a non-descript building next to a park area. She sat there for long moments, watching the patients and their attendants moving around the gardens. It looked as though a wheelchair basketball game was either about to start or had just ended. Taking a deep breath, she dropped her shoulders, plastered a smile on her face, and stepped out of the cab.

The moment people saw her, they called out greetings. Shepard waved but hurried to the door. She didn't have time to greet the entire rehab center individually. Somehow she knew that if she was even a couple of minutes late, Nihlus would put out a call.

"Hey, Shepard!" a middle-aged man called, wheeling himself through the front door. He stopped and tossed the basketball in his lap to her. "Going to come play with us, beautiful?"

Shepard chuckled as she caught it. "Hey, Sam, you old flirt." She tossed it back. "No basketball for me today. Sorry. Where is he?"

"Inside, painting. He's been pretty blue the last few days. Maybe you'll be just what the doctor ordered." He lifted a hand. "See you later. You still haven't answered me about our movie date."

Shepard walked to the door. "I'm onto something pretty huge, right now, but as soon as I have a couple of days, I promise we'll go see something." She blew him a kiss and pulled the door open.

Voices of staff and patients alike called out to her as she made her way through the halls. It had been a couple of months since her last visit, and it stung to see how happy everyone was to see her. She really needed to find more time. Stopping in the doorway to the art room, she smiled, spotting the handsome young man sitting in the light from the window, brush moving over the canvas in front of him. After a moment, he stopped, and his head turned toward her. He sniffed and grinned.

"Please tell me you haven't been boxing with Udina again," he said, his voice muffled and indistinct. "I would know his cologne anywhere."

Shepard laughed, forcing aside everything but how good he looked. "Actually, I can truthfully say that." She stepped inside the door, but didn't walk over to him, giving him the chance to show off a little.

"So, you two were making out, then?" The young man chuckled as he slipped a pair of sunglasses over his eyes, seating them into clips at his temples. Standing, he walked over to her, making his way around tables and chairs without the slightest hesitation. By the time he stopped in front of her, he smiled ear to ear.

"You look beautiful today, Shepard."

"So do you." She grinned and reached out. "Come on, give us a hug."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too, kid." She kissed his cheek, swallowing hard. Her heart ached with awe at how far he'd come. "It looks like the latest round of implants is working great."
"Yep." He pulled back and grinned, reaching up to touch the tip of his finger to her nose. "I can still only see your freckles in my memory, but the rest is right there." Laying his hands on her shoulders, he asked, "How long can you visit?"

"Not too long. I'm up to my eyeballs in disaster."

He laughed. "As usual."

"Yep, as usual." She took his hand, squeezing his fingers. "Come on, let's go sit in the garden. You can fill me in on all the news."
Chapter Summary

Shepard and Nihlus spend a little time getting to know one another.

Shepard looked up from her desk as knuckles rapped against the door. “Come in.” She turned her chair to face Nihlus as the turian entered. “What can I do for you, Mr. Big Bossman?”

He let out a low, rumbling, clicking sound that didn’t translate. “You could stop working so hard to be a pain in my ass.” After walking a couple of steps into her quarters, he stopped and stood, rigid. His tension vibrated through the room, her skin prickling in response. Nihlus felt like a time bomb, and she couldn’t decide the best way to deal with him; work on defusing him or build him to detonation.

Shepard wrinkled her nose and nodded. “Yeah, I probably could, and I might once we reach an understanding.” She shifted around to rest both arms on the chair back, regarding him with an even stare.

He bristled, the deep green of his eyes flashing, but some of the tension sloughed away. “Oh? And what understanding is that?”

One corner of her mouth quirked a little. “That I’m not some raw FNG who will follow you around, hanging off your every word and begging you to let me worship at your feet.” She grinned when she saw him realize she was teasing.

He chuckled, his broad shoulders dropping visibly, even beneath his armour. “Nor would I expect you to.” Flexing his mandibles a little, he ducked his head. “I recommended you because you’re a pain in the ass. You don’t do what you’re told just because it’s expected, and you aren’t afraid to step out of bounds if the mission requires it.” One hand drifted toward the end of the bed. “May I sit?”

Shepard nodded. “Sure, knock yourself out.”

In the few strides it took him to cross the floor, she ran a quick inventory, comparing the *torin* she’d heard so much about to the one she’d met a couple of days before. She tossed out the picture
she’d held before she met him; she’d overblown that image into something no one could live up to. As her eyes followed the lines of his *familia notas*, she saw a softening, not of drive or honor, but something that made the Spectre more . . . human, for lack of a better word. Before Saren’s betrayal, she’d found him arrogant, but that had eased back.

He sat, then turned to look at the bed. “Why is this bed built for two people, but so that they have to sleep apart?”

Shepard shrugged. “The fun part only takes half a bed, and then afterwards, the bed gives the perfect excuse not to have to cuddle.”

His brow plates rose and his mandibles spread and fluttered. “Does the Alliance encourage liaisons between their captains and crew?”

Shepard shook her head. “Quite the opposite. Fraternization is a court martial offence.” She shrugged. “I’d never sleep with anyone under my command anyway. Makes maintaining discipline a pain in the ass.” Her quirky smile returned, and she flipped her hands in an exaggerated shrug. “On this boat, I guess that just leaves you … and you don’t like my bed.”

He cleared his throat, but held her stare. “You can’t help yourself, can you? You have to … push my ... buttons. I believe that’s what your people call it.”

“We’re going to be partners.” Shepard shrugged, taking note of the sudden pulse that thumped just below his mandibles. “So, yeah, I want to know how you respond to stimuli.”

“Keep pushing that particular button, and you’ll find out.” He met and held her gaze. Shepard didn’t look away, knowing he was testing her. She just cocked an eyebrow. “So, did you come in here to see if you could double-dog-dare me into having sex with you, or are you saving that for another day?”

He grumbled something that her translator missed, but she caught the gist of it anyway and grinned. She’d been called worse. Letting out a long breath, he stood and paced to the door and back. “Actually, I came to thank you for what you said to the Council. I was prepared to tell them the truth about what happened with Saren. You were right. I let my guard down, and I shouldn’t have.” He grumbled. “And I shouldn’t have lost my temper and risked the mission.”

“Yeah, I know, but of the two of us, you had the better chance of convincing them to take Saren as a serious threat. Who knew that it would be for nothing. Idiots.” She looked down at her paperwork.
“They’re cautious,” he replied, his voice softer, conciliatory. “They’re three people responsible for the lives of billions of beings from a multitude of races. Saren has protected the galaxy for a long time.” He sighed. “He’s done a lot of good. I wanted to be just like him, once.”

Shepard winced, wondering if she should even bring up her suspicion from the meeting with the council, but decided on full disclosure. If he rejected her idea out of hand, it would tell her a lot about their partnership. “I thought I saw something pass between the turian councillor and Saren near the end of the hearing.” As she said the words, she felt stupid for saying them, but then before he could respond, she asked, “Why would they take his word over yours? Of the two of you, you have the cleanest record.”

Nihlus winced enough for her to know that he’d asked himself the same question.

“What if they’re covering for him?” she pushed. “Will any evidence we bring forward convince them?” When he didn’t answer, Shepard nodded and gestured for him to take a seat again. “So . . . Saren. Attacking colonies to steal prothean tech is new, but his hatred of humans isn’t.” She looked up, holding him with a frank stare. “Right?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

She watched him, trying to read his body language. Trying to read turian faces proved to be an unreliable source of information, but body language translated a lot closer to parity. She kept poking him to read him, and grudgingly, he was teaching her. Saren’s betrayal wounded him, but more than that, it had thrown everything he knew and believed off center. She needed to play it cool with him as much as she enjoyed tossing him around. It wouldn’t take much to tip him off his fulcrum.

Even though it pained her, she decided to play it straight. “Do you know where it comes from? Is it just a race thing, or is there more to it?”

“He’s had some bad run-ins with humans. His brother was a general in the war against your people. His brother died. Not during the war, but Saren seems to blame humans for it anyway. Saren’s not like me, charming and talkative, so I don’t really know much more than that.” Despite his attempt at flippancy, his eyes stayed sad, almost lost. He hadn’t been given enough time to process anything. He needed quiet and a chance to think. Neither of which he would get for a bit. They needed to track down evidence on what the hell Saren was doing.

“At least we have some leads to follow. He can’t be allowed to get away with this.” Nihlus ignored her invitation and continued to pace.

“Hey, Kryik.” When he turned, she nodded toward the bed. “Sit down. You’re wearing out my deck plating, and it’s new.” He turned to look into her eyes, and she tipped her head toward the bed again. “Sit. This isn’t something you can walk off.”

He let out a soft chuff of air and sat. “What happened to the twitchy inner bitch?”

Shrugging, Shepard stood and moved over to sit on the bed, pulling a knee up between them so she
faced him. “Meh, she’s worn out. Udina does that to her.”

He turned slightly, matching her posture. “You’ve had run-ins with him before?”

She shrugged. “Yeah, I may have accidentally . . .” She cleared her throat. “. . . set his hair on fire at a memorial once. Stupid candles. His reaction may or may not have led me to make his life a living hell while we were both on Arcturus.” A soft, wry smile curved her lips, and she left it to his imagination as to whether or not her story was bullshit. “So, what about Saren? How did you two end up as jedi and padawan?” When he scowled at her in confusion, she just blinked and shook her head. “Mentor and student.”

He took a deep breath, the air whistling a little through his very flat nose. “The turian military has a Spectre training program for finding suitable candidates. I was chosen to continue on.” He shrugged as if it were the easiest thing in the galaxy to get chosen as a Spectre. “Saren wasn’t the best Spectre in the galaxy at the time. He was hard on me, showed me a lot I wanted to live up to.” His voice dropped to a near whisper. “A lot I didn’t as well, but . . . he saved my life. I owed him everything.”

Shepard found herself staring at the way the end of his nose moved when he talked, although she had a feeling that if she squealed over it like she had the keeper, he’d probably shoot her. Still, might be worth it.

When he stopped talking, she nodded. “It’s got to feel like someone shot you full of polonium rounds.”

“Doesn’t matter, does it? All that matters now is making sure he doesn’t do anything else.” He stood. “I heard from my contact at CSec. We’re looking for an Officer Garrus Vakarian. He was in charge of the investigation. However, he’s since disappeared off the radar. My contact said he would try to find him. We need to meet Harkin in Chora’s Den.”

Shepard shrugged. “Nice place?”

He chuckled. “If your taste runs to seedy bars, tits shaking in your face, and overpriced drinks.”

Shepard made a face. “Really not my scene. Never seen the appeal of asari strippers personally, and hell, if I want to see human tits, I just have to look down.” She did so. “Yep, still there.”

He just shook his head. “Hopefully Harkin can help us find Vakarian. If the drunk little maggot is just stringing me along, I’ll rip his arms off.”

Nodding toward the door, she said, “Come on. It’s about the time places like Chora’s Den start filling up with undesirables.” She stepped past him, leading the way to the door.

“Do you know anything about Vakarian?” she asked as they headed across the mess area toward her locker.

Nihlus shrugged. “Not much.” He fell in beside her. “His father is a legend on the force. Garrus has a reputation for being a hothead who doesn’t think much of the rules.”

“Oh my, a rebel. However will he fit in with us?” Shepard chuckled. She raised a hand and waved to Alenko over at his station. “Hey, Sport, suit up, and fill your pockets with singles. We’re going out on the town.”

“Singles, ma’am?”
"We’re hitting a titty bar, Lieutenant. Got to be prepared.” She laughed as Kaidan blushed a bright red. “Whoa! Damp that down there, Alenko. I’m getting a sunburn.”

Kaidan fled for the elevator.

“Wow, note to self: can’t tease that one. He’ll burst into flames.” Looking over at Nihlus, she noticed the turian wringing his hands a little. She needed to keep him out of his head until they had time to sit around and talk him through everything. “So, Kryik. Why do turians wear gloves all the time? I’ve never seen one of your people without them.”

“Social convention from interacting with the other races. The gloves make our talons look more friendly … less deadly.”

“Really? Now you’ve got me curious.” She nudged him a little with her elbow. “Come on, let’s see the deadly.” She shrugged into her undersuit, smoothing it out before starting at her feet, sealing her armour in place.

He chuckled. “You really have no sense of personal boundaries, do you? We only take them off around family and close friends.” He pulled his hands behind his back.

Shepard gasped. “I’m wounded. After saving your life twice, and taking the hit with the Council, I thought we were working ourselves to a good place, Kryik … somewhere special.”

“Spirits,” he grumbled. “Fine, if you’ll just shut up about us going somewhere special.” He pulled off one glove and held out his hand.

“Nice.” Shepard took it between both of hers, ignoring the small gasp of surprise that escaped him. “Not as hard as I thought. Calloused too. Love a man with callouses.” She ran her fingertip along the sharp foretalon. “Very nice.”

“No boundaries,” Nihlus sighed.

Shepard grinned. “Maybe not, but now I know where yours are.” She looked pointedly at his hand then winked at him and clicked her tongue. “Very nice indeed.”

“I’m never going to know where I stand with you, am I?” He pulled his glove back on.

Shepard stopped and turned. “You’ll always know exactly where you stand with me, Kryik.” She gestured back and forth between them a couple of times. “This little game … that’s just me figuring you out. When push comes to shove, you’ll never have a single doubt of where you stand.” She settled her right gauntlet into place then jerked her head toward the elevator. “Let’s get moving.”

She got into the elevator and held the door, waiting. After nearly a minute, he strode around the corner and stepped in beside her. Looking up at him with a wry grin, she said, “You’re loving the hell out of the game. You know you are.”

He just cleared his throat and stared straight ahead at the door. “You wield your sexuality like a weapon.”

She nodded. “Damn straight. It’s the only one no one has any shields against.”
Shepard stepped out of a taxi at the closest transit station to Chora's Den. She could already hear the terrible, repetitive techno music. Sighing, she shook her head. "And me without my earplugs."

"We agree on something at last, Shepard," Nihlus said, brushing past her.

"Be still my heart. When do I book the church?" She walked to the door leading out onto the walkway. She held up a fist and took cover against the wall, shrugging Roger into her hand. "Hostiles galore trying to look casual just outside the door to the club." She crouched and rolled through the door, taking cover behind a railing. "It looks like a Thugs-R-Us convention."

"It's them!" one of the krogan yelled.

"No shit, morons." Shepard peered over the top of the railing. "Sweet baby Jesus, that's a lot of bad guys."

A squad of twelve turians, krogan, and asari started moving toward them, spreading out to trap them. She hit a small cluster of them with overload to take down their shields. "Kaidan, sabotage as many as you can manage." She waited until he used his tech attack then got up and opened fire. She stood and side-stepped down the wall, launching her drone into the middle of the herd to sow a little chaos. Roger had one down and another one just about flatlined when the enemy flanked them on the left, moving to cut them off from retreat back to the transit stop.

"We can't stay here, Captain," Kaidan called as his shields went down. He rolled back out the door and took cover.

"Yeah, I picked that up." Shepard followed, covering for Nihlus. Her drone expired in a flash of light, so she spawned another, drawing the attention of a couple enemy. Another half second later, her shields went down. Why wasn't Nihlus moving back?

"Come on, Kryik, pull back." Shepard heard the roar of a krogan just in time to somersault behind the Spectre and out of the charge. The krogan slammed through the barrier and tumbled down into traffic. "Shit!" Shepard cried. "That's some fucked up shit, there."

Two bullets hit while she grabbed Nihlus by the cowl of his armour and yanked him back toward Kaidan and the doorway. "We've got to retreat, get some cover, dammit."

He spun, slapping her hand away. "I decide when I retreat."

"My squad, I decide, or are you better at killing things when you're dead?" She kept Roger moving, trying to force the attackers to stay behind cover. A warp flew at her from the left, slamming her to the floor, feeling like every molecule of her body was being torn apart. When it passed, she stayed on the ground and crawled out the door before getting up.

"Damn, that smarts." She took cover behind the wall, trying to keep the bad guys off Kryik's ass.
"One of the asari down," Kaidan called.

"Good job, LT. Next time your lift is cooled, let me know, we'll combo one of those two krogan over the edge." Nihlus's shields went down. "Kryik, get back here before I shoot you in the head myself just so I don't have the distraction of worrying about your stupid ass."

Finally, he backed through the door.

"Lift ready, Captain," Kaidan called.

"I'll overload, you grab him." Shepard leaned out and brought down the krogan's shields. He ducked for cover, but Kaidan was on the ball and grabbed him before he could get too far down. Bellowing, the enemy brute sailed through the air and then fell down through the traffic lanes.

"The enemy are at half strength," Kaidan called. "My amp is starting to get uncomfortably warm."

"That's what guns are for, Sport." Roger took out another asari as she tried to shoehorn her way in the door with a warp. One of the turians made it in the door, but Shepard barrels into him, tossing his gun as she bore him to the floor. Shoving her hand under his jaw, she hit overload, glad that Kaidan had the presence of mind to shoot him since she was too busy electrocuting herself. When she recouped enough to blink, Nihlus was gone again.

"We going to start leaving him on the ship?" Kaidan asked, leaning out to sabotage the remaining krogan.

Shepard overloaded the krogan then peppered him with rounds. "This is getting old, that's for sure." She dashed out the door and behind the barrier to the right. "When your lift is ready again, Alenko, let's get this last krogan off our backs." She used her sabotage, turning Roger on two turians and an asari trying to make their way down the wall toward her.

A moment later, Kaidan threw himself behind the same barrier. They were facing the club entrance, the krogan pinning Nihlus down on their right, the other three coming down the barrier on their left.

"Ready, LT? Let's clear ourselves a path of retreat."

"Yes, ma'am."

Shepard overloaded the krogan again, whittling down the shields he'd recovered, then Kaidan grabbed him. She turned Roger on the remaining attackers, buying Kaidan a little cover from fire while exposed. One of the turians went down, but the lift didn't drift the krogan far enough, dropping him almost right on top of them.

"Shit! Follow my lead, Alenko." She sabotaged the krogan's shotgun, then leaped up and ran past him, sliding around the corner and going down on a hip. "Fuck, I hate fighting anything that closes on me." She switched to Ingrid. "Try to keep him pinned down." She brought up the sniper rifle, aimed and fired, grinning as the krogan bellowed. Once the recoil settled, she fired again, keeping it up until the bruiser finally went down and didn't get back up.

"Too much like work," she gasped, switching guns again. She glanced around, looking for Nihlus, but didn't spot him. Alenko took out the asari. One left. The last turian held out a few more seconds, then went down.

Shepard sank to the floor with a grateful sigh. "Way too much like work."
Kaidan crouched at her side. "You hit, ma'am?"

"Only five or six times, LT. Nothing I'm not used to." She held out her hand, allowing him to pull her to her feet, then gave herself a shot of medigel. "Now where the fuck is . . .?"

Nihlus strode down the walkway, his entire posture screaming that he was itching for a fight. "Shepard! What the hell did you . . .?"

She stormed toward him, meeting him halfway. "Me? What the hell did you think you were doing?" she shouted. "On my squad, you stick with the rest of the team, follow fucking orders, and fight like you've got a brain inside that skull, goddamn it. You nearly got both of us killed."

He pushed his chest into her face, pushing her back a step. "Your squad? This is my op. You're my . . ."

"Oh, no." She shoved back, refusing to flinch even when he bent down, his face a quarter inch from hers. Fuck, and she thought this power struggle crap settled. "Get this straight, as long as it's my people backing you up, you're on my squad, or you're on your own." Done playing and testing, she needed him to get it through his head or move on.

His mandibles flared and eyes flashed, brilliant and fierce. She grinned as her heart raced. That was more like it. Now if she could just get him playing with the team. "I do better on my own. I don't have to worry about you getting in my way or getting yourself killed." He tried pushing her back, but she just shoved into him.

"Then do it on your bloody own. I don't need the extra headache. I'm an N7, not a bloody ship captain. The last thing I need is a fucking wild card getting my people killed. I'm going to be busy doing that on my own." She reached up and shoved his shoulder, a move that brought him towering down over her, one long taloned hand on the armour at her throat.

A splash of cold and wet hit her in the face. Her teeth clacked shut on her next sentence as it simply vanished from her mind. Sputtering, she stepped back and shook her head, looking over to where Kaidan stood, holding his water bottle ready.

"Sport? Would you mind explaining yourself?" Her voice came out far more reasonable than she expected, considering he'd just thrown water on her like a sparring dog. She wiped the drops from her face.

"I tried yelling, you ignored me. You two were either on the verge of beating the shit out of one another, or something I want to see even less. I did what I had to." He put the lid back on his water and stowed it. "We're here for a reason, aren't we?" He passed her a couple of tissues, then turned to start searching the bodies.

"Yeah, we are." Shepard choked down her embarrassment at having completely lost her temper and patted the water from her face and neck. Once she got herself fully under control, she turned to face the Nihlus. "Tabled for a more appropriate time, Kryik, but this isn't finished. You're not putting my people at risk again. Two kicks are all you get at this can." She thrust the damp tissues at the soggy Spectre, then joined Kaidan searching for evidence.

C-Sec arrived on the scene just as they finished their search. As expected, she found nothing linking Saren to the attack.

"Just once I'd like the bad guy to send notarized orders with his lackeys when they try to kill me," Shepard grumbled, giving the last bad guy a shove as she finished her search. "I, Saren Arterius,
hereby command these thugs to kill Shepard. Signed, dated, and witnessed."

Kaidan chuckled. "Good luck with that, ma'am."

She grinned and shot him a wink as she stood. "Don't be crushing my dreams, Sport. I need what hope I've got." She slapped him on the shoulder and nodded toward the club. "Let's leave Nihlus to talk to the cops and head inside. We can watch ass while he kisses it."

Chora's Den didn't disappoint. Dancers and serving girls in various states of undress writhed and pranced about looking both jaded and resigned. Shepard glanced over at Kaidan, who seemed to be trying to look everywhere but at the ladies.

"Your first time in a place like this, Sport?" she asked, trying to hide her smirk.

"Of course not, ma'am. I'm an Alliance Marine." Still, he couldn't even look at her, as if she may have suddenly lost most of her clothing as well.

"Yeah, sorry for saying it, Alenko, but you seem more the 'stay in the crew quarters with a good book' type than the 'getting sloshed and drooling over tits' type." She got her answer about the same time his face started on fire. She chuckled and clapped him on the back. "Don't worry, Sport. I'm exactly the same. Got no use for places like this. Come on, let's see if Nihlus is done explaining the bloodbath outside."

The Spectre entered as she finished speaking. Nihlus looked around the bar, not sparing a glance for any of the half-clad employees. When he met her eyes, he nodded off to his left. She answered with a nod, but let him go ahead. Surely, his contact would be more comfortable meeting with him alone, and she couldn't be certain the two of them wouldn't start yelling and shoving again. Kryik still looked ready to kill. Instead, she took Alenko around the other way, staying back as Nihlus moved in on his man.

"What have you got for me, Harkin?" the Spectre demanded, glaring down at a dishevelled, balding man in a stained C-Sec uniform. "You find out where Vakarian is?"

"I got nothing for you, Spectre," the man said, slouching down into his chair. He belched, then scratched his stomach. "Get lost."

Shepard let out a faint sigh. Of course Harkin didn't have anything. She and Kryik really needed to find a shaman or a voodoo priest or something to clean away the bad luck.

"You told me you'd have something," Nihlus growled, leaning over the table. "What are you playing at?" Yep, there was was. The 'going to use those deadly talons straight through the gloves' fury. She preferred it aimed at her. If Nihlus laid into Harkin, she stood to lose a partner before they even got out the gate. Stepping forward, she moved to where she could jump between them if she needed to.

Harkin laughed and leaned forward, not intimidated in the least. Probably too drunk to be intimidated. "Word is that you're not the council's favourite suck-up any more, Kryik. They're pissed, and they're watching you. I'm seen talking to you, I'm fucked for life." He tossed back his drink then gestured for another. "Find yourself another stooge, maybe one who doesn't need to get his job back."

Nihlus grabbed Harkin by the collar, lifting him out of his chair. "I've paid you well over the cycles, and I'll be damned if I'm going to be extorted, you maggot."

Harkin just laughed. "Yeah, well, good luck beating it out of me. There ain't enough credits on the
whole fuckin' Citadel for me to talk to you. Fuck off."

Shepard sighed and walked over. Fantastic. She steeled herself, swallowed her gag reflex, and pushed between the two men. She peeled Nihlus's talons off Harkin's uniform and smoothed it out. "Gentlemen, is that any way to behave in front of a lady?" She winked at the drunken disgrace, then turned and lifted his drink off the waitress's tray.

Licking her lips, she met Harkin's unsteady gaze and mimed taking a sip from his drink. "Mmm, not bad." She passed it to him, then looked over at the waitress, using her omnitool to buy Harkin's drink and one for herself. "Have a seat, officer. Let a lady buy you a drink."

Harkin flopped into his chair, snagging her around the waist. "A lady, huh? There ain't many ladies in this dive." He tugged at her, pulling her over between his knees. "How about you sit on ol' Harkin's lap, and we have ourselves a good time?"

"Harkin, huh?" Shepard tilted her head back and lifted her leg over his to sit, straddling his lap. "What sort of a good time are you offering, officer?" She turned to the waitress as the asari returned, giving her a nod of thanks as she took her drink from the tray but then set it on the table, untouched.

"The kind where all that armour is going to get in the way." He reached up and grabbed her behind her neck, leaning in close enough that for a second, Shepard thought she was going to have to kiss him without a half dozen shots in her to kill the pain. Instead, he just pressed his face into her neck and took a deep breath. "Mm, you smell good. What's that perfume?"

Shepard shrugged. "Probably gun oil and sweat." She chuckled and leaned back. "So, what's your problem with Nihlus? Other than the fact that he's an uptight asshole?"

Harkin grumbled a little. "He paid well enough to be worth slipping him a little info here and there … " He burped, and Shepard had to turn away to get control of her urge to vomit as the stench of booze and stomach contents washed over her. God, she needed a raise. "... but now, word is, the council's pissed at him for fuckin' up some op." He blinked blurrily and pawed at her throat. "You've got a really long neck."

Leaning in to nuzzle along his jaw, Shepard chuckled. "Yes, I do." She nipped at his ear. "You say Kryik fucked up an op?" She laughed. "Idiot. He's always fucking up. Can't help it, I think."

"Ha! You might need to buy yourself a couple of sources of information a little closer to home, Kryik." Harkin nuzzled into Shepard's neck, but she could feel his salamander glare slide over her shoulder to the Spectre. "You might not know as much about your precious council as you think you do."

"What are you talking about, Harkin? What op was I supposed to have screwed up? Eden Prime? We saved . . . ." Nihlus stepped forward, but Shepard turned, giving him a quick, hard glare to back him off. He stared into her eyes for a moment, his entire body screaming fury and impatience. She didn't blink. If he kept going, Harkin was going to shut down on them and then they'd be completely screwed.

She plastered a soft, seductive smile back onto her face before she turned back to run her hands over Harkin's chest. "All politicians are dirty," she whispered. "It's how they get into power. It's how they stay there." She brushed just her fingertips over his cheek. "I bet you see that sort of bullshit all the time in your job." Nuzzling into him, she moaned low and throaty.

"Word is the council wanted that beacon," he said, his hand cupping her armoured breast. "We
really need to get some of this armour out of our way, princess."

Shepard wriggled on his lap a little and leaned up into his hand. "Damned straight we do." She kissed the spot under his ear. "Why would the council want a stupid beacon?"

"No idea, but that's the buzz. My guess would be that they're trying to keep everything prothean to themselves. Don't give the humans any more power." He snorted and reached around her to grab his drink, tossing it back in a single swallow. After slamming it back on the table, he stroked his fingers around her ear. "Keep them in their place, just like me."

"It's all any of them care about. Keep the little guy down, grab everything for themselves." Shepard leaned into his touch. "So what's this Garrus guy's deal? He in the council's pocket too?"

Harkin let out a belching laugh that reeked worse than the first one. "Vakarian? No way. He's got that whole honour stick shoved way too far up his ass for that. Hell, he doesn't even lift loose credits chits at crime scenes." He shook his head and leaned in to kiss her, his tongue dragging along her bottom lip.

She covered her retching gag with a purr and lifted into him again. "So, why's he in the wind?"

"He's still investigating Saren. Thinks it'll get him a pat on the head from dear old dad if he brings down a Spectre. Last I heard, someone saw him headed for Dr. Michel's clinic over in the wards. Something about a quarian runaway or something." He hiccuped. "Helluvino. Come on, princess, let's find a back room and get you out of that armour."

Shepard shoved herself off of him, tipping his chair over backward. "Yeah, about the same time as hell freezes over, asshat." She strode for the door, pausing just outside to reach back to Kaidan. "Alenko, disinfectant wipes, anything."

He rummaged through his pack, taking long enough that she started snapping her fingers. "Come on, I'm five seconds from dumping my lunch all over the damned floor."

He passed her a package, and she ripped it open, scrubbing every inch of exposed skin until it glowed red. She scrubbed her teeth with a corner, ignoring the astringent alcohol, then spat into the wipe and shoved it back in the wrapper. "Thanks, LT. Come on, let's get this over with. I suddenly feel the violent need to yack." She gagged. "A lot."

Kaidan made a nauseated face. "Ma'am, if you don't mind me saying so . . . that was the most disgusting thing I've ever seen."

Shepard nodded. "Yeah, I know, Sport, but suck it up. You're making out with the next one, and Barla Von sounds like a volus name." She grinned and nodded back toward the transit station. "Come on, let's find Vakarian and figure out what the hell is going on before the dissociation wears off, and I remember what I just did."
Mass Effect - Future Imperfect Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

What's that? A quarian in distress? Hmm.

Shepard set the car down at the transit station and popped the door. She glanced back at Kaidan. “Give us a second, will you, Sport?”

“Is ‘Sport’ going to be a thing, Captain, or can I request something a little less eight year old T-ball player?” Kaidan asked as he climbed out.

Shepard grinned. “Sure, how does Sparky hit you?”

Kaidan laughed and pointed over to the far wall by the med clinic door. “I’ll just be over there.”

Shepard leaned back in her seat. “So, Nihlus, we both suspected the council was covering for Saren,” she said softly.

Nihlus just stared out the front. “Harkin’s not exactly reliable. He was intent on crawling into your armour at the time.”

“What if he is reliable? Is any evidence going to make a difference, or do we take them whatever we dig up, only to find ourselves and the entire crew of the *Normandy* on the wrong end of a kill order?” She looked over at him. “I need to know what I’m getting my people into here, Nihlus.”

“We find evidence that they can’t ignore.” He got out of the car, his shotgun settling easily into his hands.

Shepard sighed and shook her head. “Shepard, the asari councillor left her poodle on Illium . . .” She climbed out and headed for the med clinic door, but before she palmed the control, she turned to Nihlus. “If we meet resistance in here, I’m lead.” When he gave her a stiff nod, she hit the door control.

The door opened to chaos.

“Sweet baby Jesus.” Shepard ran in the door, taking stock of the situation as she crossed the few metres of open floor. Five bad guys with a female hostage just head and to the right, and a C-Sec agent on the far left hand side of the room. Ducking behind a low wall, she shouted, “Kaidan, take cover at the end by C-Sec over there. Nihlus, draw their fire down the wall. I’ll go for the woman.” She launched her drone to draw off some fire, then overloaded the thug holding the hostage. The tech attack stunned both of them, giving her a chance to move. Leaping over the wall, Shepard grabbed the hostage and spun her behind some crates, using her shields to give the woman cover.

Surrounded and unable to find shelter from the hail of bullets, the small squad of thugs went down within seconds.

“Slick as shit,” Shepard said, grinning as Nihlus came around the corner and gave her a firm nod. “Hm. Sterner stuff, indeed.”
After making sure the last one was dead, Shepard turned to the woman, who remained hunkered in the corner behind the crate, her arms wrapped around her knees.

“Hey there.” The captain crouched down in front of her. “Are you okay? What’s your name?”

“I’m fine, just shaken up.” The woman took a deep breath and nodded, meeting Shepard’s stare with a far steadier one than she would have thought. “My name’s Dr. Chloe Michel. Thank you for saving me.”

Shepard stood and held out her hand to help her up. “It’s our pleasure. I’m just glad we didn’t sit in the car talking any longer. Sorry about the overload there. It seemed better to stun you than let him shoot you, but I know it stings.” She gave the doctor’s hand a comforting squeeze then turned to the turian at the other end of the room. “You Vakarian?”

“Yeah, Garrus Vakarian.” He looked to the doctor. “Are you all right, Dr. Michel?” When she assured him she was, he turned back to Shepard. “And who are you?” He looked at the three of them like they’d dropped out of the sky. She supposed they sort of had.

“Comm . . . Captain Jane Shepard,” she said, pointing to herself. “Spectre Nihlus Kryik and Lt. Sparky Alenko.” She ignored the exasperated glare from the LT, well . . . except for shooting him a quick grin. “We’ve been looking for you.”

“Yeah, Garrus Vakarian?” Vakarian walked over to her. “You’re the ones who were on Eden Prime?”

“Yeah, we were there,” Nihlus said, stepping forward. “We’re trying to prove that Saren Arterius was responsible for the attack. My sources said you were investigating him?”

Shepard looked to Kaidan. “Keep an eye on the door, LT.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She looked back to the C-Sec officer. “Can you help us out?”

He nodded. “I was investigating Saren before we even heard about the attack on Eden Prime. I started hearing reports from all over the traverse and terminus of quarian pilgrims disappearing. When I first started making inquiries, I’d heard of maybe five disappearances, but once I started asking questions, the number rose to nearly a hundred.”

Shepard watched him, staring intently into his ice-blue eyes. She liked him, she decided. He didn’t have Kryik’s ‘never met a situation he couldn’t defeat’ arrogance, and still seemed to give a rat’s ass. That alone was rare enough to be noteworthy. “So, why are you here? And what does a bunch of missing quarians have to do with Saren?” She thought for a second, wondering what a quarian pilgrim was. Her mind spat out an environment suited alien wearing a thanksgiving costume. “Probably not right,” she muttered to herself.

The doctor cleared her throat. “I believe I may be of some assistance.”

Shepard looked over at her and grinned: the doctor had pluck. “Okay, doctor. The floor is yours.”

“A young female quarian came to me last last night. She’d been shot in the arm. Polonium rounds. Naturally, because of her weakened immune system, she was quite ill. She was very frightened, said she’d escaped from the geth and needed to find somewhere safe to stay and had information to trade for it.” She looked at Vakarian, the expression on her face almost as amusingly adoring as Vakarian’s was oblivious. “That’s when I called Garrus, but before he got here, she took off, said she’d been told to talk to Fist.” Her expression said she knew Garrus would know that name. He
did not disappoint.

“Fist is low-life, bottom-rung loser in organized crime, but also an agent for the Shadow Broker,” Garrus offered. “If she went to Fist for help hiding, she’s just going to get killed. Fist’s as watertight as a rusted out toilet.”

“Wow, thanks for that mind-gem.” Shepard shuddered and looked to Nihlus. “So, we visit Fist?”

When he nodded, she started for the door. Part way, she turned back. “You going to be okay, Doc?”

Chloe Michel nodded. “Yes, thank you, Captain. I think it’s an excellent time to take a few days off.”

Shepard grinned. “Couldn’t have said it better myself. Nothing screams spa weekend like being taken hostage by thugs. Take care.” She pointed to Garrus. “Vakarian, walk with us.” As she reached the door, Nihlus stepped up beside her. She looked over at him and gave him a wink, glad to see him checking back in.

Garrus strode up next to her. “You going after Fist, Captain?”

She looked over at him and nodded. “You know where we can find him?”

“He owns Chora’s Den.” He looked at her with an expression she decided to call ‘excited puppy’. “Take me with you? I need to know where all this is going.”

“Sure. You good with those guns?” She laughed when he just raised a brow plate at her and set his head at a cocky tilt. “Guess so. Okay.” She palmed the door and gestured for Kaidan to fall in. “So, Vakarian, why do you think Saren is behind your missing quarians?”

Garrus made a subharmonic rumble of disgust down low in his throat that sent a tingle down her spine. “Saren is that cop everyone knows is dirty but who’s so well protected that no one can ever prove it. When I started looking at the data, he was in the area near way too many of the disappearances to be coincidence.”

Shepard opened the car. “Okay, so . . . what’s a quarian pilgrim? I’m assuming it has nothing to do with turkeys.”

Kaidan let out a coughing laugh, but the two turians just stared at her. She shook her head. “At least Sparky got the joke. Get in gentlemen.”

Nihlus climbed in the front. “Quarians leave the flotilla when they reach adulthood, going on a pilgrimage to find something of value to take back to the flotilla.”

Shepard hummed and nodded as she closed the hatch. “Okay, so coming of age.” Lifting off, she sent the car zipping into the traffic lane. She added one and one and got zero. “Wait. Quarians are really tight knit, aren’t they? That means we have a whole lot of frantic quarian parents somewhere? Why haven’t we heard anything about this?”

“They’re also very insular,” Nihlus added, “and they don’t trust council authorities.”

Shepard cut a glance across at him and tipped her head, acknowledging that fact. “Yeah. Guess you get treated like dog crap on someone’s boot long enough, you start to resent it. Go figure.”

Vakarian made that grumbling sound that gave her goosepimples again. “Let’s hope this quarian can tell us what’s going on.”
“Didn’t we just fight our way into Chora’s Den?” Kaidan sighed.

Shepard chuckled then groaned. “Crap, Harkin will still be there. Think I could plug him and pretend it was an accident?”

“Harkin?” Garrus made a rude noise. “They might just give you a reward.”

Grinning, Shepard pulled the car into the transit station. “I like the way you think, Vakarian.”

They heard gunfire before they even got to the door.

“What is with this place?” Shepard groaned, pulling Roger off her back. “Okay, Vakarian with me, we go in the door, take the left. Kryik, you take Sparky to the right?” When he nodded, she palmed the door control. “Meet you on the other side.”

Once again, a door opened to chaos. Except this time the gunfire wasn’t directed at them, but a massive krogan in red armour. After watching him in action for a moment, she waved her team forward.

“He seems to be doing fine on his own,” Garrus called.

“He sure does,” Shepard agreed, overloading the thug directly in front of the krogan. She winced as the big guy charged and the sound of snapping bones drowned out even the gunfire. She put the thug out of his misery as she passed him writhing on the floor. Launching her drone, she followed in the krogan’s wake, finishing off any his shotgun didn’t leave a two foot hole in the middle of.

“I want to be a krogan when I grow up,” she grumbled. Bullets peppered her shields from the right, but a couple blasts from Nihlus’s shotgun took the thug behind the bar out before she could even bring Roger to bear. She chuckled and gave him a nod.

She hadn’t fired Roger more than ten times when they reached a gap in the wall leading to the rear of the club. The krogan waited for them there, leaning against the door.

“Nice work,” Shepard said, walking up to him. “You clear a room faster than I do, and that’s saying something.”

The big guy straightened and stepped into her, his red eyes staring into hers from a couple hand widths away. After a second, he laughed, a harsh cough of sound. “Who are you? Am I going to have to kill you?”

Shepard grinned. “My name’s Captain Jane Shepard, and I sure hope not. We’re here to get some information from Fist. What’s your story?”

“I’m here to kill him.”

Shepard nodded. “Okay, good to know. Personal grudge or just business?” She cocked a hip affecting a nonchalance she didn’t feel.

“Business. The Shadow Broker doesn’t like it when his agents turn on him.” The big guy glanced back at the door. “Fist knows we’re here.”

Shepard chuckled. “Fair to say.”

“Maybe we should get in there before he kills the quarian?” Nihlus suggested from just behind Shepard’s shoulder.
“A very good idea.” Shepard straightened. “We go in together? We get our information, then you do what you need to?”

The krogan nodded. “I can live with that.”

Shepard palmed the door, then stopped dead, coming face to face with a couple of terrified men holding guns. “Seriously? With your hands shaking that hard, you couldn’t hit me if you tried.” She nodded over her shoulder. “Go on, get out of here.”

They stared at her until she lifted Roger, then nodded and bolted.

“Guess we killed all the real guards Fist had,” the krogan said, giving a satisfied grunt.

“You got a name, big fella?” Shepard asked, leading the way toward a door at the far end of the room.

“Urdnot Wrex.” He punched the door control, striding in, completely unconcerned as turret fire pelted his shields. A blast from his shotgun took one out.

Shepard hit the wall and leaned out, overloading the shields on the other one, then finishing it off with a couple of shots.

A human male held a small quarian in front of him, a pistol held to her head. “No further, or I put a bullet in her head.”

Shepard looked back at Nihlus. He traded his shotgun for his sniper rifle. She nodded, then hung Roger on her back and stepped out, her hands held away from her body. “Hey, we’re here to talk. No one needs to do anything drastic.” She moved forward, covering the wall to help block his view of Nihlus as the Spectre lined up his shot.

“Yeah right. Like you talked your way in here?” Fist backed up, dragging the quarian with him. “I know the Shadow Broker sent Wrex here to kill me.”

Shepard shrugged. “That’s between you, Wrex, and the Shadow Broker. I just need to talk to the lady.” She glanced over at Wrex who was moving up on Fist’s other side, and shook her head. A shotgun would take the quarian out too. They needed a precise strike.

“Who else is there?” Fist tried to look around her.

Shepard raised her hands a little, drawing his attention back to her. “Sparky, Vakarian, come on out where he can see you,” she called, then stepped forward. “You’re in control here. Let’s just . . ..” She didn’t get a chance to finish her sentence as a bullet whistled past her ear, slamming through Fist’s forehead. The body stood there for a second as if it didn’t realize most of its head was gone, then went down, dragging the quarian with it.

Shepard jumped forward and helped the young woman to her feet. “Are you okay?”

The quarian stood there for a moment, far more composed than Shepard would have thought, then nodded. “I’m fine. Thank you.” She looked down at Fist’s body, then just sort of crumpled at the knees.

Shepard grabbed her around the waist and helped her to a couch, sitting her down. “Good.” She sat beside her. “My name is Captain Jane Shepard. What’s yours?”

The quarian let out a shaky breath. “Tali’Zorah nar Rayya.” She looked from one to the other.
“What are you all doing here?”

“We were looking for you, actually.” Shepard nodded toward Nihlus. “Spectre Kryik and I have been looking for evidence that another Spectre named Saren Arterius was responsible for an attack on a human colony. That led us to Officer Vakarian who has been looking into Saren too, but related to disappearing quarians.”

“Eden Prime,” Tali said and nodded. “I was there. An asari matriarch named Benezia approached me on Omega. I was just there to catch a ship to the Citadel.” She looked to Shepard as if trying to assure her that she’d never normally be caught dead anywhere near a hole like Omega. When Shepard smiled and patted her shoulder, the quarian let out a long breath.

“The matriarch said that she and Saren needed my help. I was suspicious because of all the disappearances, and tried to get away, but you can see how well that went. Next thing I knew, I was locked in a room on a geth ship. I managed to bypass the door and hid. When the geth landed on Eden Prime, I escaped but the geth caught me and took me to the bridge of their flagship.”

Tali shuddered. “That thing is terrifying. It whispers inside your head all the time. Anyway, they sent me back to the geth. I hacked my guards and used them to sow chaos while I escaped again. After stowing away on a turian cruiser and then a transport, I made it to the Citadel. Still, Saren’s people tracked me, got a shot off in the markets. Hit me in the arm.” She shook her head. “My father’s going to kill me.”

Shepard rubbed the young woman’s back. “I think he’ll be proud as hell. You’re a quarian Houdini.”

“A who?” she asked, tilting her head.

“Human escape artist,” Kaidan explained.

“You were going to trade information for somewhere to hide?” Nihlus prompted. He crouched down in front of her.

Tali brought up her omnitool. “I managed to take some recordings while the matriarch thought I was unconscious on the dreadnought.”

“I got the information from the beacon,” a rough, flanged voice said, “but Kryik came after me before I could secure it for transport.”

“And you think one of the humans used it?” a second, elegant, female voice asked.

“Yes, so did Kryik. The beacon overloaded. It’s gone, and the information it stuck in my head makes no sense. It’s incomplete. Jumbled. We’ll never find the conduit without more information.” Saren sounded as if he teetered on the edge between rage and madness.

“We need someone with knowledge of the protheans.”

Saren barked out a harsh laugh. “You mean your daughter? How’s she going to be any help? Suppositions and theories are all she knows.”

The calm, regal voice never wavered, showing no discomfiture. “Do we have other options at this point?”

“We need to pressure Rael’Zorah . . ..”
Shepard glanced over at Tali, both connecting the family name and the young woman’s sudden stiffness.

“. . . convince him that the only way to get his people back is to give us the star charts. Maybe we send him his own daughter, in pieces.”

The recording cut out. Tali gave an apologetic shrug. “They realized I was awake, so I had to turn it off.”

Shepard smiled. “It’s way more than we had five minutes ago.” She looked into the silvery glints of the quarian’s eyes through her mask. “This Rael’Zorah is the father who’s going to kill you?”

Tali nodded.

“Okay. Give us a second, but don’t worry, okay? We’ll protect you from here on.” Shepard looked up, finding Kaidan, nodding for him to come over and take her spot when she stood and headed back toward the door, Nihlus, Vakarian, and Wrex following.

She grinned, noticing the two self-appointed new members of her squad, but then she looked into Nihlus’s eyes and the smile bled away. “What the hell have we walked into here?”

He shrugged and shook his head. “They’re looking for a conduit? Abducting quarian adolescents to pressure the Admiralty Board into handing over star charts? And what do the geth have to do with any of this?”

“The geth believe that Saren is a prophet of their gods,” Tali called, drawing all their attention. She nodded. “They’re ancient, powerful machine intelligences the geth call the Old Machines and the protheans called Reapers. According to the information I hacked from the geth ship, these Old Machines hunted the protheans to extinction and then vanished fifty thousand years ago. The geth think Saren can bring them back.”

“Oh good, and here I thought it was going to be something terrifying.” Shepard shuddered as the images from the vision flashed through her mind, an ice cold chill slithering up her spine and into her brain. “Sweet baby Jesus,” she whispered. “That’s what the vision is showing me. The protheans being destroyed by the Reapers.” Her eyes locked onto Nihlus’s again. “But . . .”

“Why would the council be helping Saren bring back monsters capable of destroying everyone and everything?” he finished, his tone as terrified and bewildered as Shepard felt.
“So, what now?” Shepard looked to Nihlus for a moment, then turned to the rest of the team. “Toss this office, take anything that looks even remotely relevant, useful, or sellable.”

“Shep?ed?” Vakarian asked, his spine stiffening.

Shepard met his offense with a softening of her posture. “Yeah, officer . . . sellable. I get the feeling we’re going to be on the run soon, and we’ll need every credit we can get our paws on to get us through. If looting from bad guys bothers you, then this is a very good time to get back to your beat.” She pressed her lips together to stifle her grin at his reaction to the word ‘beat’, but try as she might, she couldn’t keep the gleam from her eye.

After a moment, his mandibles flicked, and he turned to join the others in their search.

Shepard turned back to Nihlus. “So, the next move . . .”

“We go to the council with her information. They can’t deny that conversation.” The Spectre paced to the door and back. “But if they are involved, they will know how much we know.”

“Yeah, not to mention the giant-ass target we paint on our backs.” Shepard shook her head and leaned against the wall, affecting a nonchalance that she didn’t feel. “What about Rael’Zorah? With all these pilgrims missing, he has to have been investigating and trying to find a way to get them back.”

“I insisted on going on my pilgrimage despite the disappearances,” Tali said, her voice soft and filled with regret and shame. “I told him that I’d investigate and send anything I discovered back to the fleet. I thought . . .” She sighed and shook her head. “It doesn’t matter what I thought. I failed, got myself captured, and now we’re no closer to finding our people.”

“Safe bet that Admiral Papa is hot on her trail. There’s no way he’s just sitting back on the flotilla hoping news of his daughter wanders past.” Shepard’s eyes flicked back to Nihlus, narrowing as she puzzled it through. Too many unknowns. “Okay, so this Matriarch seems to think her daughter is enough of a Prothean expert to hunt down. What if we try to get to her first? If she can help unravel this mess inside our heads, it might be worth our time.”

He nodded. “Be worth our time just to keep her away from Saren if she can help him.” He growled low in his throat and raked his fringe with his talons. “We don’t know nearly enough.”

Shepard nodded and pushed off the wall. “Well, if Wrex is any indication, the Shadow Broker is not a friend of Saren’s. Let’s go visit Barla Von before the council, yeah?”

“Yes.” His stance hardened. “Hopefully we find something worth trading to Von. The Shadow Broker’s information doesn’t come cheap.” He brushed past her to go over Fist’s desk.

Beckoning to Wrex, Shepard led the krogan to one side of the room. “Sorry about Fist, but you’ll still be able to collect?”
He nodded. “Dead is dead, Shepard.” Looking over at the little quarian, the giant male let out a faint, rumbling growl. “I’ve met this Saren before. Cold blooded bastard.” He stared into Shepard’s eyes for a long couple of seconds, giving her the feeling that he was searching for something written deep down at her core. A small nod told her that maybe he’d found whatever it was. “Could you use another gun?”

Grinning, the captain nodded. “I’m certainly not one to turn down help. Welcome aboard, Urdnot Wrex.”

Ten minutes later, they left the office and took a cab to the financial district on the presidium. Shepard got out of the car and headed for the door that Nihlus indicated. After a second, she glanced back and laughed. “Sweet baby Jesus,” she sighed and turned to look at her motley crew. “We look like a bunch of evangelists from the Church of Galactic Brotherhood.”

She raised her hands as if to bless them. “Brothers Kaidan and Wrex, Sister Tali, go see what you can get for that equipment, we’ll meet you back here.” She waved her hands over them. “Bless you my children, walk forward in the glory of the holy light of the Enkindlers.”

They hurried off, most likely as to not be associated with the lunatic woman. She grinned and looked to Garrus. “Brother Garrus, alight yourself somewhere on high so that ye may keep the eye of righteousness fixed upon all the sinners walking this fine presidium. If thou be a witness to anything considered a sin before the Enkindlers, raise the alarm, brother.” When he answered her with a hesitant nod and a wary stare, she turned back to Barla Von’s front door.

Nihlus took the lead. “Church of Galactic Brotherhood? Really?”

Shepard nodded and headed for the financier’s office. “I have trouble sleeping sometimes, watch a lot of very early morning broadcasts. The Galactic Brotherhood cracks me up. Started by a hanar who claims we should all come together into one great bloom—herd, flock, whatever—to spread the holy light of the Enkindlers.” She palmed the door control as if anointing it. “You haven’t heard the word until you’ve heard it shouted from the rooftops by the Father of the Light. Glory hallelujah, Brother Nihlus.”

A volus wheeze greeted their entrance. “I was not aware either Spectre Nihlus or Spectre-Candidate Shepard had joined the bloom and converted to the holy word of the Galactic Brotherhood.” A chuckle followed another wheeze. “Perhaps I need new sources of information.”

“We have come here today to spread the great and glorious light of the Enkindlers,” Shepard shouted, throwing rapturous hands over her head. She didn’t miss Nihlus’s wince. “Have you heard the word of the Enkindlers, Brother Von?”

“I have, Sister Shepard.” He wheezed. “Everytime I meet with the Holy Father of the Light to transfer his new millions into surprising operations galaxy-wide.”

Shepard chuckled as she tried to look stricken by the news. “Woe be upon you Brother Von for your lack of faith and inability to turn the blind eye of that faith.” She looked around and wondered how many millions of the Father of Light’s suspect credits had been filtered into Von’s pocket, ready for a quick getaway. Other than a couple of computer processors and a desk, the room sat bare.

“Nice place you have here, Brother Von. Very homey.” She stopped, planted her knuckles into her hips and nodded her approval. “It practically screams ‘don’t come looking if the markets go south, because I’ll be in hiding on Omega’.”
“Thank you, Brotherhood-clan.” He wheezed and chuckled again. “That is the exact look I am going for.”

Nihlus let out a deep, rumbling sigh, brushing past her none too gently, and strode straight up to the volus. “Barla Von.” The Spectre towered over the volus, glaring down at him like a falcon who’d spied a tasty snack, but was letting it get a head start before hunting it down.

The financier just looked up at the Spectre then over at Shepard who hung back. After a moment, he took a breath. “Since I have already heard the holy word of the Enkindlers, to what do I owe the pleasure of your and your protege’s company, Brother Kryik?” He gave her a slight tilt of his head. “Perhaps one of your bloom has gone astray?”

Shepard hid a grin. Clever little bastard.

“We need information, Von. What do you know about Saren?” Nihlus leaned on the desk, pushing in on the financier, but again, the little fellow just stood his ground.

“I know a great deal about Saren,” he said and took a hissing breath. Shepard sighed and settled in for the long haul. It took volus forever to spit anything out. “Do you want to know anything specific, or shall I start at his birth?”

“Don’t screw around with me, Von. Eden Prime.” As Shepard watched, the Spectre went from seething to completely still, as if time stopped inside his sphere of space. The effect was unsettling.

“Downright creepy,” she muttered.

Apparently the volus felt the same way, for his suit deflated a little as he let out a long, hissing breath. “You wish to know why Saren attacked Eden Prime?” He shrugged, his stumpy arms flapping a little. “You already know why he attacked Eden Prime. He wished to obtain the beacon. I do not know why he wanted it. He does not keep my counsel, nor apparently the counsel of anyone willing to share the information.”

“What is the Conduit? And what does Saren want with quarian children?” Only Nihlus’s mouth moved, but something rang through his subvocals that warned Shepard about what would follow the stillness.

She strode over and lifted a hip to sit on the edge of the desk. “Now, Brother Kryik, you’re forgetting the whereabouts of those children, the whereabouts of Matriarch Benezia’s daughter, and whether there is a decent Mexican restaurant on the Citadel.” She made a show of thinking. “I think that’s everything.”

She leaned on her knee, getting down near Von’s eye level. “It has been more than a year since Sister Shepard sank her teeth into a decent enchilada. Do you know how hard it is to concentrate on the holy light and sacred word of the Enkindlers when all you can think about is beefy, cheesy goodness with tons of jalapeno peppers?”

Von waddled around to face her. “I’m afraid I do not, Brotherhood-clan. However, there is a mexican restaurant in Zakera Ward that vol-clan has heard good things about.” He looked to Nihlus. “The whereabouts of Dr. Liara T’Soni, the daughter in question, are available for the time taken to do an extranet search and place a few calls.”

“Glory hallelujah, Brother Von. The Enkindlers’ light in strong in you.” She threw her hands up again in benediction. “You shall be rewarded greatly in this life and beyond.” She paused and shrugged. “I think. Not sure how that works exactly.” She leaned back down. “So, you’re pretty
plugged in to this place?”

He wheezed and nodded, a movement that included his entire torso. “One must be if one wishes to predict fluctuations in the galactic markets. Information is power.” He took a couple of breaths, and she got the feeling he was evaluating her effect on those markets. “You appear to be a woman drawn to power.”

She shrugged and waggled her head. “Power, sure. Corruption, no.” She gestured to encompass the the presidium. “I don’t see the holy light or power here, Brother Von. Corruption, absolutely.”

He took a step toward his desk and leaned his squat body against it. “Everything in balance Brotherhood-clan. How does one appreciate the holy light and virtue without holding it up against the darkness of corruption?” Breath. “Recognize good without evil?”

“And which are you?” she asked, sitting up, chin up, back ramrod straight.

Von made a half-wheeze, half-chuckling noise. “As with all things, Sister Shepard, I am a mixture of charity and avarice, good and evil, virtue and vice.” He emphasized the last word enough to make her wonder if he was flirting with her.

Shepard jumped up, putting the desk between them.

“And Saren?” Nihlus asked, saving her from having to examine the concept of a flirty volus too closely.

“Saren is misguided, I believe.” Von lifted a hand, little mechanical fingers working. “I do not know Saren’s purpose in holding the quarian youth, if he is indeed holding them, nor where they are located.” He paused for breath. “However, a member of the quarian Admiralty Board is on the Citadel, attempting to discover the answer to these questions.” Von passed Nihlus a datapad. “He is in hiding, but should you check this location, you might discover something useful.”

Nihlus snatched the datapad, the sudden movement startling Shepard with both its speed and promise of violence. Von flinched back, getting the message.

“Why did Saren want the beacon?” the Spectre demanded. “Out intel says he’s looking for a Conduit of some kind. Do you know what he’s talking about?” His words flew like daggers, the volus wincing at each.

Von shook his head, a slight waver lacing through his words now that Shepard no longer formed a buffer between him and the Spectre. “Not even the Shadow Broker has been able to ascertain his purpose, although it is whispered amongst some circles that he was to obtain the beacon for the council.” After a long pause for breath, his little fingers ticking nervously. “They do not wish the Earth-clan to get a leg up on the other species.” His little, light eyes turned to Shepard. “They believe your people to be a grave threat to galactic peace, Brotherhood-clan.”

“Sure, and nothing says get along and play well with the rest of the class like attacking our colonies.” Her arms crossed over her chest, a defensive shield, as she cocked a hip, trying for relaxed, but the electricity coming off Kryik made that impossible. “Okay, but . . . the geth? I can’t see the council climbing in bed with the geth no matter what.”

The volus shrugged and tilted his head, waddling a step toward her and shelter. “Some things you will either have to discover on your own or for a fee, Captain Shepard. I’m a businessman.”

Nihlus took a step that felt like a lunge. “Have you heard anything about Reapers?”
Shepard shifted between them again as Von shook his head. God, she hoped she didn’t have to stop Kryik from ripping the little guy’s suit open. The last thing they needed was to piss off the Shadow Broker. Who knew when they’d need his services?

“Rumour and superstition, Spectre, nothing more.” He wheezed and took a step toward her, seeking shelter.

“Then tell me the rumours and superstitions.”

Shepard’s skin rose in gooseflesh, the hairs along her arms feeling like she’d been dragging her feet along carpet. Lightning crackled through the empty room.

Shepard held up her hands, trying to keep it from striking. “Okay, our source says that they could have been behind the Prothean extinction.” She leaned on the desk to get closer to Von’s eye level. “I’ll tell you what. You give us whatever you can dig up on them, and we’ll reciprocate. Something tells me that we’re all going to need a few favours in the coming months.” She flicked her eyes toward Nihlus, encouraging Von to choose based on his own self-interest.

Von let out a long, wheezing sigh, his light eyes feeling as though they bored straight through her. “You’re correct, Brotherhood-clan. I sense dark times ahead. The markets are uneasy as if something is stirring behind the curtain, unwilling to show itself.” He wheezed. “Whatever I discover about Reapers will find its way to you.”

Shepard practically pounced on the volus to interrupt Nihlus, and shook the little mechanical hand. “We have an accord, Brother Von. Whatever I discover will be sent to you.” She emphasized the last word and placed her hands on his shoulders. “Glory be to the piercing light of the Enkindlers, and a good day to you, brother.”

Nihlus led the way out of the office, the static storminess around him dying down to where she wasn’t afraid to get electrocuted if she brushed against him. “Don’t your people have a saying about making deals with the devil, Shepard?”

She nodded. “They’re not recommended. Von, however, is far too practical to be the devil, glory hallelujah!” She tossed a companionable wink at Garrus as he sauntered over.

“I didn’t mean Von,” Nihlus said and chuffed. “I meant the Shadow Broker.”

Shepard glanced back at the door, then to Nihlus. “I didn’t hear anything about the Shadow Broker in that conversation. An acquaintance said that he would send me any information his discovered in exchange for mine.” She shrugged and leaned back against the cab. “Like I said, Von’s a practical fellow. You can guarantee that the Shadow Broker won’t see anything I send Von unless the little guy needs something. A quick, secret way off the Citadel more than likely.” She nodded and looked down the street. “We’ll have some lead time.”

Kaidan, Wrex and Tali hurried toward them.

Shepard popped the car open, then turned to look at Garrus. “There is something rotten in the state of Denmark, and you can smell it, can’t you, Horatio?”

Garrus’s mandibles fluttered. “Is this all some convincing act, or are you actually a raving lunatic?”

“How does quoting Marcellus from Hamlet make me a raving lunatic?” Shepard asked, sighed doing her best to look mortally wounded. “Honestly, Vakarian . . . I ask for your opinion as to the state of corruption on the Citadel, bring a little culture into your life, and I get called a crazy
Nihlus walked around to the other side of the car. “If the shoe fits . . . I believe that’s the phrase.”

When the other three got in, Shepard settled herself in the driver’s seat and shut the car before turning to Garrus. “You’re the most familiar with this place, Vakarian. Does everything feel business as usual?” She paused, staring at him through narrowed eyes. “Or is there something festering under the surface?”

She watched him war against his programming, both as a turian and a C-Sec agent. Both demanded unquestioning loyalty to one’s superiors, but then he sighed, and Shepard felt him settle fully inside the car with her, his side chosen.

“I’ve felt that something was off for just over a solar cycle. Odd orders, Spectres taking missions that didn’t appear to need a Spectre presence. Colleagues who asked the wrong questions just disappeared one day, and we were told they’d been reassigned.” He chuffed, his mandibles lowering. “I don’t know what it is, but something’s going on, Shepard, and it scares the hell out of me.”

Shepard watched him for another moment, then nodded—one firm, resolute nod. “Welcome aboard, Vakarian.” She looked to Nihlus. “All right, let’s go find our hiding admiral and see if we can’t figure out what the hell is going on here.”
Mass Effect - Future Imperfect Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

On the hunt for Rael'Zorah

Shepard parked the car outside a hotel in one of the seediest parts of Zakera Ward. She looked around and sighed, shaking her head sadly at the humans and aliens drifting with the garbage along the street; just more refuse. “Nothing ever changes, does it?” She opened the top. Looking up the lines of the filthy structure, she winced. “So, this is where we’re supposed to find a hiding quarian admiral?”

Nihlus got out. “I guess we’ll find out when we get in there.”

“True enough.” Shepard turned in her seat, unable to hide a soft chuckle. “Little crowded back there, guys?”

When only grumbling answered her, Shepard nodded toward where Nihlus waited. “Wrex and Tali with us.”

A turian stumbled and fell into the front of the car, sliding down onto her knees.

“Sweet baby Jesus.” Shepard jumped out, hurried to her side and helped her up. She checked the female’s breath for alcohol as she pulled up onto her feet. None. She checked her pupils, but they weren’t blown like a hallex junkie’s. Judging by the way her clothes hung off of her, the turian was just starving.

“Are you all right?” Shepard reached into her hip pack for the supplies she’d stuffed in there just in case Nihlus needed them.

“I’m fine,” gentle, harmonic tones replied. “Thank you.”

Surreptitiously, Shepard slipped the ration bars and medigel packs into her hand. “Take care of yourself.”

Releasing the female to go on her way, Shepard got into the car and closed it up before looking back at Kaidan and Garrus. “You in for the long haul, C-Sec, or are we leaving you here?”

The turian stared into her eyes for a moment, then his mandibles and chin lifted. “I’m in.”

“Good, glad to have you.” Nodding sharply, she quirked one corner of her mouth in a smile before letting out a long breath. “Okay, we’re going to need to split up to chase both of these leads down. You two get back to the Normandy. Do extranet searches for a Dr. Liara T’Soni. She’s a prothean researcher, so I’d start with universities on Thessia. Make calls . . . whatever, just find out where she is.”

Shepard’s stare locked back on Garrus. “You have ways to cover your tracks, C-Sec? I don’t want it to be obvious that we’re searching.”

“I can get us in some back doors,” he confirmed.
“Excellent.” She opened the car and got out. “Good luck, gentlemen.”

Shepard waited until the car lifted off, then turned to Nihlus and gave him a nod, leaving to him to lead the search for the admiral. The Spectre’s shock had worn off, leaving an understandable, but highly combustible fury to replace it. She wanted to see what he did with it. He might need to trust her with his life, but she needed to trust him with sixty lives. Better to find out sooner than later if that trust was well-placed. The whole Spectres do whatever they must and sacrifice whatever they must to achieve their objective was more than likely an exaggeration of a larger truth, but she wasn’t going to gamble with the lives of her crew.

Looking down the street, Shepard swallowed the bitter taste that rose up in the back of her mouth. All those souls hunkered down amidst the filth, apparently as easily ignored as the trash piled around them . . . it made her want to vomit.

“Does it get worse than this?” she asked, stepping up beside the Spectre.

Nihlus strode toward the front of the hotel. “What do you mean?”

“The squallour. Are there worse places than this on the Citadel?” She stopped for a moment as she spotted a family half-hidden under a battered tarp.

He paused, his hand lifted to palm the door control. “There is a district much like this in all the wards. He glanced down at the family. “Not every story ends happily, Shepard.”

The laugh that greeted his revelation came out bitter. “Wow. Thanks for letting me know.” She sighed, then said, “It makes me sick,” using the words to purge the subject from her mind. A mission lay before her, one she needed to stay focused on.

A glance at Wrex and Tali showed the former keeping a wary eye on their surroundings, the latter wringing her hands and looking like a child anticipating a scolding. She shot Tali a quick wink and nodded toward the now open door.

They entered the hotel and took the elevator up to the ninth floor. The building’s interior lived up to its exterior, the overall impression one of terminal dinginess. She knew a hundred places like it, even stayed in a few now and again. Sometimes an N7 needed a place to hole up and heal for a few days under the radar.

“Wrex, watch the elevator,” Nihlus ordered as they stepped out, then carried on to a door at the far end of the hallway. It opened onto the stairwell. Smart. Made quick get aways a little easier. Unless, of course, one was surrounded.

Shepard continued into the stairwell and down a couple of flights, just to be sure it was clear. She made it back upstairs just as Nihlus banged on the door.

He met her eyes and tilted his head toward the door across the hall. Nodding, she activated her omnitool and bypassed the lock. “Ready,” she said, keeping her voice soft as she slipped her pistol off her hip.

“Who is it?” a heavily accented whisper drifted from the other side of Nihlus’s door.

“Wrex?” He sighed when she shrugged.
“Tali?” the voice behind the door continued, overlapping them. “How could it be you?”

“Who is this?” The youngster looked up at Nihlus. “The voice is too muffled to tell, but I don’t think it’s father. It sounds . . . recorded.”

Nihlus cracked the door turned to check with Shepard. She just nodded and raised her hand to the door control.

“Where were you abducted?” the voice whispered through the crack.

“Omega. Father? If that’s you, we need to speak to you.” Tali stepped up to the door and started pushing it open.

Shepard pressed herself against the wall next to the other door then palmed the control. It opened with the slight grinding of metal on metal to reveal a dark, narrow passage from the door to the main part of the room. A closet and the bathroom door broke up the wall on the left.

Nothing moved. Adrenaline hit her blood like the first hit of Hallex. Her heart thumped quick and strong, her senses sharpening, extending out into the dark like hair-fine feelers. She bent her knees, crouching a little as she swung through the door. Left hip brushing along the wall, she entered, her pistol preceding her into the room.

Her finely tuned ambush detector went off inside her head. Someone was in there with her. She swept the closet door open. Empty. Another couple of steps, she pushed the bathroom door open, her eyes straight ahead, then quickly scanning the bathroom. It too stood empty.

Nihlus called across the hall. “This room is empty, Shep . . .”

The muzzle of a rifle appeared at the end of the narrow entry. Shepard dropped into a quick somersault, coming up underneath it, her shoulder jamming into the wielder’s hands. Not giving him time to react, she shoved her pistol into his belly.

“I suggest you drop that,” she said, keeping her voice soft.

Her assailant hesitated, so she jabbed the pistol into the yielding flesh. “Drop it, or I put a couple of holes through that very lovely suit.”

The lights flicked on, blinding her for a moment. Her prisoner made a move for her pistol, but she grabbed the rifle and flipped the entire person over her head, tearing the weapon from his grasp in the process. He, she saw it actually was a he despite his being upside down, recovered quickly and flipped over into a crouch, apparently ready to take them all on.

“Han?” Tali asked, running over to help the downed quarian. “Where’s father? What’s going on?”

“Tali? It really is you?” the male quarian said, his helmet turning toward Nihlus. “How did you get away from Saren?” He straightened, but stayed facing the Spectre.

“Geth were guarding my door, so I hacked the guards and escaped.” She stepped between Nihlus and the quarian. “It’s okay, Han, this is Spectre Kyrik and Captain Shepard. They saved me and are helping me . . . well, sort of. Our purposes have crossed.” Tali turned to Shepard. “Nihlus, Shepard, this is Admiral Han’Gerrel, my father’s oldest friend, and one of the Admiralty Board.”

Nihlus moved toward the admiral. “We’re looking for Rael’Zorah. Our information said we’d find something useful here.”
Han’Gerrel sidled away from the wall, definitely still expecting to be attacked, but he relaxed a little when Shepard hung up her pistol and placed the muzzle of his rifle on the floor, leaning casually against it. He held out a hand, but she shook her head.

“You can have it back once we’re all a little more certain bullets aren’t in the forecast,” she told him.

The quarian cocked a hip, giving her the most attitude she’d ever seen without facial expression or a middle finger being involved. It felt false though. Affected insolence to cover a very real arrogance. “Fine. Rael sent me a message three days ago saying that he was tracking Tali and the rest of the missing pilgrims.” He snapped to parade rest, back cracking straight and rigid, his hands clasped behind him, mask jutted out at the chin.

Shepard pulled the inside of her bottom lip between her teeth to hide her smile as the real Admiral appeared.

“He told me to meet him in the room across the hall. When I got there, all I found was a heavily encrypted message telling me that he’d traced Tali to Eden Prime, and he would contact me when he found covert transport.”

“Do you have any idea of what Saren and the asari are up to? What they’re doing working with geth?” Shepard asked. She lifted his rifle, cradling it in her crossed arms as she rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. All the running around just to get slapped in the face with another dead end had lost its novelty.

“All I know is that the Admiralty Board received a demand for all our star charts for five systems going back as far as we have records of those regions—hundreds of cycles. He’s searching for something, and it’s valuable enough to be worth the lives of our young people.” His spine softened for a moment, his narrow shoulders bowing. Shepard’s mind flashed to the image of ice cream melting, the cherry slumping from the top, but then the moment of weakness lifted. “He has not informed us as to the nature of his search, just that he will exchange the charts for our youth.”

“Rael’Zorah was headed for Eden Prime?” Nihlus asked, the rumble that ran under his voice sounding enough like a growl that Shepard felt safe guessing he tired of the goose chase as quickly as she did.

“His message was dated a day ago. He could be anywhere between here and there.” Han’Gerrel sighed, a short, sharp exhalation that stiffened his posture rather than easing it. “I must return to the flotilla. My people are under attack, and I do not have time to chase Rael across half the galaxy. The rest of the Board are seriously considering capitulating to Saren’s demand.”

Nihlus stepped forward, scalpel sharp. “You cannot give in, Admiral. We have no idea what Saren is doing, but by Tali’Zorah’s own intel, it appears that he is trying to resurrect some ancient race that wiped out the entire prothean empire.”

The admiral stepped into Nihlus, also sharp enough to draw blood at a touch. “And if he held hundreds of your children, Spectre Kryik?” The melting ice cream returned for another breath as the heavy accent cracked. “If the daughter you taught to walk, to whom you told just one more story, who learned to dance standing on your feet... the bright center of your galaxy... was his hostage? Would you be so sure then?” He cleared his throat and straightened, but without the same steel.

Nihlus backed up a half step, allowing the admiral the space to regain his composure.
Shepard held out the man’s rifle. “Give us some time, please, Admiral. If Saren can bring these Reapers back, the bright center of everyone’s galaxy will be at risk. I promise you that if there is a way to free your young people, we will do it.” When he didn’t reach for his weapon, she stepped forward and placed it in his hands. “Can you tell us what systems he wanted charts for?”

Gerrel nodded. “Of course, Captain Shepard.” His omnitool flared to life. “I sent you everything I have. You managed to return one of our brightest to us, perhaps you can return the rest.”

Shepard chuckled and stepped back to lay a hand on Tali’s shoulder. “She returned herself, Admiral. We just gave her a ride over here.”

Tali spun. “I’m coming with you!”

“Tali . . .” Shepard squeezed her shoulder. “. . . you should go home, help your people figure this out. When we round up your father, we’ll send him right behind you.”

“No.” The quarian shook her head and planted herself, arms crossed. “You’re not sending me home, Captain. I set out to find my people, and I’m going to see it through. You can either take me with you to make sure I don’t get myself into trouble, or I can do it on my own.”

A wide smile spread across Shepard’s face. The kid had guts. She didn’t miss Nihlus’s gesture to refuse, but she believed Tali. The kid would just set out on her own, and end up captured again. At least if she was on the Normandy, Shepard could keep an eye on her.

“Okay. You can come with the Normandy, but you obey orders. No matter what. If I or Nihlus give an order, your only answer is yes, ma’am. Understood?”

The young quarian bounced a little on the spot. “Yes, ma’am.”

“This is a mistake,” Nihlus grumbled. He loomed over Han’Gerrel. “Do you have anything helpful to offer, Admiral?”

Shepard shrugged and grumbled, feeling the truth behind his words in her gut. “Won’t be my first.”

“Just what I’ve told you. We have a wide net cast searching for any intel, but whatever Saren is up to, either he is keeping it to himself, or he has a hold over everyone who knows, and it’s so strong that he is generating absolutely no chatter. Even Eden Prime is silent. The only thing that has leaked is that the colony came under attack by unknown forces.”

Shepard frowned at that. Surely something should have leaked out. The largest dreadnought she’d even seen landed on the planet, geth poured out, and the colony was nearly destroyed. Damn, it looked like they were going back to Eden Prime.

She sent Han’Gerrel the information he needed to contact her or Anderson. ‘Please, sir, if that net brings in anything, let us know. We’ll try to get ahead of Rael’Zorah, but our priority has to be Saren.”

“Understood, Captain. Thank you.” The admiral took Tali by the shoulders. “May the ancestors watch over you and bring you home, Tali’Zorah nar Raaya. Keelah se’lai.”

“Keelah se’lai.” Tali hurried to stand next to Shepard, prompting another grin. “Ready when you are, Captain.”

Shepard looked to Nihlus, who nodded and spun, stalking toward the door. Tali chased after him as if afraid of being left behind.
“Thank you again, Admiral Gerrel,” Shepard said. “Safe journey back to the flotilla.” She turned to follow Nihlus, but didn’t have time to take a step before gunfire shattered the air. The first rounds threw her forward, her shields going down with a buzzing whine as she reached for her pistol. Rounds impacted like fists, hitting her in the backs of her thighs and right calf when she dove for the bathroom door. One slammed into her shoulder, throwing off her roll and sending her sliding across the tile floor in a fat streak of blood. Adrenaline masked the pain for the moment, but set off her fury like a grenade thrown into an explosives factory.

“You’re such a stupid, god-damned, fucking moron, Shepard!” she yelled, as she flipped over, trying to focus through the blood pouring over her eyes from a graze across her brow. She heard Gerrel’s approaching footsteps like a countdown and brought up her pistol. “You deserve to get your stupid ass shot off. Never turn your back. Goddamn it!”

She wriggled to the side of the vanity, but other than wedging herself behind the toilet the bathroom offered no cover. The admiral stepped into the door, his assault rifle lifting from low-ready. She squeezed her trigger, her eyes morbidly fixed on his digit performing the same action. “Fucking rookie stupid-ass, bullshit, goddamned move.” The rounds left her pistol too slowly as his assault rifle roared to life.

“God-fucking-dammit. Sweet baby Jesus, I’m going to die on a fucking bathroom floor, after handing my murderer his goddamned gun.”

Bullets slammed into her right calf and thigh. One to her lower stomach knocked the wind out of her, halting her diatribe of self-abuse as he corrected his aim, but then she heard the brittle chatter of an assault rifle and the harsh cough of a shot gun from behind her, and the barrage of bullets sinking into her flesh stopped. Her finger stopped convulsing on the trigger as the barrel of Garrel’s rifle sank toward the floor. He staggered once, lifting it, then another cough from the shotgun threw him in the door and face down on the floor.

Shepard screamed more from rage at her own stupidity than pain. As the seconds ticked past, her lower legs started on fire, the pain roaring up through her body like dry kindling. Still, she managed to kick Gerrel’s gun away from his hand.

“Shepard!” Nihlus gripped the door jam, swinging around it, hitting the tile on his knees. “Spirits, Shepard.”

“Yeah, I’m fucked up.” She leaned back against the vanity, suddenly as tired as she had been angry before. “Take his body back for Chakwas to look over. Secure his omnitool too. I don’t want C-Sec . . .” She frowned as her thought just vanished.

“Turn the lights back on,” she muttered, her voice slurring. Darkness crept in around the edges of her vision. “I can’t believe that I gave him the fucking gun.”
Mass Effect - Future Imperfect Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

Ouch, being shot 19 times really hurts.

The darkness peeled back like someone pulling her eyelids open. A handsome, familiar face peered at her then blinded her with a light that stabbed an ice pick into her brain. Wait, someone actually was pulling her eyelids open.

Shepard jerked away, throwing spastic swats at the doctor, driving her back. “Sweet baby Jesus,” she grumbled, her voice coming out like tumbling gravel. She swallowed and dragged her tongue over the carpet paste that covered the inside of her mouth. “Was anyone else hurt? And damn, Doc. Maybe let someone wake up before you peel their eyelids back and give them the ice pick in the eye treatment.”

Dr. Chakwas folded her arms across her chest. “I’ll remember that for the next time you get yourself shot nineteen times.” She sighed. “But, no, Captain, no one else was injured. Nihlus, Tali’Zorah, and Urdnot Wrex all escaped injury. Apparently, you’re as greedy as you are obstinate and kept all the bullets for yourself.” She held something up between her index finger and thumb. “As well as a bug.”

Shepard took it, wincing as she extended her bad arm. “Ah. Nice. Thanks.” She sat up, grinding her teeth to keep from groaning. “How long?” She braced her hands against the edge of the bed and leaned forward, giving her body a few moments to stop screaming at her. After she passed out, someone must have tenderized her, hollowed her out, then stuffed her with tacks, broken glass, and sharp rusty bits of metal. If she found out who did it, they’d pay. Pressing her hand to the ball of the opposite shoulder, she rolled the joint, grunting as the muscles threatened to snap.

“Thirty six hours. I knew from your medical records that you wouldn’t stay in bed once you regained consciousness, so I kept you sedated until the worst of the damage had time to heal.” The doctor leaned down, lifting the hem of the gown to palpate Shepard’s right knee. She looked up from under shuttered eyelids, watching Shepard’s face as she poked here and there, manipulating the joint. “Luckily, your legs took the worst of it, all relatively simple injuries to heal, except for this knee. How are you feeling?”

Shepard winced, her face scrunching into a grimace as the doctor’s fingers sent a bolt of jagged pain tearing from her knee to midthigh. “Ouch! Dammit! For the love of the baby Jesus, Doc. Stop it!” She cursed and reached down to rub her knee. “Mostly, I just feel like an idiot. I’m getting soft. A year ago, I would have never just accepted that quarian at his word.”

When the doctor straightened, stepping back, Shepard eased herself off the edge of the bed. The deck plating dug into the soles of her feet. Every strand of muscle, tendon and ligament in her legs trembled like overtightened violin strings deciding whether to break or hold as they took her weight. Despite a few twangs here and there, most held, saving her the embarrassment of landing face-first on the floor between the doc’s sensible shoes.

Good enough. Time to get her body working, drive it to heal. She didn’t have time to convalesce. Tissues healed better with a shitload of medigel and blood racing through them. Lying around
exercised all the wrong muscles, giving her too much time to think.

“Got a uniform and some undies, Doc?” When Dr. Chakwas set a small pile of clothing on the bed in front of her, Shepard untied the hospital gown and slipped it off her arms.

“Okay, so what’s the news on our dead quarian friend?” She hesitated, the gown hanging from her hand over the bed. “They did bring him aboard, right?”

“They did.” The doctor leaned against the next bed. “I performed a thorough autopsy, and below the neck everything checked out. He was a perfectly normal, middle-aged quarian male.

Shepard shivered, the medbay air chill on her bare skin, and dropped the gown. “Below the neck.” The words sent a tremor of fear and revulsion through her, nipping at the heels of the chill. She stepped into her panties. “Do I want to know what that means?”

The door opened behind her. Shooting a glance over her shoulder, Shepard nodded to Nihlus before turning her attention back to the doctor. “So, above the neck?” She slipped her bra up her arms and tugged it down over her breasts, but she couldn’t convince her bad shoulder to reach around behind her to do it up. Looking back at Nihlus, she cocked an eyebrow. “Could you give me a hand?”

He started to step forward, then lurched to a halt.

“What? Do you know how to do it?” He nodded, so she shrugged. “Then what’s the problem?” Following his stare, she realized his issue. “That’s an old wound,” she said, referring to the ten inch band of dark pink scar tissue that ran down her right side from her shoulder blade to kidney. Surely he expected the older scars that laced across her entire body from chin to toes. He knew about the batarian attack on Mindoir after all. “Seventeen year old drug addict versus dealer. Split me open almost all the way to the front.”

“You trying to break them up?” he asked, grasping her bra and quickly clipping it.

“No, I was busy beating the shit out of him for my Hallex. Well, and trying unsuccessfully not to get stabbed.” She nodded. “Thanks.”

She grabbed the trousers off the bed and shook them out. “Sorry about that, Doc. Report away.”

“Han’Gerrel’s brain chemistry was radically out of balance, Shepard, and I found severe lesions on his prefrontal cortex.” The doctor rubbed her hands together, almost as if trying to wash them, her whole demeanour discomfitted.

“So, pretend that I left my neuroscience degree in my other pants. What does this mean?” Shepard pulled up her trousers and fastened them.

Dr. Chakwas looked as though she’d rather chew her own arm off than speak the words, but finally spat out. “It looks like mind control.”

“Oh.” Shepard sighed and nodded, tilting her head back and forth a little. “Makes sense. He appeared normal enough, but right now, we’re one of the best hopes of finding their kids. Opening fire on me doesn’t fit.” She glanced back at Nihlus. “Maybe Saren got to him?”

The Spectre sucked in a quick breath, his mandibles flicking with the excitement of something, finally, making sense. “He could have been working with Saren for months, giving him the pilgrim’s locations, keeping Rael’Zorah off Saren’s trail.”

Shepard nodded, her eyebrows arching in concern. “I just hope he didn’t get to, and dispose of,
Tali’s father before we got there.”

Dr. Chakwas cleared her throat, regaining Shepard’s attention. “My autopsy confirms that the changes in Han’Gerrel’s brain chemistry and structure had been ongoing for about a year. Also, judging by the state of the lesions on his prefrontal cortex, he would have died within the next year.”

Shepard stepped into her boots and reached for her uniform, but her attention was on Nihlus. “Did C-Sec and Sparky find out where Liara T’Soni is?” Shepard struggled to get her uniform on, but managed to wrestle it into submission and tucked it in.

“Yes, she’s participating in an archeological dig on the planet Therum in the Knossos system, Artemis Tau Cluster.”

Shepard nodded. “Okay. I have to spend some time in the gym getting my body to behave, and then I need to go ashore for a few minutes.” She lifted her hand to her ear.

“Pressley, start clearances and preflight to get us out of here as soon as possible.” When her XO responded to the affirmative, she asked. “How long are we going to have to wait, approximately?” She paused, then groaned. “Really? Three hours? Okay. Do what you can. Shepard out.”

“Three hours before we can leave?” Nihlus repeated, letting out a chuff of air.

“Heavy traffic load, not enough controllers.” She gave him a crooked smile. “Don’t suppose Spectre authority could get us out of here in two?”

He nodded. “If you don’t mind losing what small amount of anonymity we have.”

“Three hours it is.” Shepard looked over at the doctor. “Thanks for patching me up, Doc. Much appreciated.”

“Keep coming in like that, Shepard, I’ll just install an electromagnet to pull all the bullets out at once.” Dr. Chakwas peered at the area above the bed as if considering the viability of that option.

“Ouch, Doc.” Shepard winced and backed toward the medi-gel dispenser. “Harsh, very harsh. You’re a cruel woman.” She grabbed a couple of injectable packets then stepped out the door, turning back to grin. “I knew I liked you.”

“Are you actually ready for duty?” Nihlus asked once the door closed. “You couldn’t even do up your own bra.”

“If I’m conscious, I’m working.” She leaned down and stabbed one of the medi-gel packs into her knee, then the other into her shoulder. The pain eased from an eight to a five, and she let out a long breath of relief. “Much better. Now, I just need to get them moving.” She headed to her quarters, stopping partway across the deck to turn back. “You coming ashore with me?”

He hesitated long enough for her to guess his thought process. Strength in numbers versus keeping their eggs in separate baskets. She left him to decide and continued on.

“Hey, Sparky. Good work tracking T’Soni. Be ready to go ashore in an hour or so.”

If Kaidan felt any trepidation at her being back to work, he didn’t show it. “Yes, ma’am.”

Ten minutes later, Shepard walked into the small gym space, stopping when she saw Vakarian kicking the living crap out of one of the bags. Leaning against the door, she watched, waiting for
him to notice her there rather than drawing attention to herself. He moved well, strong, balanced, his skill obvious, but at the moment skill didn’t appear to matter. Bare talons slit the heavy leather like tissue paper, rage and frustration expressing themselves in their purest form.

Wearing only leggings, he offered her first real chance to see what a turian looked like under the layers and gloves. She shook her head. It seemed as if when all the races met one another, they instantly decided that they needed to downplay the physical differences. He was magnificent. Tall and broad through the shoulders, the layered plates of his chest and the smooth curve of his cowl a steel grey, tough-looking even though they didn’t provide him much more protection than her skin gave her. Softer hide, like that at his throat, covered his belly above the waist of his leggings.

He broke off and threw himself back, bouncing on his talons for a moment, before bending over, elbows on knees.

“I think you killed it, C-Sec.” She crossed her arms over her chest, a teasing smile lifting the left side of her face.

He spun, completely thrown for a second, then let out a laugh like a rifle shot. “You can bill me.”

“Nah.” She shoved off the side of the door with her hip and walked toward him. “That one can be your bitch. We’ll just grab you a sewing kit so you can patch it up afterward.” She bent down, grabbed the end of the weight bench between her legs and turned it so she could straddle it and still face him. “Have any luck with the admiral’s omnitool?”

He nodded. “A little.” He returned to kicking the crap out of the bag, but at a more controlled pace. “It’s heavily encrypted, but between Tali and I, we’ll break it.” He hit the bag with an open hand. Having taken her share of boxer’s fractures in training, she understood.

She stood and pulled the bug out of her pocket. “Can either of you two tech geniuses get this thing to send a false location?”

He stopped again, taking it from her palm, the edge of his talon sliding over her skin. She pulled back, scrubbing her arms with her hands to hide the gooseflesh before she embarrassed herself.

“Where did this come from?” He held it up, examining it with his visor.

“That turian female planted it on me when she stumbled into the car. Planted one on the car as well, not that it will matter. Saren can waste all the time he wants following that cab around.” She stripped off her uniform top and threw it over the bench then moved to the mats to stretch. Groaning like a ninety-year-old porn star, she bent over, gravity gradually pulling her down until she could press her palms to the floor.

Garrus laughed. “That was a disturbing sound.” He pocketed the bug. “Why not just destroy it?”

Shepard walked her hands backwards until her head made it between her knees, her arms wrapping around her legs. “I could,” she said, grunting, her face twisting into a grimace. “But if I can send Saren the completely wrong direction for a bit, it might buy us some time.”

Vakarian crouched down a couple of metres away, studying her with the expression of an interrogator. “You gave that female food, medi-gel, and water sterilization packs even though you knew she was planting a bug?” When Shepard nodded, he shifted his weight to one leg, his eyes narrowing. “Why?”

She shrugged then unwound, walking her hands forward into downward dog facing forward. “If she was desperate enough to accept money from a stranger to plant a bug on someone despite the
danger, she needed the supplies.” She dropped her ass, arching into upward dog facing forward, her back cracking like old twigs underfoot. After stretching there for a second, she looked over at him, finding him still staring at her like he could read her mind. “Little help?”

He chuckled and straightened, standing over her legs. Looping his hands under her arms, he hauled her up and set her on her feet. “Are you sure you should even be out of bed yet?”

She twisted at the waist, stretching her sides. “Yep. Don’t heal lying around a medbay.” She twisted the other way. “So, our prothean expert is on Therum?”

Garrus backed away and crossed his arms, the intensity in his stare never wavering. “Yes. I contacted the dig site a couple of hours ago, and there hadn’t been any sign of geth, or anyone who shouldn’t be on the planet.”

Shepard tried to grasp her wrists behind her back, but her bad shoulder refused. “Little help?” He pressed his palms against the outside of her arms gently, just providing traction until she could clasp her hands. “Thanks.” She groaned again as she lifted her arms, the pain almost enough to make her throw up, but she fought it down. “I need to go to the med clinic, grab a medical exoskeleton for each of our ground team, then we’ll head straight there.”

She released the stretch and pinwheeled her arms a few times, loosening them up. “Can you take it a little more easy on an old lady than you did on that bag?” She slapped her hand against her taut, bare midriff as she took her stance, bouncing a little to shut up her screaming knee. “Haven’t got the hide for taking much abuse from the talons.”

Taking a relaxed stance across from her on the mat, he shook his head. “Judging by the sounds you made stretching, I should wrap my hands and feet in padding.”

Shepard stepped into him, hooking his ankle with her foot, throwing him onto his back, then pinned him with his knee pressed into his keel. “You were saying?” She wriggled her eyebrows at him and bounced her elbow off his gut, just hard enough to make him grunt.

“Ouch.”

She jumped up, offering him a hand to pull him off the mat, then flew through the air, ending up on her belly, arm and one legged pinned.

“You were saying?” he asked, his subvocals rumbling next to her ear.

“Ow.” She groaned as all her body parts fought to make their aches and pains known over the screams of their fellows. She gritted her teeth, shoving the pain aside, and bucked him off. Scrambling up, she backed away, a wide smile on her face. “Oh, I like a man who plays dirty.” She cracked her neck. “Come on, C-Sec, bring it on.”

A half hour later, Garrus released her from his pin and rolled over onto his back, leaning up on his elbows. “You grapple pretty well for someone in her nineties.”

Shepard kicked him in the ankle. “And you grapple pretty well for a beat cop.” She grinned, then sat up, crossing her legs. “How soon can you get that bug reset? I want to drop it off on the Citadel before we pull out for Therum.”

He stood and held out a hand to help her up. “I’ll re-calibrate it and have it ready in a half hour.”

She nodded and grabbed a towel off the stack, throwing it around her neck. “Good. Suit up and be ready to go ashore in forty-five.” She jogged to the door, snatching her uniform off the weight
bench on her way past.

Stopping at the door, Shepard glanced back. “Hey, C-Sec . . ..”

He looked up, brow plates rising.

“Thanks. You’re not a bad guy . . . for a cop.” She lifted one corner of her mouth in a grudging smile. One day soon, she’d peel him open like an orange to find out where all that rage came from, but for now they had work to do. She nodded toward the bag. “Don’t forget to patch up the suspect before he lawyers up.”

His mandibles spread a little as he chuckled and shook his head.
They heard the shouting even before Shepard reached out to hit the clinic’s door control. Brow furrowing, she shook her head. “What in the name of all that’s holy . . ..”

“You draw their fire this time, Shepard,” Nihlus said, shrugging his assault rifle into his hands.

She grinned and shook her head. “Nineteen bullets doesn’t get me a pass?” She glanced to Garrus who nodded, his sniper rifle in his hand. She moved into the center of the door to allow him to use the wall as cover to line up his shots. Since she was on fire-drawing duty this time, might as well make a show of it.

She palmed the door control and strode in. “Dr. Michel, that embarrassing, itchy, scaly rash is back, and it’s spreading. I think I caught it from a krogan.”

A krogan with dark blue plating spun away from the doctor, shoving her back into the corner. He pulled a shotgun off his back and brought it to bear on Shepard.

The red-headed doctor peered around the wall of thug. “I’m a little busy at the moment, Captain.”

“I see that.” Shepard strode around the divider. “Gral? Is that you? Damn, man. I told you that rash was bad news.” Leaning against the post she crossed her arms. “If you’re here to get some ointment from Dr. Michel, make sure it’s not the same one she gave me. The rash is twice as bad as yesterday.” Activating her omnitool, she got an overload ready, but also opened an extranet window. “I read an article that said this rash comes from varren. See? Look. Anything you want to tell me, big fella?”

Shepard glanced to Dr. Michel. “Is this the same sort of discussion you were having when I came in last time?”

The doctor’s eyebrows lifted a little as she nodded. “Similar. Quite similar.”

The krogan glowered at her, but shook off his confusion faster than she liked. “I don’t know you, Army. Get out of here.” Dark blue eyes glowered at her from under his heavy brow. “This is none of your business.”

“Gentlemen,” Shepard said, glancing back. “Introduce yourselves.” She overloaded the krogan, ripping down his shields. Garrus followed with another overload, then both turians shot the thug in the head while Kaidan sabotaged his gun then opened up on his chest. The krogan went down, roaring his pain and fury.

“Hold your fire, gentlemen, thank you.” Shepard grabbed the doctor’s hand, pulling her out of the corner and sending her spinning toward Garrus. She dropped on the krogan, burying her knee in his neck before she glanced over her shoulder at the doctor.

“Sweet baby Jesus, Dr. Michel. Do you collect thugs? I suggest changing to coins or stamps.”
Shepard leaned all her weight on her knee, staring into the stunned krogan’s eyes. “You working for someone, handsome?”

“His name’s Armistan Banes.” The thug groaned and shifted, bucking under her, regaining strength as he regenerated. “That’s all I know. Armistan Banes paid me to shake the doctor down, to make her an offer.” Throwing Shepard back, he twisted and rolled to his feet, snatching up his shotgun. He trained it on the captain’s midsection.

“You use that, you know my boys are going to take their time with you. C-Sec over there can put a bullet through each major organ while Kryik puts one through the base of your spinal cord . . . both of them.” She crossed her arms and cocked a hip, giving him a moment to look over at the two turians with their sniper rifles sighted on him. “Sparky, the little one, he just likes to see how many body parts he can put a bullet in before you die.” She shuddered. “He freaks me out, sick bugger.”

Kaidan let out an indignant squawk. Shepard faked a coughing fit to disguise his ongoing grumbling as to which he liked least, being the little one or a blood-crazed sociopath.

After another second, the krogan hung up his shotgun, his hands held out a little. “Hey, I’m just hired muscle.”

“Give me the frequency you were supposed to contact this Banes on, and I’ll make you a deal. You keep an eye on this clinic, keep the good doctor safe and out of trouble, and I’ll make it worth your while.”

She stepped up to him and held out her hand. “Deal?”

He stared at her through narrow eyes. “How do you know I won’t just take your money and leave the doctor to get herself killed?”

Shepard stepped into him, butting him with a shoulder. “Because I believe you’re capable of comprehending how unhealthy a decision that would be. That, and you only get paid if I get back here and the doc reports that she’s never felt safer.” She narrowed her eyes and stared him down with a practiced cold-crazy-bitch grin that snapped like cracking ice. “Couldn’t hurt your cause to suddenly have an urge to fulfill your life’s passion to become a candy striper, either.”

The krogan backed up two steps. “A what?”

Shepard shook her head, suddenly weary beyond telling. “Get the hell out. And I’m serious about letting the boys have you. Keep the lady and her clinic safe.” Waiting until the door closed behind him, Shepard turned to the doctor. “What the hell, Doc?”

“I swear, I’ve never had trouble like this before.” She walked over and folded onto the end of the first bed.

“So, who’s this Banes?” Shepard perched on the corner of the next bed.

Dr. Michel wrung her hands a little. “We worked together a long time ago.” She sighed. “I wasn’t proud of the work, so I left the lab to heal people.” Jumping up, she paced a few metres then back. “My next employer caught me giving away supplies to small clinics like this one. They didn’t want a big scene, so they let me go quietly, without charges.”

“And if the powers that be knew, this clinic would be shut down, yes?” Shepard asked, leaning on her knees.

“Yes. Armistan sent me an obscene offer to return to our old research. When I refused--he’d only dangle that sort of money in front of me for my soul--he demanded that I send supplies, or he’d leak the story about the scandal.” She shrugged and collapsed back into the bed. “But he wants so
much equipment that I’d have to close the clinic.” Fluttering her hands in a weak, helpless gesture, she let out a sigh. “It appears I have no choice, because I won’t reopen that research. I became a doctor to save lives, not destroy them.”

Shepard’s sigh felt as though it started at her feet. “Don’t send him anything. You have a dedicated bodyguard, or will, once he gets his first payment. Let me do some digging and find out what the deal is with Armistan Banes. Okay?”

The doctor offered a tentative but relieved smile. “Thank you, Captain. I don’t know how to repay you for everything you’ve done for me.”

“Well, to start, I need to buy four medical exoskeletons, then you could actually take that spa weekend and stay out of trouble for a couple of days.” Shepard chuckled and stood, giving the woman’s forearm a squeeze.

“Done.” The doctor hurried to her supplies. “What model do you need, Captain?”

“The best one I can afford.” Shepard looked through the supplies, picking up a medi-gel capacity upgrade and a couple of purchase licenses while she was at it. Never hurt to have a well-supplied quartermaster.

Shepard stopped at the door on her way out. “I mean it, Doc. Stay out of trouble. We’re going to be around the Citadel for a couple more days, but we can’t be watching this place all the time, just in case.”

The doctor laughed, but followed it with a long, tremulous sigh. “I’ll do my best, Captain. Thank you again.”

When they walked out the door, Shepard headed over to the railing and stared out over the ward arms. “Big place.” She sidled over next to a couple of asari and gave them a friendly nod. “It’s my first time here,” she said, heaving her shoulders in an awkward shrug. “Sort of feeling overwhelmed. It’s gorgeous though, right? Just so huge. Do you live here?”

The closest one gave Shepard a pained smile and inclined her head, in a way that screamed, ‘I’ll be polite, but go away, lower creature’.

Shepard patted the asari’s shoulder. “Well, that’s super. It’s been amazing talking to the two of you. I’m going to go poke a Keeper now, and see if they really do melt into puddles of goo.”

“You shouldn’t . . .” the other asari began, but her friend cut her off, mumbling something about ignorant colonials being better off in jail.

Shepard jumped forward, the rude asari letting out a little scream as the Captain grabbed her arms. “I love this place,” she gushed. “Everyone is so friendly.” She grabbed the other asari’s hand in both of hers, giving it a hearty shake, then stroked the top of her head. “Ooo, those feel nice.” Backing away, she waved, and nearly tripped over a volus. “Oops, sorry about that, my friend. As for you ladies . . .” She stretched out both arms to point at them. “. . . stay gorgeous. I’ll see you.”

Garrus chuckled as Shepard fell in step, turning back every few steps to wave to the still-staring asari. “Which one did you plant the bug on?”

Shepard just grabbed the inside of her lip between her teeth and tilted her head.

“The volus,” Kaidan said under his breath, earning a raised eyebrow and a grin from Shepard.
“Very good, Sparky. You’ve earned an extra brownie with supper.” Shepard opened the car and climbed in. “Come on, let’s see if we can’t get ahead of Saren.”

When they returned to the *Normandy*, Shepard arranged for both a department and a team briefing before they arrived at Therum the following day. Taking a bowl of soup and a sandwich into her quarters, she sat at her computer to memorize all the information on Dr. Liara T’Soni, Therum, and Matriarch Benezia.

What she discovered about Dr. T’Soni didn’t concern her at all. She was young for an asari, very intelligent, and dedicated to her field of study to the point of having no life outside of work.

What she discovered about Therum and the dig site concerned her from a team safety point of view. Lava flows, geological instability, and mines honeycombing the surface all pointed to a high potential for disaster that had nothing to do with Saren. She’d seen men throw grenades that ruptured pressure or steam pockets close to the surface. The results never proved healthy for anyone.

What she discovered about the good doctor’s mother concerned her most of all. Powerful, wealthy, intelligent, a massive following . . . she had the clout to raise an army, supply it, and buy any information or influence she needed. Shepard sighed and set down the datapad. The only connection she couldn’t make was the one to the geth. Saren made sense in an odd sort of way, but the geth . . . where did they and their doomsday robot gods come in?

Knuckles rapped on her door.

“Unless you’re that charming asari from outside the med clinic, I’m busy,” she called.

“I don’t think I could pull off that dress,” Vakarian replied, “but I’m willing to give it a try if it means being able to deliver my report.”

Shepard hid a wide grin behind her hand and shook her head. “Get in here, wiseass.”

The door opened to reveal the turian craning around to look behind him. “I don’t really have an ass, so . . . .”

“True.” She sat sideways in her chair and leaned against the back, arms crossed. “So, what can I do for you, Officer Wise-assless?”

He just strode over and handed her a datapad. “Here’s everything I dug up during my investigation into Saren. Maybe you’ll see something I didn’t.” Letting out a long breath, he frowned and nodded at the datapads covering her desk. “You planning on laying siege to the terminus systems?”

“Well, one planet in them, anyway.” She shrugged. “I like to over prepare. Been on my share of missions that ended up FUBAR. If we run in like unprepared idiots, a planet like Therum is as likely to kill us as the geth.”

He nodded and took a step back, standing with a cocked hip, his arms crossed. “I contacted the dig site again when we got back on board. They haven’t heard from Dr. T’Soni in a couple of days, but they said that’s not unusual. She tends to disappear for up to a week if she gets fascinated by something. They haven’t seen any sign of the geth.”

“Thanks for staying on top of that. Much appreciated.” She nodded toward the door. “You got yourself something to eat?” When he hummed to the affirmative, she grinned. “Is there something else I can do for you?”
“Want an extra set of eyes?”

A soft, genuine smile touched just the corners of her mouth. “Thanks C-Sec, but as soon as I’m done scarfing down my peanut butter, I’m going to pass out. Rumour is that I took nineteen bullets the other day, then earlier, this massive turian threw me all around the gym, so I’m going to hit the rack. I’ll see you in the comm room at 0800.”

Flipping a hand toward the door, she sagged in her chair. “Get some sleep. You did some good work the last couple of days.”

“Thanks, and thanks for bringing me along, Captain.” His head jerked in an awkward nod and he spun on his talons, striding quickly from the room.

“God save me from the turians,” she sighed when the door closed. Turning her lights off, Shepard moved her dinner to her nightstand, then laid out on her side to read her reports, falling asleep within a few moments.
Chapter Summary

Getting ready to go to Therum.

0515. Far too early.

0520. Way too early.

0525. Shepard opened one eye, looked around, then slammed her hand back down on the alarm.

0530. Alenko hammered on her door. As much as she wanted to, she couldn’t slam her hand down on him to make him go away. She grumbled something obscene and rolled out of bed, missing her feet entirely to land on her knees on the floor.

“Ow! Dammit! Sweet frickin’ baby Jesus. When did I turn ninety and lose basic coordination skills? What’s next? Adult diapers?” She braced against the bed and shoved herself up onto her feet.

“Are you up, Captain?” Alenko banged on the door again.

“Sparky, if you want to keep that arm go eat your damned breakfast, and get your ass to the comm room for 0600.” She flopped face first across the bed.

“Yes, ma’am. Good morning.” He chuckled, and she could swear she heard him bouncing out there.

Morning people sucked. “New punishment protocol for perkiness before 0900. Take notes, LT.” She didn’t lift her face out of her blankets.

“And what is that, ma’am?”

“Firing squad. Now go away.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll have hot chocolate with extra sugar and creamer waiting in the comm room.”

She opened her mouth to yell at him again, but she heard him bound away. Besides, she couldn’t really kill her supplier before she got her chocolate fix for the day.

She managed to drag herself up to the comm room by 0555 and flopped in her chair. The heads of all departments awaited her, datapads held expectantly in front of them.

Note to self: New punishment protocol for being overly punctual to morning briefings, also firing squad.

Alenko placed a large thermos of hot chocolate in her hand and sat in the chair to her right.

She took a couple of sips. Strong enough to stand a spoon in. Perfect. After giving Sparky a nod of thanks, she leaned forward on her knees. “Good morning. I know we haven’t had a chance to get acquainted, and frankly, it’s a luxury this mission isn’t going to allow. We’ll have to get to know
each other as we go. If we’re going to run Saren to ground, we need to get our asses moving and stay scalpel sharp.” She paused to meet each set of eyes, waiting for a nod of understanding from each before moving on.

“I’m going to be off-ship a great deal, so all daily operations will be reported directly to XO Pressley.” She looked at the older, balding man. Something about him rubbed her the wrong way, but he presented a credible, reliable face to the crew. She knew her limitations as well as her strengths, and her reputation always presented her biggest hurdle. Until the crew saw that she was a standup CO and had their backs, they needed security. Pressley could give them that.

“Pressley, what you think needs my attention, you bring to me. Everything else you have my authority to handle. Supplies, equipment . . . if we can easily afford it, go ahead. If it’s going to be a problem financially, let me know, and I’ll try to make it work.” She raised her eyebrows and waited.

“Yes, ma’am.” He preened a little.

“Daily reports, logs, requisitions all go to Pressley.” Looking over at Kaidan, she sighed. “Except for you, Sparky. Your Marines will be providing back up and support on the ground, so anything that affects their performance, I know. This entire crew’s safety depends on them and the team. Schedule two hours a day for the team and your people to work out together. I want the members of my ground teams familiar enough to read each other’s minds.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.”

She looked over at Chief Engineer Adams. “The IES is at peak?”

“Yes, ma’am. Stealth system, engines, all running at optimal performance,” the middle-aged engineer reported, his back ramrod straight in his seat. “Tali’Zorah is a great asset, and has ideas about how to help mask our FTL doppler shifts. We’ll be examining them and their possible execution in the new few days.”

Shepard nodded. “Excellent. Thank you. Report directly to me on your results. I need to know exactly what I can ask both of this vessel and her crew.” She took another long draught off her thermos and then stood.

“We’re a lot more blind out here than I’m comfortable with, but if our current intel is accurate, Saren plans to unleash the same nightmare that exterminated the Protheans. Whether or not we have the Council’s support, whether or not anyone believes the threat is real, we have to be the sentinel in his path.” She took a few steps, her eyes on the floor in the ‘strong leader faces an uncertain future’ posture. “I’d rather be wrong and have the galaxy mock me than to take a chance that the Reapers exist, and Saren can bring them back.” Looking up, she saw agreement register on their faces.

Pacing to the ramp out of the room and then back, she ordered her thoughts. “I understand that none of you know me well enough to trust me . . . yet.” Spinning on her heel, she met the eye of each department head once more, spending a little longer locking stares with Pressley than the others.

“I also know that I have a reputation . . . well, more than one. Most of them are true. I’m known for pulling out the big win, but I’m also known for doing it in the way least expected. I hope that will give us an edge against Saren, but I understand that my unorthodox methods take some getting used to.” She looked down at her boots. She’d dripped hot chocolate on her left one. Damn.
“One thing I am not is reckless.” She pulled her polishing cloth out of a side pocket of her trousers and cleaned away the drip. Satisfied, she straightened, but remained silent, waiting long enough to speak that they all leaned in.

Letting out a long, resolute breath, she straightened her shoulders and gave her head a little nod. Her words came out soft, pulling them all in even closer. “There’s one thing you can rely on with absolute certainty in these coming days, weeks and months: the safety of this vessel and her crew is my first priority. I will not risk lives unnecessarily. Losses on a mission like this are inevitable, but I will force that bastard to fight with everything he’s got and make sure he pays a steep price for the blood we spill.”

She sat back in her chair and leaned forward, elbows braced on her knees. When she spoke, she measured her words, letting each drop and settle before saying the next. “I will earn your trust. In return, this mission requires that I ask for every drop of blood and sweat, every inspired thought, every ounce of strength. If we don’t stop Saren, Eden Prime . . .” She gave them a gallows shrug. “. . . well, Eden Prime will be known as the beginning of the end.”

Straightening, she scanned the officers again. “Are there any questions?” When none presented, she nodded and gave them a tight-lipped smile. “Excellent. We are scheduled to drop the teams on Therum at 0900. Stealth system will remain active for the duration of the mission.” Another single, determined nod. “Thank you all. Dismissed.”

Kaidan remained as the others filed out.

“So, Sparky? How’d I do?” One side of her mouth quirked as she looked at him out of the corner of her eye.

“A solid 7.5 out of 10 ma’am. A little rough off the blocks, but you pulled it together.” He leaned back. “This could get really ugly, couldn’t it? If the Council is supporting Saren . . .”

Shepard nodded and took a long drink of hot chocolate. “Yeah, it could. We may well end up fugitives from everyone, because if Udina thinks we hurt Earth’s chance to get a seat, he’ll throw us to the wolves in a heartbeat.” She shook her head. “We need to find enough evidence and get far enough ahead of the storm that the Council has to stand behind us even if it’s just for show.” She turned to meet his eyes and gave him a tight smile. “We can do it. Nihlus will make sure they have to listen.”

Garrus, Nihlus, Williams, Tali and Wrex filed in within a minute and took seats. Shepard waited until they settled, then brought up the scans of the planet and dig site on the vid screen.

“Good morning. Our drop onto Therum is scheduled for 0900. Kryik, Vakarian, Alenko and I will be dropping in the Mako just south of the dig site perimeter, here.” She marked the drop location on the 3D surface scan. “The Normandy will drop Williams, Wrex, Jenkins, Gladstone, Pakti, and Tenaka on the northeast side of the camp. You’ll have high ground and a good view of the entire area.” She marked their drop point on a high plateau.

“Williams, you’re team leader. Your team is distraction and backup if the enemy engages. Get into cover and watch our backs. If we end up having to go into the underground portion of the site, move your team up to cover the entrance.” Shepard looked to Garrus. “Anything further from the dig site?”

“Sitrep at 0600 Normandy time was all quiet, but still no sign of Dr. T’Soni. I spoke to the head of the dig team, a Dr. Chandra, and she admitted that she’s starting to get concerned. T’Soni is known for disappearing, but she usually checks in before now. She was on the far side of the mines from
the camp. Chandra sent me the information on that area.”

He stood and walked over to the console, circling an area a sizeable distance to the northeast of both insertion points. Keying in another command, he brought up a coloured overlay of the mines the dig team were using to access the ruins. “This area through here is geologically unstable.” He highlighted a chunk just outside his circle. “They’ve sprayed polycrete to shore up the walls and ceiling, but Dr. Chandra says there’s a chance that part of it caved in and trapped T’Soni.”

Shepard nodded and gave him a tight smile as he returned to his seat. “If we end up having to hike two or three kilometres underground, we’ll call for pickup from the back entrance here.” She marked it. “That area is highly unstable, but on foot, we should be fine, providing we don’t set off any large explosions.”

“If you do call for extraction from the rear exit, we’ll get the Mako back aboard the Normandy once we get your all-clear, ma’am,” Williams spoke up.

“Excellent. Make sure everyone has three days’ supplies in their packs, just in case.” Shepard met their eyes. “Any questions?”

“What about me?” Tali asked.

Shepard smiled. “Adams tells me you have some ideas for improving our emission masking going into and out of FTL?”

“Yes. If it works, it won’t mask them completely, but it will shorten the length of time that we are visible to sensors.” The quarian practically bounced in her seat, vibrating with eagerness.

“Excellent. I’ll need you to stay aboard and work on that. One more body on the ground won’t make that big a difference, but those few extra seconds of stealth could save everyone aboard.” Shepard winked. “Don’t worry, you’ll have lots of opportunities to use that shotgun.”

She looked over her team. “Anyone else?” A nod met their silence. “Then, I’ll see you all down in the cargo bay at 0830, suited up and ready to drop. Dismissed.” She waited until they left before following, not wanting them to see her old granny hobble. Before anything else, she needed to head to the gym and limber up.

Stopping in her cabin, she checked her messages to make sure nothing urgent had come up, then changed and headed down to the gym. She’d just stretched, taped her hands, and started warming up on one of the heavy bags when Nihlus walked in.

“Her name tiptoed from his mouth, like a butcher picking his way through a pack of starving wolves.

“Good morning, Spectre Kryik. I trust you slept well?” She kept her attention on the bag.

He chuckled and stripped off his tunic, gloves and boots. “Well enough, thank you.”

Watching him out of the corner of her eye, she studied the way he moved as he warmed up. “You didn’t have anything to add to the briefing?”

“In my experience, briefings work well until sixty seconds after the drop. Nothing ever goes to plan.” He moved over to the bag that Garrus eviscerated the day before and started slapping it with the same open hand technique as the other turian.

“It’s true that plans need to remain fluid, but it doesn’t hurt to have a framework for people to fall
back on when things go to hell.” She stopped punching and stretched out her left side. She pulled her arm behind her back, then over her head. “Care to work out against something that can hit back?”

“We have a mission in less than two hours, Shepard. Do you want to hobble through it?” Despite his words, Nihlus turned to face her.

She smiled and shook her head. “I didn’t ask if you wanted to rip my arms off. I’m pretty sure we both have a sufficient level of control not to hurt one another.” Pulling her arm across her chest, she twisted at the waist.

The chuckle that came out of him sounded bitter and raw. “Nothing I’ve seen from you the past few days gives me any confidence in your level of control.”

“Oddly enough, appearing out of control actually takes a great deal.” She raised her hands in front of her face and lowered her center of gravity into a solid fighting stance. Forcing herself into complete stillness, she waited for him to reveal his intentions first.

He came at her with a handful of slow, easily blocked punches. Her counter-attack slipped between his long arms, landing three solid blows before she danced back, out of reach.

Moving faster, he jumped in, landing a solid blow to her sternum with the heel of his hand that knocked her back and left her gasping.

Shepard laughed. “Is that the best you’ve got, Kryik? Where’s the deadly?” She winced and stretched, cracking her back. That last one hurt. Not that she’d ever admit it. She lifted one eyebrow, pulling back enough to meet his eyes, and bit her lip. “You a good little housecat? Keep the claws sheathed?”

He growled and feinted, spinning to hook her arm. He rolled her over his cowl and onto the mat, landing hard on top of her, knocking the wind from her lungs. “You really don’t know when to shut up, do you?” He swept up her one leg, pinning her hard. “Why are you always peeling back my plates?”

She gasped for a second while she waited for her organs to settle back into their usual spots, then grinned and bucked up off the mat, using her hips and shoulders to roll him. Leaning over him, she grinned. “You need to loosen up, Kryik. Learn how to relax and just banter a bit. Not everything is the end of the world.”

He scoffed as he threw her back, rolling effortlessly to his feet. He jumped in, distracting her with a left hand swipe, while bringing his right fist in low, aiming for her belly. “Some things are the end of the world, Shepard. I know enough to tell the difference. You treat everything like a joke.” His eyes flashed with anger.

She tumbled backwards over her left shoulder, wincing as it complained. “Having a grin on my face doesn’t mean I’m taking things lightly.” She blocked three quick blows, then danced in, trying to land several of her own, all of which he swept aside.

“You’ve got a smart, filthy mouth, and you piss off everyone you come in contact with, even the people we need to be our allies.” He backed off and dropped his arms. “What is wrong with you? I assumed coming in that with your military record, the crazy bitch rumours were the exaggerations of jealous comrades.”

She dropped her hands as well, letting them hang heavy from her shoulders. “And now you
honestly think I’m insane? There’s no room for my behaviour to be tactically based?” Shrugging, she walked over to the stack of mats and grabbed her water bottle, taking a long drink. She offered it to him, cocking an eyebrow and waiting him out as he appeared to be deciding whether the offer constituted a trap.

He took it and drank, giving her a nod and grunt of thanks as he passed it back. “I have no idea what to think, Shepard. All you do is run that damned mouth too fast for me to know what’s real.” He stepped back in, giving her a second to get her guard up before he started throwing blows fast and furious.

She blocked them, but his speed threw her off on her left side. “You got something better for me to do with my mouth?”

He laughed and leaped into the opening. “You just can’t help but throw yourself at anything male, can you?” He flipped her onto her ass and bounced away.

Lying there, she gasped for a second, then rolled to her feet. Her jaw tightened, molars squeaking together, but she forced a smile. “I could help myself, anytime, anywhere, but I’m choosy.” She took her stance, hands held in front of her face, and beckoned. “You quitting?”

“You do something better for me to do with my mouth?” He dropped his hands and backed away from her again, his expression one of contempt and . . . something that made her stomach roll. “Does your behaviour have its roots in your colourful past? Drug addicts frequently need to pay for their habits in less than savoury ways.”

Shepard reeled away from the blow, his words landing harder than his fists. Tears sprang to her eyes before she could crush them, and for a moment, she wondered if the pain in her chest was a heart attack. She held his glare, the teasing grin melting from her face, the muscles paralyzed and slack.

Finally, letting out a sigh that trembled far closer to a whimper than she cared for, she nodded. “Yeah. That was me, Kryik. You nailed it straight on the head. Five credit blow jobs from behind a dumpster in an alley. You must be psychic.”

She forced a laugh that came out tasting like bile and sounded enough like a retch that she couldn’t be sure it hadn’t been one. She grabbed her towel and threw it around her neck. “You might want to ask yourself how many people you’ve seen me flirt with. Harkin was business, the fastest route to what we needed that didn’t involve de-boning him in a public place.” It took her a few seconds and hard swallows to get her next words out. “I told you I use my sexuality as a weapon, and I do, very effectively. Get this straight, Spectre. I don’t fire on friendlies. Ever.”

Closing the distance between them in the blink of an eye, she tucked her leg behind his and swept his feet out from under him, a firm hand on his keel shoving him onto his back. “Some things you just . . . do not . . . have the right . . . to say to me. Understand? I’m no whore, Kryik. Cement that into your memory, or I’ll take you to school until you do. I swear to the sweet baby Jesus it’s a lesson they’ll carry you away from.” She shoved herself up and stormed off, biting down on her tongue to keep from letting out a sob of humiliation and fury.

She barrelled through the ship until she reached her quarters, then threw her towel across the cabin. “Fuck!” Her lamp followed the towel, then the stack of datapads on her desk, her Alliance reg manual, and everything else not bolted to the floor. Still, the fury and disgust . . . and hurt . . . chewed through her with iron teeth. How dare he?

Her eyes burned as hot, salty tears welled up, then spilled down her cheeks. She wound up and
punched the wall. How dare he?

When you like him so much.

“Shut up,” she growled. Her fist hit the metal with a satisfying thump that vibrated through the bulkhead.

“Look, meat, if you fight me, I’ll tie you to that tree over there and make you watch as I do every single twisted, agonizing thing I plan to do to you, ‘cept on that little one over there.”

“Shut up. Shut up. Shut up!” Both hands pounded against the unyielding surface until exhaustion drove her to stop, sweat pouring over her skin as thick as the tears.

Knuckles rapped on the door.

She backed up and sat on the corner of the bed, elbows on her knees, throbbing hands dangling. “What do you want, Alenko?” It didn’t take a genius to know who it was, considering she’d been beating the shit out of the wall right behind him.

The door opened. “Ma’am.” He stared at her hands for long enough that she had to grind her teeth together not to say anything.

“Spit it out and move on, Sparky.” She wiped the tears from her face on the sleeves of her t-shirt.

“Are you okay?”

She laughed, harsh and bitter. “It’s all relative, Sparky. It’s all relative. But yes, I’m fully functional and all over business. Is there anything else?”

He let out a heavy sigh and shook his head. “No, but I know what to get you for your birthday now.”

Shepard laughed, caught off guard. “Oh?”

“Punching bag for in here. The Normandy wasn’t made to withstand that sort of punishment.” He walked over and ran his hand down the wall. “Thought for sure there’d be dents.”

Shepard chuckled and nodded toward the door. “Get the hell out of here, Alenko. We’re due on Therum in a couple of hours. If you want to be on the ground team, you better be waiting in the Mako.”

He backed toward the door, groaning. “The Mako? Couldn’t the Normandy just drop us from orbit without chutes? Be less painful.” He grinned and gave her a sharp salute when she growled.

When the door closed behind him, she held up her hands. “Well, damn, you fucked them up, didn’t you, Shepard?” Leaving the tape in place, she crossed her arms, tucking her hands into her armpits, then headed over to med bay.

“Fuck.” She stopped in the doorway when she saw Nihlus sitting on one of the beds.

“Do you need something, Commander?” Dr. Chakwas asked, looking around the turian.

Shepard shook her head. “No, Doc. Thanks. As you were.” She grabbed two medi-gel packs then backed out. Heading over to the freezer, she grabbed a couple of ice packs. It would have to do until she was in her armour and could mainline medi-gel.
“Shepard!”

She let out a long sigh, but didn’t turn around. “What is it, Kryik?”

“I... uh...”

She half turned toward him. “I haven’t got all day, just spit it out.”

He glanced over at Alenko then back, nodding toward the door behind her. “Could we discuss this in your quarters?”

Shepard shook her head. “Not right now. I need to go over the scans for Therum. We can talk about whatever when we get back.” She spun on her heel and headed in to her cabin. Just before she stepped inside, she remembered that he’d been in medbay and glanced back. “Unless this is about a mission critical injury. Did I damage something?” When he shook his head, she kept going.

“Shepard!”

“I’ll see you down at the Mako in an hour, Spectre Kryik.” She shut and locked the door behind her, then set her chair upright. After staring at it for a moment, she flopped on the bed. She injected both hands with the medi-gel, then wrapped them in the ice packs and laid them gingerly on her belly.

“I’m an idiot.” She sighed and closed her eyes. “A complete idiot.”
Chapter Summary

Therum is a lovely place to spend one's day nursing boxer's fractures.

It occurred to Shepard on her way down to the cargo bay in the elevator that maybe, just maybe, her tried and true method for keeping the universe at bay might not work as well as the captain of a ship as it had as an N7. She’d never cared about getting along with people. Life was not a popularity contest; it was about survival and getting the job done.

The people who stuck around long enough always figured her out. She’d put Anderson through all the rings of hell after he pulled her off Mindoir, and he’d never let her down.

Letting people inside her shields before she got them disarmed just invited a shot to the head . . . or the heart. A chuckle as brittle as a February ice storm echoed off the walls. She pressed the heel of her hand against the lingering pain that throbbed alongside her heartbeat.

*Case in point, Shepard. Case in point.*

When the elevator opened on the bottom deck of her ship, the Marines and her team had already assembled. She gave Sparky a crooked smile and a nod, but passed by, heading for where Gunnery Chief Williams stood armoured and ready, but separate.

“Ma’am.” The woman gave Shepard a brisk salute.

Shepard returned the salute. “At ease, Chief.” She glanced over her shoulder at the Marines then back. “You all right taking squad leader?” She held Ashley’s eyes, searching for any sign that the gunnery chief wasn’t ready to step up. “I think you’ve got the brains and the spine for leadership, so I’m tossing you in the deep end, Williams. If you’re not ready, you need to tell me. There’s no disgrace in needing to put some time and distance between yourself and the sort of hell you went through on Eden Prime.”

Ashley straightened and gave Shepard another salute. “I’m ready, ma’am. Five by five.”

“Excellent.” Shepard nodded toward the gathered Marines. “Go get ‘em, Chief. Good luck down there.”

The soldier softened a little just at the edges. “You too, ma’am.”

Shepard stopped next to Jenkins. “How you holding up, Corporal? Did you hear anything about your folks?”

Jenkins saluted, then nodded. “Yes, ma’am, they’re both fine, thank you.”

“Glad to hear it.” She patted his shoulder. “Take care of yourself down there.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Sparky, you’re driving,” Shepard called, striding toward the Mako. She grinned at Garrus. “You
ready to go, C-Sec?"

He nodded, and opened the hatch at the back of the tank. “Your chariot, Captain.”

She chuckled and gave him a sweeping bow. “You’re starting to worry me, big guy. Did turians use chariots, or are you a student of ancient human history?” She winced a little as she pressed her hands to the Mako’s floor and hopped up. “You want the cannon and electronics, or the gun, C-Sec?”

She sat on one of the seats in the back. Kaidan brushing past on the way to the operator’s seat.

“You’re not driving, and you’re not shooting?” Nihlus asked, hopping in. “You take a debilitating head injury during our sparring match, Shepard?”

Shooting Kaidan a cautionary glare and quick shake of the head, Shepard leaned back. “Something like that, Kryik.” She looked back to Garrus. “Which is it, big guy?”

His mandibles spread wide and fluttered. “Cannon.”

She laughed, brightly, if a little forced. “I can see that it’s always going to be the biggest gun with you.” She nodded to Nihlus. “That leaves you the other gun.”

“You’re really just going to sit there?” He moved to the other front seat despite questioning her. Garrus strapped himself into the seat at the cannon controls and powered up the electronics suite.

“I might even take a nap . . . if Sparky can keep us out of the lava.” She strapped herself in, her hands clumsy, but managing to get the harness buckled before anyone noticed. “Hell, I might stay in the car unless I find something of tourist value.”

“With all due respect, Captain, our odds of avoiding lava are a lot better than if you were driving,” Kaidan called back. “You just relax, lie back and take your nap while I demonstrate how to make this baby handle like a prized thoroughbred.”

“You haven’t seen me drive to know if I endanger lives or property,” she called back, stretching out as far as she could within her harness.

“Do you remember a Marine by the name of Lt. Angus McLaren, Captain?” Kaidan called back as he started bringing the massive tank to life.

The name lit a fire under Shepard’s skin. “Hey! That totally wasn’t my fault. McLaren was navigating. He said that river was shallow enough to cross.” Despite her embarrassed blush, Shepard grinned, recalling the shrill screams of her team. Good times.

“How many waterfalls did it go over before you finally got it back on shore, again? Four?” Kaidan finished the pre-start checklist and activated the controls, the Mako rumbling to life.

Shepard ignored his laughter and purred. “Oh yeah, this is going to be nice, just like a baby on a Sunday drive.” She yawned and laid her head back, closing her eyes. “You’re such a drama queen, Sparky. Get this damned thing on the ground, and let’s go find this matriarch’s daughter.”

“Captain?”

“What is it, Joker?” She sat up, hearing the bad news in his tone.

“The dig site contacted us, said they were under attack, then the message cut out.”
“Deja vu,” Shepard said, her heart sinking. “Okay, drop us outside the enemy perimeter. We’ll fight our way in. As long as that plateau is still viable, land the second team there as planned.”

“Roger that.”

Shepard shook her head. “You heard the man, we’re fighting our way in. I hope you’re as good as you think you are, Sparky.”

“Roger that, Shepard.”

Alenko lived up to his own hype, mostly. She left it to Garrus and Nihlus to yell at him when he set the tires on fire trying to avoid blasts from armature class geth, choosing to watch her team from under heavily lidded eyes. More than once, she had to clamp down on her lip to avoid saying something, but Nihlus stepped up and took command. For their parts, Sparky and C-Sec took no time at all to settle into a rhythm, bantering back and forth as they coordinated keeping the Mako out of the line of fire and blowing the geth to hell.

She grinned to herself as they debated the best way to tackle the few geth fortifications they came across. Although never quite relaxed enough to sleep through it, she pretended, while keeping one eye on the tank’s damage sensors. She got out at the first compound, emptying the lockers and crates while her boys played commando, raiding the outbuildings on either side of the massive gates. She piled the weapons, armour and mods in the back of the Mako, then climbed back in, holding her aching hands trapped under her arms.

“Here.” Making no more fuss than if he were brushing lint off her shoulder, Garrus fastened her harness, then sat back at the cannon.

Shepard shook her head. Of course he’d seen. He said so little and yet saw everything with those pale, ice-blue eyes. She nodded her thanks when he looked her way again, then sat back until Kaidan called out that the luxury cruise had come to an end. She climbed out and pulled first Ingrid and then Roger from her back, trying to decide which one would hurt less to fire. Either one was going to smart like a mother.

They clambered over the wall of rock in their way, and she radioed for the Normandy to pick up the Mako before they set out for the dig site. A hundred metres in they encountered the first resistance, mostly just troopers with the odd rocket trooper thrown in to keep them on their toes.

Shepard launched her drone, keeping it active, and then stuck to a support role, overloading and sabotaging to save her hands. It worked well until they came under fire from snipers entrenched in towers several hundred metres up the road.

Shepard let the rest of her squad take out the geth on the ground and took cover, pulling Ingrid from her back. “Okay, my love. Do me proud,” Shepard set up the shot, resting the gun on the rock, setting the sight on the distant tower. She adjusted for the wind, took a deep breath, let it out slowly, then fired. The geth toppled out of the tower. Shepard bit down on a thin shrill of pain as the gun kicked back, the impact sending bolts of fiery lightning searing halfway up her forearm before they eased.

“Sweet shot, Captain,” Kaidan said and whistled.

“Why thank you, Sparky. I live to entertain.” She lined up the shot for the second tower, this one a good hundred metres further out. Compensating, she went through her routine. Hesitating for just a second, Shepard steeled herself, then the second geth fell.
Garrus walked up beside her and nodded. “The first one . . . bronze medal at best.” His subvocals rumbled. “The second, nothing but gold.”

Shepard hung the sniper rifle from her back, a quirky smile on her lips, her heart speeding up a little in her chest. “What, you a cop or something, C-Sec? You been running my rap sheet?”

He chuckled and switched his guns. “Something like that.”

“Yeah, it’s an compelling thriller packed with heartbreak, suspense, and a whole lot of stupid.” She spawned her drone and followed as Nihlus took the lead once more.

Kaidan walked backwards for two steps. “That’s right, I remember hearing something about that. You won an Olympic medal for something, didn’t you?”

She spun her finger in a turn around gesture and pointed up the road. “Oh look, Sparky, there’s no one on point.” She sighed and shrugged Roger off her back. “And it was two medals, actually. In Biathlon.”

He made a low hum and nodded as he trotted past Nihlus. “Skiing and shooting, right?”

“Yep. Now, enough with the ancient history lesson. We’re going to be getting shot at again in a minute or two.” She squared her shoulders, her spine crackling like someone walking over bubble wrap, and hefted her rifle.

In fact, they fought pretty steadily up the last few hundred metres to the excavation site. A couple of new leapfrogging friends, a half dozen troopers, three krogan, and an armature awaited them in the camp. Nihlus and Kaidan worked on the smaller units while she and Vakarian whittled down the armature with overload and their sniper rifles.

“I really hate the jumping ones,” Kaidan gasped, throwing himself behind a crate at Shepard’s side.

“Spray and pray, Sparky.” Shepard waited for the burst of plasma from the armature’s canon, then swung out and overloaded before putting a bullet in its head.

Kaidan ducked out then back. “You meant bullets, right?”

Garrus took out the armature with his next round, then they set to work on the krogan. After another half hour of dancing in large circles around walls and crates, Shepard bent over, resting on her knees, her chest heaving, sweat running down her face. “Sweet baby Jesus, Saren wants to make sure we get our exercise.” She looked up. “You all in one piece, gentlemen?”

“I think my amp set the back of my head on fire,” Alenko groaned.

“Fine here,” Nihlus called, striding past her and up the ramp into the mine shaft. “The doctor’s got to be in here if she’s still alive.”

Shepard nodded and heaved herself up, giving Garrus a gentle nudge as she went past. “You okay, C-Sec?”

He straightened and pushed away from the railing that had been holding him up. “Yeah, Shepard, I’m fine. Damn krogan.”

“Yeah, tough sons-of-bitches,” she agreed, climbing the ramp a few metres behind Nihlus.

“We need to start bringing Wrex along,” he suggested.
Shepard laughed. “The Mako will seem so crowded and claustrophobic with all that krogan.” She lifted her hand to her ear. “Williams, sitrep?”

“Under fire, but nothing we can’t handle, Shepard. We’re making our way down to cover the entrance now,” the chief reported.

“Roger that, Shepard out.” She followed Nihlus from the bleak, brown-black, smouldering surface into a narrow, corrugated metal tube. “Oh yeah, this can’t possibly go wrong,” she muttered, staring down the hundred metre stretch.

“Sitting ducks,” Kaidan whispered.

“Sh!” Nihlus hissed, glancing back. “I hear geth.”

“Pick it up,” Shepard whispered. “Get out of here and into cover.” She hunkered down, taking point ahead of Nihlus, and sent her drone out. Hopefully it would distract and confuse.

A shock trooper stepped into the mouth of the tunnel, its back to them as it fired on the drone. Shepard overloaded it and the others took it down. Unmistakable chattering and clicking sounds echoed through the cavern beyond the tunnel.

Lifting into double-time, Shepard moved as silently as she could down the rest of the tunnel. It branched right, more geth showing through the metal railings along the catwalks. She spawned a new drone and settled in to the familiar heartbeat of battle.

They fought their way down through a series of ramps and catwalks set up to get the people down into the mine, signs of battle becoming more and more apparent the further in they went. Shepard stepped into an elevator, no small amount of trepidation and claustrophobia clinging to her back. She stood at the front of the platform, staring straight out, trying to ignore the shrinking metal cage around her.

She leaped out the moment the door opened and let out the lungful of air she’d been holding.

A little further along, they reached another elevator, this one definitely showing signs of heavy bombardment damage, like someone had been using missiles. She searched for another way down, but all the tiled corridors leading out of the cavern glowed blue, the entrances sealed by kinetic barriers.

“Prothean?” Nihlus asked, stepping up beside her.

“That would be my guess. Unless the archeological team are all a bunch of neat freaks and tile their dig sites.” Shepard shoved her shoulders back, cracked her neck and stepped into the elevator.

“Two seconds,” she muttered to herself, trying to avoid looking at the twisted metal. “You can endure it for two seconds.” She looked down. “Ohhh stupid move, Shepard,” she groaned, louder than she intended.

Below them, the elevator shaft had been reduced to pretzel-shaped metal, and fallen chunks of the ruins.

“There’s got to be another way down,” she said, but too late. Nihlus hit the control and the door closed, sealing her in. Again, she moved to the front, standing close enough to the structure to keep it at the extreme of her peripherals.

Letting out a horrific grinding shriek, and a shower of sparks, the lift lurched to a halt. Shepard
looked down. It was only maybe a ten foot drop, but first they needed to escape the cage.

“C-Sec, can you get us out of here?” she asked, taking position at the side of the elevator to watch for incoming enemy troops. She turned her back to them, struggling to keep her breathing from whistling through her nose as it sped up and shallowed.

“You’re an engineer, aren’t you?” Vakarian asked, giving her a cocky nod.

“You have a point to make?”

Oh for the sake of the sweet baby Jesus, just cut us out of this fucking thing!

“Pretty sure I already made it,” he said, his chuckle warm.

The tones moving under his voice and through his laugh slowed her breathing a little, her heart taking two entire beats before fluttering. “Just open the door, wise-assless.” Shepard meant to keep going, but then a little voice called out of the rubble below them.

“Hello?”

Shepard clung to the distraction of that call. She opened her mouth the answer, then closed it as she saw movement at the far end of the cavern. She traded Roger for Ingrid and looked through the sight. A few shock troopers and two rocket troopers picked their way over the uneven surface.

Shepard gestured to Nihlus, then pointed down the cavern. When he nodded and reached behind him, she looked back to her sights, lining up a rocket trooper’s head. A red laser nearly blinded her as it homed in, then a shot blasted against her shields, throwing her back.

“Son of a motherless . . . .” She lifted the rifle, looking for the geth sniper. Her lip curled in a vengeful grimace as she took its head off. A shrill cry greeted the crack of her rifle.

“Who’s there?” the voice called. Definitely young and female, Shepard decided.

Nihlus took a shot, grunting in satisfaction as the rocket trooper’s head exploded in a spray of white fluids.

“Please, if you’re not geth, say something.”

“We’re busy at the moment, love,” Shepard called. “Put on your big girl panties and breathe.”

“Put on my wha--?”

Shepard took out the other rocket trooper.

“How dare y--?”

Nihlus put a bullet straight through the flashlight on one of the shock troopers, earning him a Shepard grunt of approval.

Shepard lined up her next shot, her shields sparking now that the troopers were in range with their rifles. Her finger tightened on the trigger.

“I don’t know who you are, but--” The voice shrilled, sending sharp metal spikes up Shepard’s spine.

The captain jumped, then took a long breath. As if her nerves weren’t frayed enough being trapped
in the tiny metal cage of death. “Sweet baby Jesus, lady. Shut the fuck up for five seconds.” Shepard took the shot, winging the geth, and cursed, lining it up again. Her shield indicator flashed at her, warning her of their imminent failure. The last two geth went down, and she let out a long sigh as she holstered Ingrid.

“Lovely soundtrack,” she sighed. “How’s that door coming?”

“Who are you? You’ve got to get me out of here.”

“Hold your horses,” Shepard called back. “We’re coming.” She craned her head around Garrus to look at his cutting work. “Maybe.”

A second later he turned his back to his work and kicked behind him, sending a chunk of the elevator crashing to the floor of the cavern. He chuffed a little and stepped back. “Your door, Captain.”

She grinned as she ducked through. “Very nice, C-Sec. Practically a work of art. I can see why you’re so proud.”

He just chuffed again, his subvocals rumbling.

“Hello?”

“We’re on our way,” Shepard called back. She looked down, trying to figure the best way down through the rubble. Why had the geth blown the crap out of the cavern?

Nihlus jumped down ahead of her, picking his way over the heaved slabs of rock and concrete. She followed his path, seeing the reason for the use of rockets when she reached the bottom.

“Well, damn,” Shepard said, crossing her arms and cocking a hip. “I didn’t expect this. In fact, I probably couldn’t have guessed this if I’d tried.”

Like the rest of the corridors leading off the main cavern, a barrier curtain blocked the way forward. The part that had Shepard thrown related directly to the asari on the other side, dangling in mid air like a butterfly in a spider’s web.

The asari let out a long sigh. “Thank the goddess. Help. I’ve been trapped here for days.”

“Um . . ..” Shepard walked up to the barrier. Struggling to rein in her sarcastic sense of humour, she looked over the situation. “How the hell?”

The asari ignored Shepard, looking to Nihlus. “Please, you have to get me out of here. I’ve been trapped in here for days.”

“That would explain why the dig site lost contact with her,” Garrus offered.

“Dr. Liara T’Soni?” Shepard asked. When she didn’t get an answer, she waved. “Hey, lady, focus on the cranky human. Are you Dr. Liara T’Soni?”

“Yes.” The asari finally looked back at Shepard, her mouth turned up in a delicate sneer of distaste.

“How did you get into this mess?” Shepard prodded the energy field a little, but it was too strong for even her overload.

“The geth and krogan came after me. I activated the barrier curtains, but I must have triggered a security device.” She grumbled a little. “Please, I’ve been here for days. If you can get past the
barrier curtain, there is a control panel.”

Shepard walked right up to the energy field. “Look, honey, my partner, Spectre Kryik, here will probably try to talk me into letting you out of there, because, let’s face it, you’re an asari maiden . . . he’s turian. Between us, he hasn’t gotten any in awhile and a nice dance might loosen him up.” Shepard crossed her arms and leaned back, letting out a long, heavy sigh.

“Your problem lies with the fact that, as much as my life might improve if someone worked that rod out of his ass, I need more, and it’s me you have to convince. I’ve got to know that you’re going to be more useful to us than helping Kryik over there get his rocks off.” Shepard ignored the elbow that smacked into her from behind. “Your mother is Matriarch Benezia. We believe that she’s helping Saren destroy the entire galaxy. Can you help me with that, or do I go back to my ship and look for someone who can?”

The asari went a darker shade of blue, her mouth opening and closing like a beached fish for a second before an indignant squeal made it out. “How dare you? I’m not some stripper in a seedy bar. I’m a doctor of archeology and an expert on the prothean extinction.”

Shepard backed up, making beeping sounds. “Ship for the people useful to Shepard now leaving. Last call for boarding . . . all those useful to Shepard please get aboard.”

The asari let out an enraged noise that wavered between scream and shout. “Fine. Fine! I haven’t had any contact with my mother in years, but I can tell you that she wouldn’t just be trying to destroy the galaxy. I’ll help you find her, even if just to figure out why she’s helping Saren.”

“And if I need to put her down?” All traces of humor drained from Shepard’s face. “Am I going to be fighting her and you?”

The archeologist took a deep breath and shook her head, meeting Shepard’s stare with one that finally told Shepard what she was looking for. “No. If my mother really has joined Saren, then these geth and krogan trying to capture or kill me are here under her orders as well.”

Shepard nodded. “Okay. Give us a minute or two to figure this thing out.” She turned her back on the energy field and let out a long sigh.

“Do you have to antagonize everyone right off the mark?” Nihlus whispered, stepping up beside her.

“Nothing gets to the real person faster than pissing them off, Kryik.” She gave him a dead, exhausted stare. “Look how well it worked on me.”

He chuffed and gave her that exasperated rumble from his subvocals, but she saw his mandibles drop.

She strode forward. “We need to find a way to get the doctor out of her situation.” Spotting geth making their way down the chamber, she glanced behind her. “Sparky. C-Sec. Look sharp, bogies at our twelve. You two stay here and keep the good doctor company. We’ll go down and see if we can get past that curtain.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am,” Kaidan answered.

Shepard grabbed her pistol off her hip and made her way down the rubble field to an intact walkway, pausing to shoot the few geth that made it past Garrus and Alenko. By the time she made it down to the cavern floor, they’d cleared the way.
“Nicely done, gentlemen,” she called up.

Shepard scanned the side of the cavern closest to the trapped scientist. “Looks like there was a way through there, but it caved in. She winced, giving her head a quick, single shake and clicking her tongue. “I don’t like it. This whole place seems as unstable as hell.” She looked up at Garrus. “Hey, C-Sec, we’re right in that super fragile, danger spot you marked, aren’t we?”

“Yes. The rear exit you intended to use is on the other side of the doctor’s barrier and then a hard right,” the turian answered, gesturing as he explained.

“Yeah. Okay.” She wandered up the cavern, picking up dropped supplies as she went. Her mind flipping through possibilities, discarding each as it appeared.

“That’s a mining laser.” Alenko pointed out. “It’s aimed the right way.”

“Yes . . . to destabilize the entire mine,” Nihlus grumbled.

“Yeah,” Shepard agreed. Still, she stopped next to the giant laser. “We might not have a choice. Activate it for a few seconds, cut through to the tunnel on the other side of that barrier.” She shrugged when Nihlus chuffed, his subvocals rumbling. “I’m open to less crazy options. We could grab one of the geth rocket launchers, but it’s using a wrecking ball instead of a scalpel.”

“No, you’re right. We don’t have any other means to get through it. The rocket launchers collapsed all this. Any more explosions, the whole place could come down on our heads.” Nihlus stepped back.

“Okay guys,” Shepard called as she opened her omnitool to hack the laser controls. “This could be the last stupid thing I do in a really long line of massively stupid things, so be ready to grab the doctor and run.” Casting one last glance behind her at Nihlus, she hit the override.
Therum hot, stinky volcano planet. How we love thee.

For a moment, Shepard wondered if she could actually cough hard enough for her lungs to fly out her mouth, but then the dust began to settle and the choking eased to a thin wheeze. On the up side, the laser had cut a clean hole through the corner of the cavern beneath the trapped asari and into a cross corridor.

“So nice,” she said and looked up, giving Kaidan the thumbs high. “Nice thinking, Sparky. I knew you were more than just a pretty face. We’ll be joining you momentarily. Keep frosty.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.”

She chuckled and shook her head, able to see him blushing even from there and through the settling dust.

Nihlus took the lead, picking his way down into the hole. Partway down, a slab of rock broke loose and slid, but the Spectre rode it like a pro surfer and just stepped off at the bottom. Shepard cocked an eyebrow and followed at a more reserved pace.

She paused next to a thick stream of steam escaping through a crack in the floor. “This could be bad.” The chamber rumbled, trembling a little under her feet. “I think we nicked a pressure pocket, Kryik,” she called, running and sliding the rest of the way down. “Judging by the amount of steam coming through that crack, it’s not a small one. We better keep moving. This place could well come down around our ears.”

He gave her a curt nod and stepped into the corridor. He paused a couple of steps in and looked around him, his mandibles fluttering slowly. “We’re standing in a hallway built more than fifty thousand years ago by an extinct people.”

Shepard nodded, understanding the awe. She passed him, heading what she hoped was the right way. “Makes you wonder what this place was, who lived or worked here . . . what it looked like when protheans walked over these tiles.” Twenty metres in, she stepped out into a massive cylindrical space that rose above her as far as she could see, presumably the surface. “Cargo elevator.”

Nihlus nodded. “Looks like it.” He hung up his rifle and strode over to the console at the center. He brought up the haptic interface.

Shepard prowled the perimeter of the elevator, watching the corridors that spread out from that central point. The vast space above her pressed down, making her skin prickle as if she were being watched. An itch down deep in her brain began to sound an alarm.

*Perfect place for an ambush.*

“What’s the holdup?” she asked, passing by the Spectre a second time. “You asking yourself which button you’d be if you were the up button?”
“Not everyone uses your highly scientific methods, Shepard,” he replied, “but essentially, yes. All the controls are in Prothean.”

She stepped up next to him, peering around his arm at the controls. “If I was the up button, I would be . . . that one.” She pointed and went back to her patrol.

“Thank you, your assistance has been invaluable,” he said, his tone practically chewing its way up her leg. “And what do you base that highly informed choice upon?”

The ground rumbled, with conviction that time. Shepard ducked closer to the center as chunks of the walls shook loose, tile raining down to explode into shards that bounced off the metal floor to sizzle against her shields. “Press it or don’t, Nihlus. Let’s just get moving before the place comes down on us.”

A moment later, the elevator mechanisms began to grind, sounding like they hadn’t been used since the Prothean occupation. It heaved and shuddered enough for Shepard to wonder how far down the shaft went beneath them, but finally settled into a semi-steady climb.

“Baby Jesus, if you’re listening,” she whispered, “I really don’t want to die flattened into a pancake fifty storeys down.” Edging over closer to one of the large gears, Shepard eyed the long, notched vertical beams that the gear climbed and wondered if she’d be able to climb it.

“You afraid of heights, Shepard?” Nihlus asked, turning from the console.

She shook her head and squared her shoulders. He’d gotten to see more than his fair share of her weaknesses. When she gave him nothing, he turned back to the console, bringing their ride to a smooth stop just behind Dr. T’Soni’s position.

Shepard strode off, setting her jaw. The console behind the scientist activated at her touch. Deactivating the kinetic barriers proved a simple matter. Deciphering the Prothean control interface didn’t give her as much of a challenge as she’d imagined. After all, all their current technology was based on Prothean tech. The same went for all the races. Strange that they found so little in common despite that.

After a couple of false starts, Shepard found the right combination, and the stasis field vanished, dropping Dr. T’Soni to the floor.

The asari landed on her hands and knees. “Thank you,” she said, her voice barely louder than a breath. Weakened by her long imprisonment, she tipped over onto one hip, her head hanging.

Shepard walked over and knelt, pulling out her water bottle. “Here, drink this, slowly. We need you able to move.” Withdrawing a dried fruit bar from her hip pack, she gave it to the asari as well. “Quick energy. Eat while we move, yeah?”

“Thank you, again.” The archeologist opened the bottle and took a couple of swallows. “It’s been a long few days trapped in there.”

The cavern demanded Shepard’s attention again. It shook hard enough that Shepard had to brace herself. Beyond the ruined elevator, large chunks of ceiling dropped, exploding on the floor.

Shepard stood and bent down. “Come on, Doc, we need to get out of here before the whole place lands on our heads.” She slipped a hand under the asari’s arm to help her up, not wanting the female draped around her shoulders if fighting broke out. It wasn’t enough. The doctor couldn’t make her limbs behave enough to climb to her feet.
Shepard heaved a couple of times, ending up with the asari draped over one shoulder. She looked up at her squad. “I understand that this is probably highly entertaining, gentlemen, but let’s spare the lady as much indignity as possible, shall we? Sparky, a little help?”

Between the two of them they got Dr. T’Soni upright on her feet and moving toward the elevator. The asari stank like an outhouse, sweat and who knew what else soaking her from the skin out, but Shepard swallowed her gag reflex and kept them moving. They could hose her down later.

“Sorry about that,” Shepard said as they made their way to the elevator. “Men.” She cut a teasing scowl across at Kaidan. “They really have no clue.”

The asari shot furtive glances at Shepard, seeming afraid of her, not that the captain could blame her after their introduction. “I wouldn’t have thought you’d be concerned about my feelings after you intimated that my only use aboard your vessel would be . . ..” She cleared her throat delicately. “. . . adult entertainment.”

“I’m an enigma.” Shepard paused and looked back. “C-Sec, you keeping an eye on our six back there?” The itch in her brain grew into a twitch, and she pulled her pistol, every nerve on high alert. “I smell an ambush.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Garrus followed them, his assault rifle sitting easily in his hands as he swept the area, alert for threats. “Just so I can identify it next time, what does an ambush smell like?”

Shepard chuckled. “Sweaty feet, gun oil, swamp gas, and belly-button lint.”

“Are you certain you’re not just smelling me?” the doctor asked, one delicate brow marking raised.

“Ha!” Shepard laughed, caught off guard. She and Kaidan lifted the asari down onto the elevator. “Nice one, Doc. You’re going to fit right in.”

As soon as Garrus stepped down onto the elevator, Nihlus started it shuddering its way to the surface. Another tremor rocked the cavern, making the elevator shimmy and grind. At least until a chunk of tile and rock fell into one of the gears, and it let out a horrific death screech, shook hard enough to send them all crashing to the floor, and tilted hard to that side.

“Sweet baby Jesus, I don’t want to die here.” Shepard looked in front of the asari at Kaidan. “You got her, Sparky?” When Kaidan answered to the affirmative, Shepard slipped out from under the doctor’s arm and ran over to the gear.

Hammering at it with the butt of her assault rifle, she chipped away in aggravatingly small bites. Each blow felt like a varren grinding the bones of her hands between its jaws. She disguised the yelps of pain under an imaginative bouquet of curses. Finally, after reaching the point she felt certain that amputation became both inevitable and desirable, enough of the rubble broke away that the gear chewed through the rest. The elevator began to climb again, although it didn’t quite correct the lean.

“Glory hallelujah, praise the divine work of the Enkindlers.” Shepard spun around to help the doctor, but before she took a step or two, bodies dropped onto the elevator from above. Well-armed bodies.

“Thanks for getting the doctor out from behind that barrier for us,” a huge krogan spoke up, stepping toward the asari. “We tried everything, but didn’t think of using that laser. Guess that’s what you get for working with machines and vat-grown muscle.”

Shepard stepped between him and the doctor, eyes moving, trying to find some cover for the
doctor and some room to fight for them. “Which of those are you, handsome?” she asked, playing for time.

The behemoth laughed. “You’ve got a quad, Shepard. You and Kryik teaming up has Saren as close to a blood rage as I’ve ever seen a turian. Hand the doctor over and this can end in a quick death.”

Shepard nodded. “I accept. Drop your shields, and I’ll take care of that quick death for you.” Glancing over at Nihlus, she jerked her head toward the elevator controls. They needed to get to the next floor at the very least, or the elevator would prove a circular death trap.

“A smart mouth won’t get you out of this, human.” He stalked toward her, his shot gun looking like a pistol compared to his mammoth size. If he charged, she’d end up a pancake with krogan tracks down the middle. “I’ve been stomping on roaches like you for more than a thousand cycles.”

Looking up, she saw that Kaidan had already moved T’Soni into partial cover behind the far mechanism. She edged toward the opposite side of the center pillar to draw fire away from them.

“This place is crumbling. If you’re smart, you’ll make a run for the surface before you end up at the bottom of this shaft covered in fifty thousand years’ worth of butt-ugly tile.” She backed toward one of the side corridors as the elevator reached the next level and stopped. Some luck. The mining company had left a large crate that she could use for cover, and the cross-corridor remained open, providing room to retreat.

“It’s exhilarating, isn’t it?” the battlemaster bellowed, laughing. “Let’s ride this thing to the bottom and see which one of us survives.”

“Thanks for the offer, but no,” she called, hitting one of the five geth with overload. It went down with a chattering shriek and spray of white fluid as Nihlus sniped it. “I’ve got a date with your boss and the business end of my rifle. Really can’t miss that.” She launched her drone.

“I’ll take him your regrets.” The krogan ducked around the center pillar, a shimmering blue warp field already flying from his hand. Shepard threw herself to the side, knocking the wind out of herself as she slammed into the floor.

“Need armour with a better biotic defense rating,” she groaned. Scrambling up, she ran for the closest gear mechanism, ducking behind it just in time to catch a shotgun blast to the backside of her shields.

A rocket trooper waited for her on the other side. “Shit.” She took partial cover halfway between the two.

“Too many of them, nowhere to get any damned cover,” she gasped. Garrus took the rocket trooper’s shields down with overload. The krogan stepped into firing range on her left, so she ran straight toward the geth, spraying bullets hoping to take it down.

The sharp bark of a sniper rifle sent it crumpling to the floor, just in time for the whole place to shake hard enough that the floor simply bucked her off like an ornery Shetland pony. She tumbled down the incline, using her momentum to roll onto her feet just before hitting the far wall.

“We have to get out of here, Shepard.” Nihlus circled the central pillar, glancing her way as he tried to keep it between him and two krogan.

“C-Sec, Sparky . . . overload and lift on the krogan in the green armour.” She primed the overload,
but didn’t get a chance to use it before the battlemaster’s warp snuck up on her and tossed her to the floor like a ragdoll.


As soon as the warp wore off, Shepard wobbled up onto her hands and knees, immediately ducking her head and somersaulting off to the right as the krogan charged. He clipped her hard enough to send her sliding into the center pillar, but that distance gave her a chance to get up and organized again. She launched her drone, then hit him with overload before running back out to the edge.

“Too many krogan. Way too many krogan.” She circled, staying wary, searching out the last couple of rocket troopers. She saw Sparky and Garrus take one down, that meant one left plus the four krogan.

On a pass by the corridor with the crate, she spotted a thin trickle of steam or smoke escaping through a crack in a floor tile.

A cold, hard, ghoul’s grin stretched her lips thin. “C-Sec, Nihlus, you got eyes on me?”

“Roger that, Shepard.”

“See that steam?” She jogged past the vent, able to feel the tile under her feet shaking as if the cavern were seized in a nightmare, hovering on the verge of waking. The slightest provocation would awake the giant in a torrent of fire and molten rock.

They both replied to the affirmative.

“Sparky, take the good doctor to the opposite side of the shaft, get her into cover.” She pressed her back against the crate. “I’ll try to pull the krogan over into this hallway. They seem most intent on me. I’ll take cover around the corner, and you two put a couple of rounds into that tile.”

“And then pray?” Kaidan asked as he moved the archeologist out of danger.

Shepard closed her eyes sending a silent prayer to the powers that be then boosted her shields and stepped out into the open. “Glory hallelujah, Brother Sparky.” Spraying fire over the four krogan, Shepard backed down the corridor. “Glory hallelujah.”

She flipped to the side, narrowly missing a krogan charge, but as she rolled onto her feet, the rocket trooper landed a solid hit. The rocket exploded against her shields, tearing them down even as it threw her flying. She slammed into the krogan, flipped over him and hit the floor, blind, deaf, and stunned.

Someone grabbed her and dragged her to her feet. Bringing Roger up, she shoved his barrel into her assailant’s belly, but then the blindness faded enough to see it was Garrus. She tried to take a step, but her bad knee gave. Luckily, Garrus still had his arm around her, so she stumbled rather than fell.

“Pull back!” She hit her medigel as she hobbled toward the corner. “Come on, C-Sec. Work the plan.”

He nodded and fought backwards, drawing three of the four krogan and the rocket trooper into corridor. She let him support her, keeping up fire to draw them over the broken tile. At the end of the corridor, the turian pushed her into cover.
Shepard leaned against the wall for a second, the maelstrom of battle beating like drums inside her head. She peeked around the corner in time to see that their marks had made it to the steam pocket.

“At your leisure, gentlemen,” she called over the radio and leaned out to open fire. She overloaded the battlemaster, Garrus following suit right behind, then all three of them fired into the floor. For a moment, Shepard thought she’d been wrong about what lay under the tile, but then Nihlus threw in a grenade.

“C-Sec, fire in the hole!” She threw herself back and covered her head just as the grenade blew, the entire corridor erupting into a huge plume of steam. Shepard jumped up as the cloud boiled toward her, hobbled double-time away from a painful death.

Something hit her and she flew through the air. As her ribs slammed into the cowl of Garrus’s armour, she realized that the turian had grabbed her with one arm, flipping her over his shoulder like she weighed no more than a towel.

“Ow, for the love of all... not a sack of potatoes, here, C-Sec,” she cried, fairly sure she’d broken a rib on his armour.

“Saving your ass, Shepard,” he yelled between breaths. “Complain later.”

She started to form a retort, but he had a point, so she bit down on it.

“Shepard!” The krogan battlemaster stumbled out of the smoke and steam, his armour melted to him, his skin a scalded nightmare under his plates. He cast around, trying to find them, one eye gone, the other milky and bleeding.

Snatching her pistol off her hip, Shepard selected incendiary ammo and fired at his head, aiming to put him out of his misery as much as anything.

The brute lumbered after them, picking up momentum, if not coordination. Charging, he closed the distance far too quickly for comfort despite his flesh sloughing off his face and neck. Blood rage. Shepard almost told Garrus to put her down, but she’d just slow them down further. She braced her elbow inside the turian’s cowl, sighted and fired.

Still the krogan closed. “Die, goddammit,” she screamed. Her shots appeared to have no effect, despite tearing into his head, blowing off a chunk of his headplate and taking out his other eye. “What the hell?” Finger convulsive on the trigger, she overheated the gun, and still he closed.

Shepard squawked and jumped up, throwing Garrus off stride as the battlemaster leaped across the metres letting out an unearthly, demon howl of rage. One ruined, skeletal hand clawed at her, the flesh under his nostrils splitting like a second mouth as he tried to spit out what she was sure amounted to cursing her with his dying breath. “Sh... e... p...” At last he stumbled, his knees giving out. He slid, laying out along his front almost gracefully as his momentum carried him another ten metres.

“Hold up, C-Sec,” she said, tapping her elbow against the back of Garrus’s neck. “He’s down, let’s head back, see if we can’t get across.”

Garrus set her down much more carefully than he’d picked her up, then slipped an arm around her waist. Pausing to put a couple of bullets into the battlemaster’s head, just in case, they returned the way they’d come. She limped down the corridor, slipping a little on the steam-slick tiles, but Garrus kept her steady with his arm around her waist.

“Oh, crap,” Garrus said, his voice low and void of humour as they turned the corner.
“Damn.” Shepard stepped away from his arm, staring across the chasm of steam and lava that blocked the path back to the elevator. She glanced back at Garrus. “Could you jump that?”

He shook his head. “Even if I could, there’s no way you’re getting across it.”

Nodding and letting out a long, grumbling sigh, Shepard looked up into his eyes. “Have I just trapped us inside an erupting volcano?”
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Summary

Note to self: Do not strand yourself inside erupting volcanoes.

Shepard stared at the five-metre-wide lava pool. “Note to self: Don’t trap yourself inside active volcanoes.”

“Little late for that note, isn’t it?” Garrus asked. He edged forward as if judging whether or not he could get around it. “Damn, that’s hot.”

“Holy crap, C-Sec,” Shepard gasped, “that is some of the best detective work I’ve ever seen. How are you not the Executor?” Chuckling, she stumbled as he gave her shoulder a shove.

Backing up a little, she shielded her face behind her arm. “Anyone still alive over there?” she called out. “Sparky? You still breathing?”

Kaidan walked around the elevator’s center pillar, the asari archeologist leaning on his shoulder. “Yeah, we’re still here, but um . . . aren’t you on the wrong side of that lava?”

“Wow, C-Sec, watch your back. Sparky’s in the hunt for detective of the year.” She winced and limped backwards as a jet of steam erupted out a crack in the floor. “You wouldn’t have a really big fire extinguisher in your pants, would you?”

Alenko’s face turned the colour of the lava, but his mouth twitched at the corner. “First time I’ve heard it called that, ma’am.”

Dr. T’Soni jumped back from the lieutenant, her face frozen in a comical mask of surprise as she lost her balance and scrambled to stay on her feet. He caught her, mumbling awkward apologies as he steadied her.

Shepard just shook her head. “You’re scaring the doctor with your perversions, Sparky.” She pressed her lips tight to keep a grin from forming. “Honestly, I’m shocked and dismayed at your lack of sensitivity.”

“This place is still coming down,” Nihlus shouted, limping around one of the side mechanisms. “Maybe we could save the witty repartee for aboard the Normandy.”

“But it won’t be funny then,” Shepard said. She shrugged and sighed. “We’re stuck over here, so the three of you head for the surface, meet up with the second team and get aboard the Normandy. I’ll get C-Sec here to use his finely honed investigative skills to find us a route around to the back exit. When we get clear, we’ll radio for pickup.” She looked to Garrus, cocking an eyebrow in query. He nodded and turned his back on the lava, activating his omnitool.

“Be careful, ma’am,” Kaidan called.

Shepard lifted a hand in a casual wave. “No worries, Sparky. We’ll see you aboard in a few minutes.” She gave Nihlus a curt nod in answer to his stare, and turned away, still able to feel his eyes fixed on her back.
“Okay, so . . ..” Shepard called up the mine layout on her omnitool as she stepped up next to Garrus. “We are . . ..” She pulled in on the roughly sketched in area behind the elevator shaft, then dropped down fifty metres. “. . . about here?”

Garrus glanced over and nodded. “I’ve got a scanning app on my omnitool for finding hidden entrances, hollow areas in floors . . . that sort of thing. It’s short range, but might be able to help us find our way through.” He started down the corridor to the right. “The rear exit is a series of ramps at the far east of the mines. The archeological team didn’t go into those tunnels -- too unstable.”

Shepard grabbed her pistol off her hip and took the lead, stepping around the battlemaster’s corpse. “Of course they are. It wouldn’t be any fun if there wasn’t an almost certain chance of death.” She turned, walking backwards a few steps and held out her hands. “Cheer up, C-Sec. It’s an adventure.”

Garrus chuckled and moved over to the wall, scanning. “Right. I’ll try to remember that.”

The corridor ended another fifty metres along in a cave in. Shepard pulled a section of rebar out of the pile and poked at it. “I think I see air at the top. Your scan say what’s on the other side?”

Garrus climbed up about halfway. “It’s all open on the other side. A vertical shaft.” He looked down at her and shrugged. “Another elevator, maybe?” He looked up. “It’s going to take some digging to get me through there, though. I’m not freakishly tiny, like you.”

“Freakishly tiny?” Shepard started climbing, scrambling up on all fours, her rebar still clutched in one hand. “Maybe you’re just freakishly huge.” She chuckled. “I think I can make it through, do some recon, and help dig from the other side to get your freakishly monstrous butt through.” She reached the ceiling and the maybe hand’s width of space along the apex of the curve. Shoveling at the fallen rock and construction materials, she cursed herself for choosing that day to beat her hands to living crap.

Grinding her teeth together, she gave herself a shot of medi-gel through her armour and forced herself to keep digging. Finally, she made a hole big enough to wriggle through. The other side was almost absolutely dark. The slope of skree angled down away from her as far as she could make out. Activating the flashlight on her omnitool, she shone it down, able to see that the slope ended abruptly, dropping away into nothing.

“Fan-fucking-tastic,” she muttered.

“What’s that?” Vakarian’s head appeared in the hole. “Can we get through here?”

Snapping around like a whip, Shepard blinded him with her flashlight for a moment before she turned it off. “Odds are that we’ll end up in a landslide to our death, so sure . . . this way is awesome.” She grabbed a large tile, using it as a shovel to dig at the hole, enlarging it enough for the turian to get through.

When Garrus made it through far enough to hang half in and half out, he shone his flashlight down the slope to where Shepard could just make out an orange glow. Lava. Great.

He looked into her eyes, his brow plates arching. “I think we have different definitions of awesome, Shepard.” He opened the map on his omnitool. “There should be a corridor over to my right.”

When they both shone their flashlights at the far right, Shepard saw a slightly darker, oval-ish patch against the darkness. “Okay. We’ll stick as far up this mess as we can get. Always easier to
head downhill if we come in above the corridor.” She looped a hand under his arm to help anchor him as he turned to aim his feet toward the sheer drop below them.

“Okay,” he said and pulled away. “Go ahead.”

Clambering, using the rebar to both test her footing and help anchor her, Shepard made her way sideways along the rubble, her flashlight all but useless as she navigated through the dark.

“I might actually be willing to let the krogan take me prisoner if he found me here,” she grumbled, pausing to catch her breath. Picking her way through the loose, uneven footing set her legs trembling with fatigue, her bad knee singing a really off-key version of the Hallelujah Chorus.

“For the lord God omnipotent, reigneth,” she muttered, leaning down to rub the kneecap.

“What was that?” Garrus asked.

“Religious-based grumbling,” she said, trying to keep the strain out of her voice. “I do that. Don’t let it alarm you.” She pushed up and started picking her way forward again. “Moving out, C-Sec. Keep up or . . .”

She heard him clambering behind her. He cursed. “Or get left?”

“Nah, I won’t leave you.” She chuckled. “I don’t like being alone in the dark.”

“Um, Shepard?”

She spun, the knife edge of alarm in Garrus’s voice cutting into her. “Oh shit, C-Sec.” She scrambled down the debris field to where he very slowly but inevitably slid toward the chasm. The more he tried to climb, digging into the skree with his talons, the more broke loose, and he began to pick up speed.

“Stop moving, dammit! Lay flat, spread your arms and legs!” She let herself slide, using the chunk of rebar to control her descent. “Just about there. Grab my foot.” She stabbed the rebar into the rubble and threw herself down onto her hip, holding onto the metal with both hands. For a few, breathless seconds, she thought the rebar wouldn’t catch. Garrus grabbed hold of her foot, but they both kept sliding.

Finally, with an excruciating jolt that felt like the bones in her arms had yanked right out of the skin and muscle, the rebar dug in and held.

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“Climb fast, damn it,” she said, her words coming out in grunts that ended shrill enough to be screams. She might as well have been hanging on to a bare high voltage wire for the agony shooting through her hands.

*Thank the sweet baby Jesus for adrenaline.*

The turian threw himself sideways, wriggling like a beached fish as he tried to catch hold of her with both hands. “I’m too heavy. You can’t hold us both.” He clawed at the skree with his right hand, but his struggles just started them both sliding again.

Shepard lifted herself as much as she could manage, pressing down on the metal bar, but they lost nearly another metre of ground before it caught again. “For fuck’s sake, C-Sec, do what you’re told.” Gasping, she tightened her grip on the metal bar and looked down. His lower legs hung over the void. “We’re on the express train to pancake city, so climb. I can hold us.”
Both hands grabbed hold of her foot, and he hauled himself up, using her armour as fingerholds. Each of his movements tugged at her grip, and her hands started to slip on the rebar.

“Hold up.” She looked down as he grabbed hold of her belt. “Can you let go of me without sliding?”

Slowly, he loosened the grip on one hand, then the other, rolling slightly to the side. “Yeah.”

“Okay. I need to hook my elbow on this bar. If you start sliding, shout and grab me, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Shepard looked up, took a deep breath and heaved, keeping her body completely still, dead weight as she lifted. Hooking one arm over the rebar, she grabbed her wrist with her other hand. “Okay, I’m secure. Climb with the strength of the Enkindlers, Brother C-Sec.”

He gripped her with both hands again, climbing up until he could grab the bar as well. Once his weight was off her, Shepard relaxed, huffing and puffing. “Wow, you’re heavy,” she said, gasping between words.

He let out a breathless laugh. “And you’re freakishly strong as well as freakishly tiny.”

“Sweet-talker.” They laughed helplessly for a few minutes, then Shepard took a deep breath. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“Agreed.”

Using the rebar as an anchor, they pulled themselves along the skree on their hands and knees until they reached the side corridor and hauled themselves up onto solid ground.

“An adventure, right?” Garrus asked, lying flat on his stomach, staring down over the drop.

“That’s what the poster said when I signed up.” Shepard crawled on her hands and knees over next to him and slumped on one hip to peer down. Lava poured down like waterfalls from side corridors on two different levels, pooling at the bottom of the elevator shaft a good fifty or so metres below them.

“Thanks for not letting me fall into that,” Garrus said, shoving himself up onto his feet. He held out a hand to help her up. When she winced at the thought, he bent over and lifted her onto her feet. “The ramps to the surface shouldn’t be too far.” He wrapped an arm around her waist, helping her limp down the corridor.

The ramps turned out to be a rickety, rusted-out pretzel of metal. Shepard went first, testing everything to make sure it would hold her, then jumping up and down to test it for Garrus’s significantly higher mass. Despite its fragile appearance, the metal held, and in less than an hour, they climbed through a long culvert to a door onto the surface.

“Glory hallelujah. Praise the dirty brown disgustingness of this planet,” Shepard sighed, sinking down onto her backside in the dirt. She opened a channel to the Normandy, calling for pickup.

Garrus remained standing, turning to look in the direction of the dig site. A giant plume of smoke and ash billowed a hundred storeys into the air. “An adventure,” he muttered.

“Now there is a beautiful sight,” Shepard sighed as the Normandy swooped in to pick them up.
“Glory hallelujah, Sister Shepard,” Garrus said, lifting her off the ground into his arms. “Glory hallelujah.”

Shepard chuckled. “You know, you keep carrying me around, I’m going to get used to it.”

“Right, you letting someone carry you.” He set her down at the top of the ramp. “That will be the day.” He patted her shoulder and strode to his locker.

“I’m sure C-Sec will be glad to tell you the tale of our harrowing escape,” she told the crowd of crew and team members, as they pressed in eager to hear the story of how she’d made it out. “I need a shower and a nap.” She straightened. “Ground team from Therum, debriefing in the Comm Room, 0630. Pass the word.”

She hobbled to the elevator and then to the med bay to check on Dr. T’Soni and Nihlus. They both lay on beds, sound asleep and cozy under blankets when she looked in.

“Captain!” Dr. Chakwas called, striding toward her. “Are you all right?”

Nihlus woke and stared blurrily at her for a moment before bolting upright.

“Spectre Kryik!” the doctor barked, whirling to face him, a stern finger pointed toward his nose. “Stay right there. Don’t make me tranq you again.”

Shepard nodded and chuckled. “Yeah, I’m fine.” She held up her hands. “No need to tranq me, Doc. Nothing a shower, a couple of ice packs and eight hours of sleep won’t cure.” Suddenly every muscle in her body insisted on lying down, and she slumped against the door. “How about your patients? Both going to be okay?”

“Dr. T’Soni is suffering from exposure, exhaustion, and dehydration. She’ll be fine by morning.” Dr. Chakwas looked from the asari still sleeping on the far bed back to Nihlus on the closest. “Spectre Kryik tore a ligament in his right, proximal ankle joint. A night in a regen field and a couple of days rest will see it right.”

Shepard gave her a bone-weary smile and shoved off the doorjamb. “Excellent. I’m off to take a shower and lapse into unconsciousness. Good night, Doc . . . Nihlus.” She turned and hobbled away before Nihlus could do anything more than open his mouth.

A half hour later, Shepard checked through her messages, having received one from an Admiral Kahoku in reference to her inquiries about Armistan Banes, Dr. Michel’s blackmailer. His men supposedly found Banes’s body on a ship, but those same men had just disappeared in the Sparta system. She replied, offering to stop in the system to check it out on their way to Eden Prime.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” she grumbled, and sent out a crew memo that they’d be heading for Sparta. After notifying the ground team to meet for a quick briefing at the Mako prior to dropping at 0800, she had Pressley set their course and then put her computer to bed.

Shepard collapsed onto her bed, wishing the Alliance knew the difference between granite and mattress material. Her hands throbbed like they were trying to jump off her wrists and make a break for freedom, and her knee had swollen to the point where it looked like a small football had taken refuge inside her trouser-leg. Closing her eyes, she let out a long, slow breath.

“So tired,” she moaned, stretching a little. Horizontal felt glorious. Painful, but glorious.

Knuckles rapped on the door.
“Seriously? Come on, people, give the captain a break. Pressley has the ship,” she shouted without opening her eyes.

“Not really all that eager to talk to Pressley, actually,” a warm, dual-toned voice called from the other side. “I think I’d rather knife fight Chief Williams for the last donut and then eat it.”

Shepard grinned. “Come in, C-Sec.” She didn’t get up. If he was uncomfortable with his captain splattered in a ruined heap on her bed, he could leave.

The door opened and Garrus walked in. He stopped just inside, then let out a sharp breath and nodded. “Yeah, that’s about what I thought.” He walked over to the desk and set a small crate on it, then passed her a large insulated thermos. “It’s soup. I figured after the way you were handling your guns that a fork or spoon would be out of the question.”

“Thanks. I appreciate the thought, but I’m not hungry.” She took the thermos and set it on her nightstand.

“You’re what? Forty seven kilos soaking wet, in armour? Yes, you’re freakishly tiny . . ..” His mandibles fluttered. “. . . and freakishly strong, but you’re still too skinny. Besides, we just spent the better part of five hours outrunning lava. You’ve got be hungry.” He pulled her chair over next to the bed and sat. “I just downed four ration bars without chewing.” He sat and shrugged then put the thermos back in her hands. “Although with those, it’s best not to.”

Frowning, Shepard tilted her head off to the side. “Yeah, I guess the groceries aren’t the best for you guys, are they?” She took a sip of soup, her brow wrinkling. “Wow, this is good. Tomato made with milk?” Narrowing her eyes, she gave him a considering scowl. “How did you know about that? You really have been going through my file, haven’t you?”

He bobbed his head in what she was learning amounted to a turian shrug. “I wanted to know who I was signing on with. You make a . . . colourful first impression.” Turning in his chair, he opened the crate. “It’s just rehydrated soy milk. Only kind in the refrigeration unit.”

She reached out and laid her hand on his knee. “C-Sec. Thanks. I appreciate the thought.” She set the thermos down. “Next time we hit a world with dextro supplies, I’ll take you and Tali ashore with me. You can do some shopping, get some food that isn’t ration bars.” Flopping onto her pillows, she sighed. “If they’re anything like the levo ones . . ..” She gave an exaggerated shudder.

Flopping her arm across her brow, Shepard relaxed into the mattress. “Thanks for the soup. You didn’t hit me as the caretaker type, C-Sec.”

He shrugged and deadpanned. “I’m a complex fellow . . . an enigma, really.”

She laughed, her first decent belly laugh in days. “Yeah.” She picked up the thermos and sipped her soup. “Yeah, I guess you are at that.” Still not bothering to sit up enough to do more than drink, she met his eyes. “You did some good work in there today. Go get some rest. You don’t need to fuss over me.”

He took the mug and set it on the nightstand and held out his hands. “Come on, show them to me.”

Shepard’s laugh cut bright and sharp. “We don’t know one another well enough for that, C-Sec. Besides, I didn’t think turians were into breasts.”

His mandibles fluttered, and he cleared his throat. “Nice try. You know I meant your hands. Drop your shields, and let’s see what’s under the gloves.”
Shepard grumbled and peeled the soft glove off the hand closest to him, wincing as the pressure disappeared and the throbbing upped in volume. She held out the purple and black, still-taped, swollen mess. “I don’t think anything is really broken. It’s just bruising.”

He took her hand between both of hers, feeling along the bones and fingers with far more care than she would have expected. “You showered and left the tape on?” He picked at the end of the tape, working it off slowly.

“I couldn’t grip it to peel it off,” she admitted. “Leave it, it’s helping control the swelling.”

“You’re going to lose a finger or two if we don’t take it off,” he growled as she tried to pull her hand back. “So, what did Kryik say or do to cause this?”

Scowling, Shepard snatched her hand back, then gave up when he just captured it again. “What makes you think it was Nihlus? Maybe I’m just a crazy woman who beats on immovable objects for something to do.”

He cut off the bit of tape he’d removed, then coiled an ice wrap around her hand, turning the appendage into a flipper. “We’ll let them numb up a bit. As for the crazy woman . . . could be. The crazy part is definitely accurate.” His mandibles fluttered in a way she recognized as a teasing smile. “But, you’ve got a nice matching set of boxer’s fractures that should be in med bay, and they aren’t. Pretty sure you aren’t avoiding Dr. Chakwas, so it’s either Dr. T’Soni or Kryik.” He gestured for her to give him the other hand. “And, T’Soni hasn’t been around long enough.”

Shepard rolled over on her side and placed her fingers in his talons. She winced preemptively when he moved to slip off her glove, but he took more care than she had. “Harkin wouldn’t talk to Nihlus because he was afraid of the council. Instead of Nihlus beating him to death, I used my feminine wiles to get him to talk.”

He chuckled. “Ah. Jealousy.”

Shepard laughed. “Yeah, right, C-Sec. That’s insane for so many reasons.”

He nodded. “It’s still true.” He wrapped another ice wrap around that hand, then placed the thermos between her flippers. “Eat.”

She sipped the soup, glaring at him the whole time. “Nihlus is only interested in being a pain in my ass.”

Garrus leaned back. “If that was the case, he wouldn’t have recommended you to the council. Spectres have better things to do than mentor random candidates just to make their lives miserable.” He shrugged. “I don’t know all that much about humans, but out here, people like you are pretty rare.”

“I’m just a soldier, C-Sec. Nothing rare here.” She sat up, pressing her back against the wall, and pulled her knees up to her chest.

“I’ve read your file.” He focused on taking supplies out of the crate, not putting any pressure on her. “Most of the early stuff is redacted, but I can make a pale guess as to what happened on Mindoir based on the fact you came out alive but living on the street and hooked on Hallex.”

She turtled up further. “I don’t talk about that.”

He moved over to the bed since she’d withdrawn beyond his reach and began unwinding one hand. “You kicked it though, became a champion athlete, one of the Alliance’s most decorated. Not
many addicts manage to pull off that transition.”

Shepard watched him peel the tape off her hand, not sure how she’d gotten suckered into this conversation. She sighed and whispered, “He called me a whore.”

He nodded and cocked a brow plate. “Your MO is pissing people off. You’ve been called worse.”

Chuckling, she nodded. “Was called a gangrenous, prolapsed elcor cloaca once. I think that might have been Ambassador Udina, actually.” A tight grin attempted to change the subject. “He really hates me.”

“So?” Finished unwrapping that hand, he balled up the tape and tossed it into the crate.

“Dammit, C-Sec, I said I don’t talk about this stuff.” He shrugged, and she grumbled. “It was the way he said it, like I made him sick. And now, I really am done talking about this.”

“So, tomorrow, Edolus to investigate the mysterious Armistan Banes?”

He surprised her. She’d thought he’d keep pushing, the interrogator in him unable to let it go before she’d confessed her entire soul. A tiny smile forced its way onto her lips, lifting just the corner of her mouth.

“Yeah,” she said after a moment, watching him from under heavily lidded eyes. “I have no idea why I’m going through all this effort to find some mad scientist, but something about it is nagging me. Since we’re in the neighbourhood, we can check out the admiral’s missing men before heading to Eden Prime.” She grinned. “At the very least, Dr. Michel will be grateful. You could get lucky, C-Sec. She likes you.”

He cleared his throat and focused on packing her hand in ice. “The doctor is a good woman.”

Her grin widened. “Ohhh, I see. You know about her little crush. Not as oblivious as you let on.”

Cocking a brow plate at her, he held up her hand, and she laughed, bright and heavy.

“Yeah,” she said, still smiling. “Yeah, you see everything.” She chugged him on the shoulder. “You’re all right, C-Sec.”
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Summary

Who is this Armistan Banes? Is it worth risking your life riding in the Mako with Shepard driving to find out?

Knuckles rapped on the door. Shepard looked at Garrus, then sighed, and called out, “That door will detonate in ten seconds. If you don’t want to get blown into chunks, go away.”

“Not a very practical means of sending people away in a space faring vessel,” Dr. Chakwas’s prim voice called from the other side. “You might want to consider electric shocks or some other means that won’t result in a hull breach.”

Shepard laughed. “I’ll take that under advisement. Come on in, Doc.” When the door opened and the doctor stepped through, the captain laughed. “Electric shocks, Doc? You are a sick woman. I knew I liked you.”

The doctor walked over and perched on the chair that Garrus had vacated. “I went through the readings from your armour and prepared some treatment that I am pleased to see Officer Vakarian has already begun.”

“Hey,” Shepard protested. “How do you know that I didn’t just start treating myself?”

The doctor deadpanned, “Painkillers and some supplements and absorption enhancers to help with the boxer’s fractures.”

Shepard tilted her head, giving the doctor a dubious scowl. “There’s nothing in the pain meds that will cause . . .” She broke off, her face heating up as she felt Garrus’s eyes on her. Last thing she needed to do was to draw attention to her issues yet again,

“Don’t worry, Captain,” the doctor said, sounding a little insulted. “There are no triggering ingredients in this pain medication.”

“In that case,” Shepard said, leaning to the side to open up her throat for the injection. “The painkillers will be welcome. They’ll have worn off by morning, though, right? I have to drive the Mako.”

Dr. Chakwas harrumphed a little. “Yes, you’ll be clear-headed and able to drive, although from what I’ve heard about your driving, no one would have known the difference.” She administered the shot. “What was it again? Four waterfalls before you got the Mako to shore?”

Garrus chuckled, earning him a narrow-eyed glare.

Shepard shook her head, affecting indignation. “I think people in the Alliance military need to spend more time defending Earth and all her holdings and less time gossiping.”

The doctor unwrapped Shepard’s hands, clucking over them a bit before injecting both of them. “They should be fine by morning. Keep the ice on for twenty minutes and then off.” She held up a regen frame. “This is going on your knee.” She motioned for Garrus to look away, then helped
Shepard out of her boots and trousers and into shorts. Once the regen frame glowed around the captain’s knee, the doctor stood.

“My work here is done,” she proclaimed, striding to the door. “I’d better get back to med bay before Nihlus manages a successful escape attempt. Good night, Captain . . . Officer Vakarian.”

Shepard slid down into her pillows as the meds began to take effect. Garrus covered her up with her sheets and blanket, but seemed in no hurry to leave. He stretched out a little at the end of the bed, letting out a stiff groan.

“I’m not going to do something crazy if you aren’t guarding me,” she grumbled. “You can go about your business.”

He just muttered something that her translator didn’t catch and semi-reclined across the bottom corner of her bed. She blinked, staring at him as his features blurred a little, finding him pleasant to look at. More pleasant as the moments passed, and her eyes drooped heavy.

“Hey, C-Sec,” she said, barely able to keep her eyes open, drifting off between words.

“Yeah, Shepard?” He let out a long breath.

“Those painkillers are kicking in, aren’t they?”

“Mmmhmmmm.” She grinned, almost drunkenly. “They are. Happy, happy painkillers. Your nose whistles when you sigh. Did you know that?” Her eyes slipped closed. “If I told you something, would you promise to forget by tomorrow?”

He chuckled. “Consider it forgotten.” The mattress moved as he shifted.

“It’s a secret,” she whispered, her index finger wavering in front of her lips, “but I thought god had given me something awesome to make up for the slavers killing my folks and . . . well, they fucked me up, C-Sec. Pretty bad.” She scratched the end of her nose and yawned.

“But, I don’t talk about that.” She raised her eyebrows even though her eyes stayed shut. “Anyway . . . you know, I thought he’d said, ‘Here, Jane, I’ll give you these skills and a path that’ll help you save other people from living through the same shit you have’. ” Low and musical, Shepard sighed. “How stupid, huh?” She gave her head a heavy, lopsided shake. “So stupid, cuz, no matter what, there’s always another bad guy, more people getting hurt.”

She turned over on her side and opened her eyes a slit. “Kryik called me a whore. Ironic, huh? Since I’ve never actually let anyone touch me.”

A wide yawn split her face, and she slid down into her blankets. “Will you stay until I go to sleep?”

The turian cleared his throat. “Sure. Get some sleep, Shepard. We have a long road ahead.”

Shepard let out a dramatic sigh and smacked her lips together a little as her head relaxed down into her pillow. “You were really heavy. Thought my hands were going to rip off.”

“You’re high. Go to sleep.”


A strange, rumbling purr woke Shepard some time later. Yawning, she rolled over and looked at the chronometer next to her bed: 0330. “Still the middle of the night,” she grumbled and turned back over, tugging her covers up around her ears. Letting out a sharp sigh, she realized that the rumbling sound was still there. She’d spent time on a lot of ships, but never heard a sound like that
before.

The sound stopped with an abrupt snort and her bed moved.

“What the . . .?” Shepard sat up then laughed. “Hey, C-Sec,” she whispered. “Don’t mean to alarm you, but you’re about to wake up in the captain’s rack.”

Garrus shifted a little, his head and shoulders still propped up against the wall, his lower legs hanging over the end of the bed.

“And you’re probably going to regret falling asleep in that position.” She reached out, shaking his shoulder gently, not wanting to startle him. “Wake up, C-Sec. It’s time to go find your own rack.”

His eyes opened, and he stared at her for a few seconds before jumping up. “Shepard!” He smoothed his tunic and glanced around as if he expected enemies to manifest through the walls. “I . . . um . . .”

“Fell asleep.” She chuckled and shrugged. “It’s not a big deal. Go on, go find a more comfortable place to sleep. I’ll see you later on.”

He backed toward the door, still self-consciously trying to straighten himself out. “Ah, yeah. Goodnight, Shepard.” He hit the door control, stepping through when it opened.

“Hey, C-Sec . . . Garrus,” Shepard called after him.

Garrus paused and turned back.

“Thanks.” She gave him a thin smile. “Thanks a lot.”

His mandibles fluttered. “My pleasure. Now go back to sleep.” He chuckled and stepped out.

“Vakarian?”

Shepard winced at the tone of Nihlus’s voice. “Fuck me, I don’t need this right now.” What was the Spectre even doing out of med bay?

“Taking the new CO out for a test drive?”

Shepard bolted up off the bed, but slowed when Garrus let out a disgusted chuff of air.

“You don’t know anything about Shepard, Kryik. Maybe you should pull your head out of your cloaca long enough to talk to her and learn a few things.”

“That must have been some test drive, if she’s already got you defending her honour.” Nihlus spat the words with venom that confounded the hell out of her. Shepard wrestled the sheets off the regen frame and clambered up onto her feet.

“She doesn’t need me to defend it since it’s not in question. Yours, however . . .”

Shepard hobbled out the door at the sound of a small scuffle. “What the hell is going on out here?” The two turians stood nose to nose, their entire bodies poised to do damage. “Vakarian, you don’t need to defend me to him any more than he has the slightest right to question anything about me.” She nodded toward the elevator. “Thanks for your help and the talk. Much appreciated. Get some rest.”

She turned weary eyes to Nihlus. “Get in here. Now.”
He bristled, then backed down and stalked past her.

Shepard shot Kaidan an apologetic grimace. The soldier sat at the table dressed in his sleepwear, looking incredibly uncomfortable and nursing a cup of something steamy. “Sparky, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, Captain. Just a bad dream. I thought I’d grab a cup of cocoa before going back to sleep.” He gave her a concerned scowl and nodded toward her door. “You okay? Need backup?”

A grateful smile passed over her lips as she shook her head. “Nah, I can handle it. Get yourself back to bed, soldier. It’s late. Thanks, though.” She waited for him to nod, then followed Nihlus into her quarters.

“So, found someone who liked your bed?” the Spectre asked the moment the door shut.

Shepard limped over to him and snapped to attention, hands clasped behind her back, her entire bearing rigid and formal. “Spectre Kryik, I have reached the end of my tolerance for your behavior. I command this ship and need to maintain the respect of the men and women aboard her. You will cease making snide comments and allegations about my sexual activities.” She blew out a sharp breath. “And, if I hear you speaking to a member of the crew the way you just spoke to Officer Vakarian, I will eject you from this vessel. Is that clear?”

He scowled, his mandibles dropping, brow plates lowering. He reached out to grip her hand, releasing her like she was on fire when a low, thin scream made it out between her lips. Antagonism turned to concern in a flash. “What? What is it?”

She shook her head and strode past him. “I’m fine, just lay off the attitude, Kryik. You don’t know anything about me.”

He followed her. “What’s going on? You’re hurt?”

“C-Sec helped me take care of it.” She nodded toward the door. “I told you that I would never sleep with anyone under my command. I never have, and I never will. That is the end of the subject. Forever.”

Rather than walking away, he closed the distance between them. “What happened to you? Why are you like this?”

“That is a long and boring story, Nihlus. Just leave it with the fact that you don’t need to concern yourself with it. If this is some sort of twisted jealousy . . .” She shook her head. “Well, calling me a whore is not acceptable behaviour. Is that understood?”

When he didn’t answer, she turned to look into his eyes. “Is that understood, Nihlus?”

He stepped toward her, his eyes softening for the first time in days, his brow plates lowered. “What was all that? With me?”

Shepard shook her head, exhausted, hitting the downward crash side of the mini-dose of adrenaline. “Oddly enough, genuine attraction. Something that comes along . . . well, something that hasn’t come along.” She nodded toward the door. “Don’t let it concern you, it won’t interfere with our working partnership. I’m over it. Now, please . . . I’m tired.”

He reached out to touch her hair, but she ducked out from under his hand. He sighed. “Shepard, I’m . . . I’m sorry for what I said. I didn’t mean to be cruel, you just . . . you drive me crazy with your smart mouth and your constant . . .” He chuffed. “What you did with Harkin. Yes, you got the
information, but at what cost?” He stepped closer to her. “Was what we got from him worth cheapening yourself?”

Shepard sighed and met his eyes with a completely closed stare. “It didn’t cheapen me, Nihlus. I decide what I allow to cheapen me. That didn’t even ping the ladar. What you said to me in the gym and that little scene out there a minute ago, that cheapens me, and it cheapens you. You haven’t known me very long, and you’ve had the crappiest couple of days on record, so I’ve been willing to cut you some slack, but that ends now.”

She walked over to her chair and sat, lifting her shoulders in a small shrug. “I get it, Nihlus, I do. You loved Saren like a brother, maybe even as a father figure, and he tried to kill you in cold blood. The council you’ve served faithfully may also be betraying you, and now you’re an honourable soldier left asking yourself how many of those missions they’ve sent you on have been dishonourable.”

Shaking her head, she looked around the room as if it encompassed not just the Normandy, but their entire mission. “Now we’ve been cast adrift, no real idea what we’re facing, or even how to figure it out. Trust me, I’m feeling that as much as you are. I also understand that I’m a wild card, and for all you know, I’ll end up betraying you as well. I’m not going to try to convince you otherwise. That knot will untangle when it does.”

The resolute iron rod snapped straight in her spine. “We have to work together, and I think we do all right on that front, so let’s keep things professional. Trust me when I say the message that you find me morally repugnant has been received. If you cannot interact with me without resorting to name calling, then you need to find alternative transport. We can always coordinate the search via comms.”

He straightened, his face showing remarkable shock for a turian. “Shepard . . ..” He let out an exasperated chuff of air.

“We’re fine, Nihlus. I’ll see you at the debriefing in a few hours. You should get back into med bay before Dr. Chakwas realizes you’re gone and tranqs you again.” She just stared at him until he turned and walked to the door. When he left without saying anything else, Shepard let out a long, relieved breath and moved over to her bed.

Before she lowered the light, she glanced down at the end of the bed where Vakarian had passed out jammed up against the wall. She grinned and laid down, dimming the lights but not all the way.

“What a very strange turn your life has taken, Jane Shepard,” she said and yawned. Her eyes closed and she drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

Three hours later, she rolled out of bed, stiff, but able to move her hands and touch her knee without screaming. Once free from the regen frame, she flexed her knee a couple of times. Serviceable. Today’s mission didn’t involve running, so she should be fine. Dressing quickly, she grabbed a dried fruit bar from the galley and headed up to the comm room.

“Sparky, my friend,” she said to Kaidan as he placed a mug of hot chocolate in her hand, “you will be a general some day. I swear I’ll make that happen.” She sat in her seat and sipped her hot chocolate while the rest of the ground team and Dr. T’Soni filed in, taking seats around the room.

An hour later, Shepard sat slumped in her chair for a long moment, waiting for the pounding in her
“Note to self: asari mind-melds hurt.”

“Bit too late for that note too,” Garrus called from the door as he followed the others out.

“Get to work, C-Sec,” she yelled after him, then grinned.

Her head really did hurt. Shepard let out a long sigh and shoved herself up out of her chair. A couple of aspirin would see her right, well, except for the nightmarish images that T’Soni had stirred up like a wand blender cutting its way through her grey matter. The vision didn’t make any more sense, but at least the asari had been able to clear it up a bit. Her suspicion that the images were a distress call solidified into a certainty. It had been the last desperate attempt of a dying people to warn those who came after. As horrific as its contents were, the message itself broke her heart.

She headed down to her locker, putting on her armour automatically as she worried through what everything meant. They had so few pieces to the puzzle, none of them edge pieces, and someone had thrown out the box. How would they ever fit it together in time?

“I only recall assigning two of you to this mission,” she called, striding up to the small crowd of people waiting at the back end of the Mako. “With my driving reputation, I’m surprised the two I assigned aren’t hiding somewhere.”

“I like to live dangerously,” Garrus said, “so I was hoping you’d change your mind and take me along, but I think the rest of them just want to know what it’s like to . . ..” He raised and softened his voice to imitate Dr. T’Soni’s. “. . . embrace eternity.”

Alenko blushed, giving himself away even though he was one of the two actually assigned to the mission.

Wrex cleared his throat and shrugged. “I’ve had sex with asari, so I already know. I’m just here to shoot things.” He rolled his shoulders and hitched up his armour.

“Come on, ma’am,” Williams said, shrugging as if she didn’t really care, but her eyes shone bright with curiosity. “It looked freaky as hell. What did it feel like?”

Shepard took a long breath, letting it out as she narrowed her eyes, affecting a deep thoughtfulness. “It felt like having someone stick their fingers straight into your eyeballs, and then sort through your neurons like flipping through a card file. Then, when they found what they were looking for, they ripped it out . . ..” She performed a wild ripping gesture to emphasize her words. “. . . balled it up, and then ate it.” She scrunched up the imaginary card file, popped into her mouth and chewed. “Mmm mmm good. I’m pretty sure all my memories before I turned five are gone now.”

Waving her hands, she shooed them away. “Everyone who isn’t going on the mission, begone. Work awaits you all.” She looked to Wrex and Kaidan. “People who are going on the mission, into the Mako.” Swooping her hands toward the hatch, she ushered them in. “Time’s a’wastin’.”

Giving Garrus an apologetic grin, she shook her head. “Sorry C-Sec, the Mako is full. We’ll see you in a couple of hours.”

He let out a long, sorrowful sigh, his shoulders sagging in his armour. “I knew everything would change once we slept together.”

A sharp, startled laugh escaped her, and Shepard punched him in the shoulder hard enough to make her hand complain. “You . . ..” She jerked her head away from the Mako. “Go find something to do, C-Sec, and stay out of trouble.” She climbed into the Mako and closed the hatch, still shaking.
her head. “Slept together . . . Sweet baby Jesus . . . cheeky buggers, the lot of you.”

“Crews do tend to look to their captains, emulating their behavior,” Kaidan said, slipping into the passenger seat.

Shepard thumped down behind the controls. “Now there is a wise career move. Emulate the woman most likely to get Cat 6’ed and sent to a retirement home on Protoplanet Vesta.”

Kaidan frowned and cocked his head. “Isn’t that in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter?”

“It’s a really terrible retirement home,” she replied.

He shook his head. “Star of Terra for holding off the batarians during the Skyllian Blitz, Captain of the Normandy, Spectre candidate . . . we could do worse.”

Shepard grumbled and focused on getting the Mako ready to drop.

Twenty minutes later, the vehicle plunged across the surface of Edolus at maximum speed.

“You know, it does have other speeds,” Kaidan called as the tank leaped off another small hill.

“Where is the fun in that?” Shepard glanced over at the navigation system. “We should be coming up on Kahoku’s men any minute.”

Kaidan activated the vid screen where a windshield would be in a vehicle that didn’t have to withstand enemy fire. He pointed off to their right. “APC at our two o’clock. Looks like a Grizzly.”

Shepard changed their course. “Ruined APC in the middle of nowhere. Nice, flat, grassland . . .”

“Thresher nest!” Wrex shouted from the back.

“Yep.” Even as Shepard answered, the ground ahead of them exploded upward, a massive, tentacled nightmare erupting from the peaceful valley floor. Shepard aimed straight for it, yelling, “Shoot it, gentlemen! Shooting it would be good.”

The monster spat a glob of acid that splashed against the front right corner of the Mako’s roof. Kaidan ducked, even though the acid didn’t burn through all the way. At least, not at first.

Shepard hooted with manic glee and pulled the tank into a tight circle around the worm. “The key, Brothers Sparky and Wrex, is to keep the Thresher Maw above ground.”

“I’m going to puke,” Kaidan gasped, despite his hands remaining steady on the firing control for the machine gun, sending short bursts of bullets at the creature.

Shepard just kept circling, giving her gunners time to adapt to her maneuvers, but also giving the Maw time to do some decent damage with its acid. “Okay, heading for high ground and repairs, gentlemen.” She peeled off, heading for a steep rise of rock, weaving the tank back and forth across the path to avoid most of the acid bursts.

“It’s going to come up under us!” Wrex yelled as the thresher disappeared underground. “It’s going . . .”

The Mako exploded off the ground, flipping over in the air. The damage sensors began to scream. Shepard hit the thrusters, pulsing them with one hand to slow the tank’s descent while using the other to manipulate the eezo core to lower their mass as much as she could manage. The second the tires touched ground, she hit the accelerator, sending it careening up the side of the rocky hill.
“Holy crap,” she said, laughing weakly as they reached the top of the hill, well out of the maw’s reach. “That was exciting! We nearly bought the farm there, boys.” She hit the omni-gel, sending the miraculous goo shooting along the tank’s bloodlines to make emergency repairs.

Reaching over, she slapped Kaidan’s shoulder companionably. “You okay there, Sparky? Still breathing?” Craning around over her shoulder, she caught Wrex’s red-eyed, dirty glare. “What?”

He just grumbled and shook his head.

Shepard shrugged. “I thought I got us out of that admirably.” The repair protocol alerted her that it had completed its work, and she reached out to stroke the console with a loving hand. “How’s that, old girl? Nothing like a nice shot o’ tank medi-gel to make you perk right up.” Turning back toward the lowland, she dropped it into a low gear for the descent. “Here’s the plan, gentlemen. We’re going to head straight out, when it shows itself, I’m going to circle around it twice, keeping it on our left. You shoot the crap out of it. Then, we come back up out of range. You know, providing it’s not dead.”

“Captain . . ..” Kaidan looked at her, his mouth gasping a little like a fish’s for a second, then he just shook his head and turned to his controls.

Shepard hit the accelerator and the Mako rumbled back down to the nest. The thresher came back out almost the same spot, giving it lots of opportunity to spit acid at them as they careened across the grassland, swerving like drunken lunatics, which, coincidentally was what Wrex kept calling Shepard.

She ignored him and pulled into the circle, keeping the maw on the tank’s left for two circles. This time she took slightly more tangential route to the cliff, trying to avoid the creature coming up underneath them.

“Hey, Sparky,” Shepard yelled.

“What?”

“Duck.” She grabbed the back of his neck and shoved his head under the console as she swerved to take the incoming glob of acid on the right front quarter of the Mako. When it passed, just grazing the roof, she let him back up.

She drove straight up the cliff on the left side of the low area, keeping the accelerator to the floor until they reached an outcropping high enough to be safe from the Thresher’s acid, and big enough to park the tank for a few seconds.

“I see a bright light, Captain,” Alenko whispered, looking decidedly green. “Should I go toward the light?”

“Not unless you want to fall off the edge of the cliff, Sparky. That’s just the sun coming in the hole the thresher burned through your door.” She gave the Mako a shot of tank medi-gel and sat back, one elbow cocked on the side control panel, the other resting casually on her thigh.

She turned back and grinned at Wrex. “How’s it going back there?”

He said nothing, but turned his head to show her the still smoking spot on his head casing. She gave him an impressed nod. “Nice. You’re going to come through this with a souvenir.”

The tank repair protocol dinged, letting her know that all functions that could be repaired, were repaired. “Okay gentlemen, once more into the breach.” She turned the Mako downhill. “Wrex,
“Keep shooting that damn thing right where it sticks out of the ground. Blast me a hole through there, will yah?”

“Shepard, wait . . ..” The krogan let out a roaring moan. “What are you . . .?”

“Sparky, same goes for you. Fire smart, don’t overheat the gun, but keep it aimed right smack in the middle where it comes out of the ground.” She hit the accelerator, roaring downhill to give the cumbersome vehicle some momentum before it hit the grass. They made it maybe ten metres out into the open before the Thresher exploded out of the ground a Mako-width off the front left quarter panel.

“Woohoo! All right boys, this is where you do your thing.” Shepard kept the throttle open full and pulled a hard left, trying to make it angry enough to stay above ground. “I hate it when it pops up under us,” she grunted, heading back to the rock wall again.

“Wrex! Are you unloading that canon into that thing’s neck?” she bellowed as the ground shook, the Thresher heading underground. “Oh dear, this could be where we all die. Sweet baby Jesus, I confess, well, most of my sins . . ..”

The back end of the tank flew upward, slamming her down into the seat, then throwing her forward into her harness, her head smacking a corner of something. The sound of metal grinding over stone filled the cab. For what seemed an eternity, the Mako slid along on its nose, then the back end dropped. Stunned, but her hands still on the controls, Shepard kept the throttle open, returning to the ledge. An ear-piercing roar reverberated through the cabin like a dentist drill to the brain.

“Sparky! Stop screaming, we’re alive,” she yelled, wiping blood out of her eyes. She hit the tank medi-gel again.

“That’s not me,” Kaidan said, his voice weak and thready. “I’m too terrified to scream. I need a can opener, a small electrical device and a car battery.”

Shepard glanced back at Wrex. “Really? That sound was coming out of you?”

“I think all my ancestors just pissed on my grave.” The krogan collapsed backward in his seat, his arms and head hanging.

“What do you need the car battery for, Sparky?” Shepard asked, giving Wrex’s theatrics a dismissive wave.

“Open heart surgery. Need it to run the pacemaker.”

She let out an incredulous laugh. “You two are such pansies. Tell me this isn’t fun.”

“This isn’t fun!” they yelled in unison.

“Pansies.” She muttered to herself until the repair protocol dinged. “Same thing, gentlemen. Let’s go.”

Letting out a hearty whoop, she sent the mako roaring back down. This time, the thresher was waiting right at the base of the cliff, but that gave Shepard a chance to get a head start on it and she laid the Mako flat out in a charge across to the low hills on the south side.

“This is insane, Captain!” Kaidan yelled. “It’s going to come up under us. It’s going to come up under us.”
Then ground shook, the Thresher roar so close and so loud that the Mako shivered with it, but it missed.

“Shoot that thing, gentlemen,” Shepard called, swerving the cumbersome tank out of the way of an acid ball. She checked the maw’s readings on sensors. Good, their concentrated fire was doing the trick. She spun the Mako around, not giving the thing a chance to go back underground. “Keep up the fire, Wrex.”

“What are you doing?” Wrex screamed. Shepard heard his finger hitting the firing control constantly, but just aimed the Mako like a giant, awkward missile.

“Goodnight, Thresher,” Shepard called, aiming straight for the thing’s neck.

A glob of acid hit the roof at the back, sending Wrex into a paroxysm of screaming krogan curses vile enough to make their ears melt. Shepard didn’t bat an eyelash.

“You’re not . . .?” Kaidan squealed. “You’re going to get us killed!”

“Glory hallelujah, Brother Sparky. Praise be to the merciful Enkindlers.”

With a slam that smacked Shepard’s head into the same metal edge she’d hit the last time, the Mako smashed straight into the thresher maw’s neck. For a moment that seemed to last a half hour or so, Shepard thought Sparky had been right, and she’d gotten them all killed. Then, in a massive spray of goo, blood, and guts, the tank erupted through the back side and the giant worm collapsed onto the shuddering ground. Dead.

“Yes!” Shepard crowed, throwing her hands in the air. “Glory hallelujah and kiss the great big glowing asses of the Enkindlers. We just drove a Mako through a worm, gentlemen.”

Shepard pulled the tank over next to the source of the distress call and parked it. “Well, now we’re here, let’s see what happened to Kahoku’s men. Just be careful getting out, the whole tank’s going to be covered in thresher acid.” She unbuckled her harness and climbed out.

About ten metres from the transmitter, a burned out APC laid tilted on its side. Bodies of Alliance Marines lay strewn around the entire area, most of them so badly burned it would be impossible to identify them. Shepard sighed and shook her head. “Damn shame. Someone lured them into this trap, but who? And what the hell does this have to do with Armistan Banes?”

Alenko crouched next to one of the bodies, gingerly removing the man’s dog tags. “Lt. Kieffer.” He winced as he looked down at the remains. “Only reason I can think of for killing off the unit that discovered Banes’s body is to cover up that it wasn’t Banes at all.”

Looking over the waste of life, Shepard nodded. “Gather up their tags, gentlemen. I’ll climb in the wreck and see if their recorders caught anything.” Ten minutes later, the recordings downloaded to her omni-tool, she called for the Normandy to pick them up, and began preparing the Marines for return to the Alliance.

When, at last, Shepard drove up the ramp and into the cargo bay, she let out a triumphant yell. “Gentlemen, we have driven through the belly of the beast and survived.” She parked it and started flipping off switches, powering it down.

“Literally,” Kaidan sighed. He unfastened his harness and turned off the gun. “I need to write home, ask mom to send me a box of new underwear.”

“I think somewhere, there’s an entire store filled with already shat on underwear with my name on
“It,” Wrex said. “Remind me to say no when you ask me to go along next time, Shepard.”

“Babies.” She turned off the key and unfastened her harness, following the other two out. “My underwear is daisy fresh.”

Wrex’s eyes slid over her, then he grunted and shook his head. “Now mine feels a little tight.”

“And I feel uncomfortable . . . also pretty sure I didn’t need to know either of those things,” Kaidan called over his shoulder, fleeing for the elevator.

Garrus stood about three metres away from the elevator door, staring at the Mako with his mouth hanging open.

Shepard grinned as she approached him. “Don’t worry, C-Sec, I’ll be down in a half hour to help with repairs. Make sure to hose it down really well before you touch it. Might want to use some sort of industrial solvent.”

“What’s with the green slime and purple tendrils?” he asked, his voice soft and monotone.

She turned back, cocked her head and squinted. “Oh . . . thresher maw intestines.”

He scowled as he looked at her, then reached up to brush her hair away from the clotted slice in her scalp. “Drop by med bay while you’re at it. You’re a constant disaster in progress, aren’t you?”

She shrugged, chuckled, and then clapped him on the back. “See you in a bit.”
Chapter Summary

Mako repairs and all mothers do that.

Clean and dry, her head happily sealed up with medi-gel, Shepard dressed in work clothes and headed out to the galley to make herself a hot drink before going down to help rebuild the Mako.

“Listen! Listen!” Ashley cackled. “This is my favorite part.”

A shrill, tremulous scream roared through the galley, echoing along the length of the space, and the crowd around the table burst into hysterical laughter.

“Yeah, that Wrex has a good set of lungs on him,” Shepard said, just loud enough to announce her presence as she stepped around the corner.

Williams greeted her with a wide grin. “Ah, Captain, we were just reviewing the audio and vid logs from the last mission. For . . . um . . . um . . .”

“Training purposes,” Joker finished for her.

“I can’t believe you drove the Mako through a thresher maw,” the chief said. “That’s either inspired, or completely insane, ma’am.”

Shepard nodded and poured herself a thermos of hot water. “Probably a bit of both. It takes so long to kill them the other way.” She started shovelling hot chocolate mix into the water. “Be careful that the aforementioned krogan with excellent lung capacity doesn’t catch you all cackling over that footage like a bunch of hens.”

She added extra sugar and creamer, then slapped on a lid. “Give Sparky and Wrex some respect. They brought that thing down. All I did was drive.”

As she waited for the elevator, Shepard heard someone whisper. “She’s a lunatic. She’s going to get us all killed.”

“Didn’t get Wrex or Alenko killed, did she?” Ashley asked. “Thresher sure is dead, though.”

“By the way, something else you might want to pass along: your CO has insanely good hearing.” Shepard called. The whispering dropped into awkward silence. Chuckling, she got into the elevator and pressed the control to head down to the cargo bay.

“I think I hate you a little bit, right now,” Garrus’s voice greeted her as she got out. She couldn’t see him.

“Aw, C-Sec, and here I thought we had this unshakeable bond.” She sipped her cocoa and crouched down to look under the machine. “You just getting started?”

“Yes.” He slid out from under the tank’s chassis. “It took me this long to get the guts and acid
blood washed off.”

She beamed down at him with a wide, gleeful smile. “Yeah, but damn, C-Sec. It was awesome.” After another sip, she set down her cocoa and climbed under the Mako.

“Not what I heard from Alenko and Wrex.” He grabbed a tool, changed the head on it and passed it to her. “Here, you can change out the rotors, knuckles, hub bearings, dust shields . . .” He cursed. “Just take off the wheels and entire brake mounts then we’ll look at the axles. So much of the metal is replaced by omni-gel that they’ll probably just crumble in your hand.”

Shepard chuckled and took the tool. “Fine, Mr. Grumpy-you-beat-up-on-my-Mako-and-now-I’m-going-to-sulk-pants, I’ll change out the wheels and brake mounts.”

“How much omni-gel did you use, anyway?” Garrus slid back under and set to work on the front axle.

Shepard shrugged as she started ratcheting bolts loose. “I don’t know, seventy-five or so.”

“Seventy-fi --” Garrus sighed. “It’ll take all the salvage from Therum to replace that much omni-gel.”

She let out a long, hard-done-upon grumbling sigh. “Fine, Admiral C-Sec, next time, I won’t do repairs between runs. Aye, aye, sir.” She grinned over at him, finally rewarded with a grudging flick of his mandibles. Chuckling to herself, she dug in. They needed the tank ready for Eden Prime.

After working in companionable silence for about an hour, Shepard’s prying timer went off in her head. Garrus gave her a stubborn, private vibe; the sort of onion that needed a paring knife to peel. Starting early and keeping at it always proved to be the key to the paring knife types. “So, C-Sec, what’s the deal with you and . . . well, C-Sec?”

He glanced her way, then went back to replacing the right front quarter panel. “We’re going to need two hundred and fifty thousand credits worth of replacement parts.”

Shepard sighed. “I’ll make sure the quartermaster has the credits.” She stuck her head out and whistled to the Requisition Officer. “Hey Verblovski . . . Hank! Set Vakarian here up with whatever he needs for the Mako.”

The Alliance officer glanced up from his datapad and nodded. “Yes, ma’am. I’m sending in orders tonight, Officer Vakarian, if you have time to get one together.” After waiting a moment for a reply that didn’t come, he shrugged and went back to work.

Shepard pulled herself back under the Mako. “There, now that completely unsolvable issue is taken care of -- thank god for me, by the way -- you and C-Sec, spill it.” Her hands hesitated halfway to their next task, the query gaining weight as she stared him down, one eyebrow climbing toward her hair.

His answering, non-committal head bob came across smooth but disingenuous, a white chocolate answer. “There’s nothing to spill, Shepard.”

Covering up her mouth, she heaved out a monstrous cough that sent the word, “Bullshit,” bouncing off the bulkheads.

Garrus grumbled, then let out a sigh. “Fine. Let’s just say that I don’t care for the discrepancy between the amount of time I spend fighting the system to help people and the time I spend
actually helping people. When bad people hurt good people, that draws a line for me.”

Shepard hummed, vague but aiming for interested as she dug into cutting the last wheel loose. Thresher acid really did eat through anything.

“It’s supposed to be about stopping the criminals,” Garrus continued. “How do you do that when most days it seems there are more laws protecting them than the good, decent normal people? Drug dealers, thieves, and organized crime run rampant while C-Sec and the council shackle our talons at every turn.”

Shepard turned to look at him, meeting his eyes with a narrow stare, fighting to rein in the sharp spark of disapproval that sizzled through her at his words. She had a feeling C-Sec would prove a far more complex onion to peel back than first thought. A sharp nod with a single shoulder shrug encouraged him to keep going while she took cover behind her work.

“Kryik said your father is a legend in the force.” She wrestled with her last wheel, trying to pry it off its mount. It wouldn’t have even been rotating as she drove onto the ship. She turned to lay on her back and kicked it with both feet. “Did that influence your decision at all?”

“Made the entire decision for me.” He wriggled down the length of the Mako and lay next to her. “On three. One . . . two . . . three.” They both kicked, sending the wheel flying halfway across the cargo bay. It rolled the rest of the way, slowly looping around to crash to the floor right behind Ashley.

Williams jumped and let out a foul curse, her reflex flinging a rifle across the cargo bay to land at Wrex’s feet. She spun to face the Mako. “Hey! Keep your toys on your half of the room, Vakarian!” the Chief barked. She shoved and grunted, trying to set the huge wheel upright.

“Keep your toys on your side of the bay too, Pinky.” The krogan kicked the gun back across the floor.

“Pinky? Look, dinosaur boy . . .” Williams swooped down, snatching the gun off the floor looking as though she intended to use it.

“Wait. Wait. Before we start a war, the tire’s all me,” Shepard called. “Sorry. Sorry.” She clambered out from under the tank and trotted over to the tire. “Give me a hand here, Chief, and I’ll get it out of your way.” They tipped the wheel up on its end, and Shepard ran it back, her palms slapping against the treads in a highly satisfying way. Once it was propped up next to its brethren against the bulkhead, she climbed back under and started removing the brake housing.

“So, before we were so rudely interrupted by my escaping wheel, you said that your father made the decision to go into C-Sec for you?” She turned her back to him, sensing that she needed to be an absorptive wall to keep him talking about himself.

“Mmm,’ Garrus replied. “I was happiest building things, taking things apart, drawing and reading. Whenever Dad came home for a couple of days, he’d drag me outside the city and drill me on shooting.” He chuffed, his nose sounding the thin whistle that made her grin. “He’d plant evidence and create crimes for me to solve while he was gone. Although . . .” She glanced over her shoulder in time to see him bob his head a little. “. . . that had its moments. When I was really young, I used to work hard between his visits to solve the mysteries he’d left. It was a chance for us to do something together.”

“He wasn’t around much?” she asked, her voice neutral, back still toward him.
The left front quarter panel hit the deck plating. “No. Work was important. There was always some case or another to be solved.” He dragged the eaten-away metal off to the side and threw it in the recycling bin. “Might have been different if we all lived on the Citadel, but he wanted us to grow up turian.” He deepened his voice, making it more gruff for the last few words.

“Us?” She turned and smiled. “You have a brother or sister?”

He crouched down, picking up a bottle of water he’d stuck behind one of the new tires. “Yeah, a sister. Sol is a very good turian.” His mandibles lowered, and his head jerked back and forth a little. “She blew everyone away during her mandatory military service.” His voice and mandibles lowered. “Could be a general someday.”

Shepard focused on the work for a moment, letting the silence settle thick and comfortable. He wanted to say more, she just needed to wait until he was ready.

Metal banged and clinked behind her, the volume getting louder as time passed. Garrus let out a yelp of pain, then a foul curse. When she turned to face him, he gripped the talons of one hand in the other.

Shepard walked over and held out her hand. “Come on, let me see them.”

Garrus cleared his throat and shook his head. “Shepard, I don’t think we know one another well enough for that. Besides, I didn’t think humans were into ankles.”

She chuckled and tilted her head a little. “Ankles, huh?” She waved her fingers toward her palm. “Come on, C-Sec, your turn to drop the shields.” The rumble he sent through his second larynx made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end, but he pulled off his glove and held out his hand.

“Ow, sweet baby Jesus, C-Sec, that looks painful.” She took his hand in hers, gently feeling around the knuckles he’d barked almost down to the bone. “Looks like it’s just the meat, but ow.”

“I’m fine,” he insisted pulling his hand back.

“Garrus ‘C-Sec’ Vakarian, sit down.” She pointed to the crate next to the tool cart. “Sorry, don’t know if turians have middle names. The mom voice works best if there’s a middle name involved.”

“Human mothers do that too?” Garrus asked, plunking down on the crate, surrendering his hand without a fight.

“All mothers do that,” Wrex sighed and dropped his voice an octave. “Urdnot Alnar Golc Wrex, this is the third brand new shotgun you’ve broken this year. They are not clubs!”

The gunnery chief turned away from her rifles and cocked a hip, her arms crossed to match the petulant grimace on her face. “Ashley Madeline Williams, proper young ladies don’t climb trees before church. Get in here and wash those knees.”

Shepard knelt and splashed water over Garrus’s knuckles before blotting them on a clean rag, then smearing on a little medi-gel and a couple of cling bandages. Leaning back, she shot a sly grin across the cargo bay. “You two were troublemakers. I can’t believe it. I, of course, was the ideal child. Never did anything to make my mother holler at me.”

Laughter echoed.

“What? It’s true. I was the perfect child.” Shepard felt her face heat and turned to putting away the
first aid materials.

“What’s everyone laughing about?” Tali’Zorah asked, walking up the ramp from engineering. Shepard stood. “Hey, Tali. How are things in the mysterious room with the engines?”

Garrus arched both browplates and flicked his mandibles at Shepard. “You’re a pretend engineer, aren’t you?”

She kicked his foot.

“This ship is amazing, Shepard, and Engineer Adams has been so nice to me. I’m learning so much.” The quarian bounced over to the Mako. “What’s everyone doing?”

“Comparing mommy issues,” Ashley said. “It seems we all have the experience of our mothers using our full names when they’re angry.”

“Tali’Zorah nar Rayya,” the quarian yelled in a firm voice. “If the hygiene department condemns your room again, you can go sleep in recycling.” She sighed. “Mother died a few years ago, and you all know about my father. I ran away from home when I was five; he grounded me for a quarter cycle. Do I get to ground him when we find him?”

A thoughtful frown traced wrinkles across Shepard’s brow. “You lived on a ship. How did you run away?”

Tali chuckled and sat on the crate next to Garrus. “The Rayya is a very large ship, Shepard. It’s one of the flotilla’s three liveships. I hid in one of the aeroponic bays. Of course, he worked so much that I never spent any time actually grounded.”

“Well, I guess we all have our share of daddy issues as well,” Shepard said, turning back to her work.

“Betting yours didn’t lure you to a clan gathering and then try to kill you, Shepard.” Wrex grumbled.

Shepard prepared to remove the back axle. “I hope you tried to kill him right back. You can’t tolerate that sort of behaviour from relatives.”

Wrex narrowed one red eye, glaring at her for a moment, then laughed. “Heh, yeah, family. Bastards.”

“So?” Tali asked. “What did you do?”

“Stabbed him right through both hearts and left his corpse to rot.”

“I would have been grounded for life,” Tali said, sounding entirely and hilariously serious.

“I was few hundred cycles older than you are,” Wrex replied, then spun to leer at Ashley. “What about you, Pinky? Any daddy issues?”

Ashley shook her head. “No, my dad was a great father. Died a couple of years back. In my family, it was bitter general grandfather issues.” She stopped dead, slamming up barriers over her expression before spinning around and attacking on her rifle.

“General Williams?” Garrus asked. “Shanxi General Williams?” The turian whistled a little.
“I’m surprised you know about him, Vakarian.” Ashley bulwarked her spine and didn’t turn.

The turian snapped his back straight and arched his neck. When he spoke, his voice came out formal and scolding. “A good turian knows his history, Garrus. If a male doesn’t know where he comes from, he’ll never know where he is going.” Garrus pulled on his glove and got up, returning to beating on the Mako’s front end.

“Your grandfather surrendered the garrison at Shanxi?” Shepard asked, looking out. She whistled to match Garrus’s. “That’s a tough break for you and your dad, even though your grandfather had no choice. His people were dying. At least as prisoners, they had a chance.”

“Granddad never really got past being drummed out and the family getting blacklisted.” Ashley shook her head. “Whatever, it doesn’t matter.”

Shepard nodded and climbed out far enough to crouch and meet the Marine’s eyes. “You’re right, Williams. On this ship, it doesn’t matter.”

A tight smile cracked the chief’s face a little. “Thanks, ma’am. I appreciate that.”

“Everybody deserves a chance to prove him or herself on their own merit.” Shepard climbed back underneath the tank.

“Got daddy issues, Shepard?” Ashley asked, obviously trying to lighten the mood. “Or you going with the perfect child defense again?”

Shepard kept working, clanging hard enough to mask her words. “My father was a good man who died inciting the prisoners to resist the batarian slavers.” A smile softened her words, then she shrugged. “So, yeah, probably a few issues here and there.”

Williams gave her a more genuine smile and nodded before turning back to her work in earnest.

Just when inevitable defeat loomed, Shepard wrestled the last rear brake mount free. Giving a whoop of victory, she climbed out and grabbed a large jack to slip under the axle.

“Where did you learn how to take Makos apart and rebuild them?” Garrus appeared at her shoulder to help her maneuver the large jack into place. “The Alliance?”

Shepard hit the control, raising the cylinder to where it began lifting the tank, then backed it down a touch. “My father was a sort of Jack-of-all-trades, an odd-job guy. He never really knew what to do with his life, so he just followed his passions, learning about anything that caught his fancy. Machines were one of them.” She got down on her back and scooted underneath. Loosening bolts a bit at a time, she kept the axle even on the jack.

“Yeah, so I’ve been underneath machines, covered in grease, pretty much my whole life.” She shrugged. “Unlike Kryik’s more tawdry guess at how I paid for my habit, I spent my late teens stripping jacked cars.” Grinning at the expression of surprise on his face, she nodded. “It’s true. That’s how I met up with Anderson again, actually. The people I worked for grabbed a freight truck loaded down with brand new shuttles headed for Alliance headquarters in Vancouver. When I was arrested along with the rest of them, he grabbed me, took me out of the system.”

She looked out. “You want to do the bolts on the other side? Don’t really want this thing tipping off the jack and landing on me.”

Between them, they finished removing the axle and wheeled it out.
“You really are freakishly strong,” Garrus said as she lifted one end of the trashed part and they dumped it into the recycling.

She wiped her greasy hands on the front of her overalls. “Thanks. I --”

“Captain Shepard?” Joker called over the intercom.

“Yeah, here, Joker. What’s up?” She grabbed a rag out of the tool chest and wiped off more of the grease.

“Captain Anderson on the comms, ma’am.”

“On my way, Joker, thanks.” She cocked an eyebrow. “Speak of the devil.” She looked into the reflective trim on the tool chest, searching for smudges of grease on her face.

Garrus grabbed her shoulders, then the rag and wiped at a couple spots on her face. “There, semi-presentable.”

She laughed. “At least you didn’t lick it, Mom.” She strode to the elevator. “I’ll be back.”

Garrus pulled his head back, his mandibles dropping. “Mom? Do human mothers do that licking and wiping your face thing too?”

“All mothers do that,” Wrex sighed.

“Quarian mothers don’t. Guess the bubbles and suits have an advantage after all,” Tali said happily. “See you all later.” Flipping her delicate hand in a friendly wave, she trotted back down to engineering.

Shepard nodded and grinned as she stepped inside. She hit the control and met Garrus’s eyes, tilting her head in a little, half shrug. “Guess we’re all more alike than we thought, huh?”

Shepard’s grin stayed with her until she reached the comm room, then widened as she activated the center terminal and a holographic image of her mentor and oldest friend appeared. “Anderson, it’s great to see you. How are you doing?”

The gruff officer grumbled something under his breath, then nodded and shifted to cross his arms. He always tried for formality to start, but then went to mobile and defensive once she saw him remember that formal meant nothing to Shepard. At last he let out a strong, hard sigh, the corner of his mouth lifting in a grudging smile. “Shepard.”

“How’s life treating you?” she asked, bracing herself for the reply.

“Better than your life would be if you worked with Udina fourteen hours a day.”

She chuckled. “If I worked with Udina for fourteen hours, C-Sec would be hauling one of us away for murder about hour three.” She did her best to look innocent and uninterested. “Speaking of, how did that whole Avina episode work out?”

“If I’d have been able to get my hands around your neck, Shepard . . . . Udina paced back and forth all day, trying to keep people away from it, but of course, the Keeper just kept working and once people realized what the Avina display was saying, they’d run in just close enough to trigger it then take off. Udina tried to shoo it away, it ended up self-destructing, but another one replaced it within five minutes.”
Shepard frowned. “Aww, the poor little Keeper.”

Anderson grumbled. “Glad to see your priorities are intact, as always, Shepard.” He shook his head. “We can argue that over when you get back to the Citadel, and that should be sooner rather than later. The council and Udina are beginning to ask if you and Nihlus aren’t the rogue agents.”

Shepard shook her head. “If the council’s dirty, unless we have irrefutable proof, we’ll just end up with kill orders on our heads, Anderson. We’ll be back when we know what Saren is doing. We got information from that Han’Gerrel that Rael’Zorah is trailing Saren. We’re on our way back to Eden Prime to catch up with him.”

He straightened, going formal again. “That’s why I’m contacting you, Shepard. I . . .” He paused and cleared his throat. “. . . happened upon a distress call from the Exogeni colony on Feros. It was garbled and jammed almost instantly, but it mentioned geth.”

Shepard reached up to her radio. “Pressly, get us underway for Feros, maximum possible speed. Full stealth.” When he confirmed her order, Shepard nodded to Anderson. “How long ago did you receive the call, sir? We’re about eight or nine hours out.”

“About fifteen seconds before I called you, Captain. I intercepted it before Udina saw it, so you’ll have a little lead time. I’m sending you all the information I have on the colony. Good luck, Shepard.”

She nodded, her heart thumping fast and hard. “Thank you, sir. I just hope we get there in time to do something, find something.” She gave him a crisp salute. “Talk to you soon, Anderson.”

He saluted and the image disappeared.

She stared at the space for a second before she lifted her fingers to her ear. “Kryik, we’ve got a lead. Meet me in my quarters.”
“Captain Shepard is ashore. XO Pressly has the ship.”

Shepard rolled her eyes at the VI’s statement of the obvious. On a ship the size of a large bus with a crew of just over fifty, everyone aboard knew when she was in the washroom, let alone off the ship. “Thank you, artificially human-inflected computer program.”

Ashley looked over at her, turning a little as they made their way down the docking tube. “You have something against VI’s, Captain?”

Shepard shook her head. “I have something against lies. That voice they tried to make sound human is a lie. The VI’s made to imitate famous people are the ultimate.” She shrugged Roger into her hands, letting him sit easy at low rest. “Creepy bastards.”

“So, the geth? AIs?” Williams pulled her assault rifle off her back as they stepped onto the dock.

“They aren’t lies, just a different sort of people. As long as they’re just doing their thing and aren’t killing people, I take no issue with them. It’s the getting uppity and trying to commit genocide I’m not a fan of, and that aversion . . . does not . . . limit itself to . . . geth.” She stopped dead in her tracks, Garrus running up her heel. She cocked her head, straining to hear.

“Ma’am?” Ash went on the alert, moving to watch their flank. Liara moved up on Shepard's other side, her pistol trembling a little as it lifted into Shepard's peripheral vision.

“Easy now, Dr. T'Soni. Keep a cool head.” Shepard cocked her head, a low, chittering sound echoing off the cement. "I thought I heard . . . geth!” Shepard sprinted down the docking bay, running parallel to the Normandy. Flashlight heads moved at the end of the space. As she neared the corner, she snapped off the safety and changed her ammo to tungsten rounds. A figure raced around the corner, slipping a little as he turned and came face to face with her gun. Identifying him as human, she grabbed him and tossed him behind her, slamming her back into the concrete pile at the corner.

After sucking in a couple of quick breaths to let the adrenaline settle, she leaned out, shooting in three round bursts. She activated her drone behind the mass of geth as Garrus darted across the open space, taking cover behind a pile on the other wall.

“Normandy, send someone out to grab a civilian in the line of fire. Should be near the docking tube,” Shepard barked into her radio, not waiting for an answer.

“Williams, take my position, I’m moving up.” She peeked out, yanking her head back as plasma rounds pelted her position. “C-Sec, as soon as I get in position and can give you some cover, move up. Doc, take his position.” She didn’t wait for them to respond, allowing their ‘yes, ma’ams’ to wash over her as she overloaded the most forward trooper, leaving Garrus to finish it off as it danced. Racing forward, she took a burst of incoming rounds, her shields sizzling in an impressive...
light show.

Sliding into cover behind another pile, she respawned her drone, setting it in behind the geth squad. Hopefully, it would distract a couple. Roger tore down the shields on the closest, then as she ducked back, Garrus swung out and opened fire.

“Moving up,” Garrus called. “Heads up on your right.”

“Roger that.” Shepard leaned out, peppering the geth with rounds to keep most of them pinned while Garrus moved up. Her shields went down before she could cover him the whole way, but then Ash and the doc opened fire.

One of the green destroyers barrelled around the corner, racing for the turian. Shepard overloaded it, but it didn’t even flinch as she tore down its shields.

“Shit, C-Sec, look out! It’s one of the suicidal green ones. Ladies, cover him.” All three opened fire on the destroyer, taking it down just as Garrus dove to his right, sliding into cover on his ass. Shepard leaned out, taking down a rocket trooper. “You okay there, big guy?”

“Yeah.” He scrambled up and pressed his back to the concrete.

“Another one, ma’am,” Williams yelled, pulling Shepard’s attention back to the end of the corridor. Sure enough, a massive wall of green careened toward them.

Shepard and Garrus overloaded it in unison, and its head erupted in a spray of white fluid as Williams opened fire.

“Shepard, team two is entering the Exogeni building now. No sign of enemy troops,” Nihlus’s calm, rich voice spoke in her ear, dropping her heart rate despite the fact that yet another of the destroyers pelted down the corridor at them.

“Roger that, team two. Meeting heavy resistance, here.” She overloaded the machine, but it didn’t go down. Instead, it turned, aiming for her. She jumped to the side, backing up, still firing, Roger pulled in tight against her side.

A quick glance down the corridor told Shepard they were screwed. She gritted her teeth against the order she most hated to give. “Doc, Williams, retreat to the next position back.”

“Another one,” Garrus called, his voice almost manic with the battle high.

Shepard staggered back as the destroyer cut through her shields with a plasma blast from his shotgun, but her armor dispelled the energy. She overloaded the thing despite the close range, regretting it as her own shields exploded in sparks and shivers of electricity. “That’s the second time I’ve done that in a week,” she groaned, stepping over the downed geth to shoot Garrus’s dance partner in the back of its head.

Grabbing the turian out of the corner, she pushed him behind her. “Retreat back, C-Sec.” She looked up at the destroyer as it turned to face her and grinned. “Hi there. How the hell are yah?”

Shoving Roger’s muzzle into the center seam of the being’s chest plate, she hammered at the trigger, praying the geth went down before her gun overheated. Another one hurtled across the open area and turned to charge them. “How many of you fuckers are there?”

She twisted, using the first destroyer as cover. The second one slammed into it, the transferred energy driving the air out of her lungs as her front side smacked into her insides. A heartbeat later,
her insides crashed into her backside, launching her through the air like a 155cm missile. Ass first, she smacked into the ground and slid until she hit something solid. Hands lifted her onto her feet.

Once all her giblets settled back where they belonged, she tossed a grin over her shoulder. “Thanks, C-Sec, you make good brakes.” She overloaded the still-functional geth that struggled to get up off the floor, and it let out that terrible screeching, bad-extranet sound as it died. “Sweet baby Jesus,” Shepard gasped when no further geth showed at the end. “How many was that? A gigajillion?”

“I think the technical term is bazillion, ma’am,” Ash replied, her smile weary.

Settling Roger in low ready, Shepard winked at the chief and crept forward. The troopers had pulled back. No bodies. “Come on, I have a really bad feeling about this.”

Shepard went through the door and ducked out. No geth. Complete silence, other than the wind whistling through the structure. She frowned. “I’m moving up. C-Sec, give me three metres and watch my flank.” Creeping forward, knees bent to keep her profile low, Shepard trotted down the short corridor.

“Stairs up,” she called back. “Keep sharp.”

“They delayed us with the destroyers while they retreated, didn’t they?” Garrus whispered.

Shepard answered with a sharp nod of her head. That was her guess. Two flights up and around a corner, she saw sky above what looked like a freighter parked on the roof. No friendlies or geth in sight. Moving up, she took cover at the last open doorway, sweeping the area the best she could. The colonists had set up defenses. A few bodies lay here and there, but not nearly as many as Shepard would have expected.

Moving out onto the roof, following a narrow path between a wall of rubble and some pipes, Shepard looked up, the blood dropping out of her heart as the organ turned into a frozen lump in her chest. “Oh, we are so f*cked.” She ran out a few metres, ducking from cover to cover, stopping just short of the freighter that had been lifted a couple metres off the roof.

“Spirits,” Garrus said, his voice a thready hiss. “We’re surrounded. How many are there?”

“Too many,” Shepard replied, casting a glance toward the sky and the geth ships hanging in the air above the edge of the roof. Climbing the short set of stairs, she stood on her tiptoes to look inside the freighter’s open door. About ten feet down the corridor, a demolition charge counted down nine minutes. Glancing around what portion of the rooftop she could see, she spotted at least another half dozen. Too many to try to disarm, and she couldn’t know if they’d find them all. Evacuation.

“Shepard!” Garrus pointed toward movement at the other end of the freighter. A small squad of geth marched smartly, arrayed around a familiar figure. The pieces of a very ugly puzzle came together. Delaying action at the dock, Saren casually walking away from demo charges on a countdown, and thirty or so geth ships aimed at the rooftop.

“Oh, shit.” She grabbed Ashley and Liara, shoving them into cover and looked around. They needed a plan and fast. A herd of colonists milled near the back of the vehicle, looking like lost cattle. “Okay, Williams, Doc, go round up the colonists, fast. We have just over eight minutes before this place blows to hell.” She didn’t wait to watch them, looking back to the sky. “If that.”

“Saren!” Garrus shouted.
The small party at the other end of the freighter stopped. Saren turned, his mandibles flaring as those horrible, glowing mechanical eyes met Shepard’s, holding her in a breathless stare. After a couple of heartbeats, he winked, slow and exaggerated, then turned and continued on.

“Saren!” Garrus yelled again, but Shepard kept him from charging after the Spectre by grabbing the yoke of his armour.

“Whatsoever he was after, he has it.” She pointed up at the sky. “He’s about to blow away the evidence. We need to get the colonists and our own asses out of here.”

“We have to stop him.” Garrus insisted.

“He’s bringing this place down, Garrus. We’ve got to help Williams and the doc get the colonists to safety.” She grabbed his wrist and tugged, but he pulled toward the freighter.

“Ma’am,” Ashley radioed in. “Thirty-two colonists still alive. They’re acting strange, like they’re hypnotised or something. We’ll never get them to the Normandy. There is a set of stairs here that goes down into the building. We could try to take them down through the structure. Maybe if we get far enough down, into basements or something . . . .”

“Shepard! Why are we still talking? Saren is getting away.” Garrus threw himself against Shepard’s arm, but summoning every ounce of her large mama and possible krogan lineage, she held him. He slammed into her again. “Shepard.”

“Our priority is the colonists, Garrus, so shut it.” She ran the direction Saren had gone, staying under the freighter, yanking the turian behind her. “Our only chance is to get down far enough before this place collapses around our heads.”

“We’ll lose our chance to find out what’s going on,” Garrus yelled, pulling at her again.

“Normandy, this place is about to come down. Pull back, full stealth, and wait for the second team. We’re going to try to get the colonists clear,” she said, shouting a little over the wind.

“Roger that, Shepard. Saren?” Joker asked.

“About thirty metres ahead of me, but it’s too . . . .” Shepard saw the colonists descending into the stairwell, organized and calm. At least Williams and the doc had their task well in hand.

As Shepard rounded the back end of the freighter, Saren disappeared behind a wall of crates, headed toward the interior of the structure. She ran up a short set of stairs to see if he knew something she didn’t about a way out. Garrus flew past her, furious and in full pursuit.

“Dammit, C-Sec.” She took two steps after him then the geth ships opened fire. Rounds blasted into the roof, throwing her backwards into a metal railing. Ribs gave way and agony exploded from her throat, silenced by the vacuum in her lungs.

For a few, impossibly long moments, her back wrapped around the pole, bones and tendons flexing to their breaking point. Then, like a bow, she reached maximum tension and snapped back, rebounding toward the explosion a little before the concrete rooftop came up to meet her face. The meaty, copper taste of blood flooded her mouth, but she felt no pain.

Get up, Shepard! She ignored her own order. Damn, getting insubordinate with my inner CO. A bad sign.

Must be hurt. Bad.
That one worked and she gasped, sucking in the burning air, ash, and smoke. Reaching over, she hit her medi-gel twice, then started trying to peel herself off the concrete.

“Shepard!” Garrus scrambled up a few metres away. She stared, transfixed, at the long, white marks his talons carved in the concrete. He grabbed her under the arm and tried to haul her up.

“Shepard!” Garrus yelled. “Get up!” He tugged at her arm.

Concrete exploded, shrapnel ringing musically off her armour as it pounded into her. Then Garrus grabbed her other arm and picked her up, setting her on her feet. Once her feet hit the ground, Shepard gave herself a shake. The cooling, numbing slither of medi-gel eased its way through her, and the fog lifted.

“She Shepard, you okay?”

Shepard grabbed Garrus by the yoke. “Let’s go. Down the stairs.” She gave him a push toward the long slide of debris and the staircase that disappeared into darkness. It opened like a mouth, hungry and deadly. She glanced toward where Saren disappeared through a door at the far end of the roof. It had to be a way out, and one least likely to have things exploding, but the colonists were already below.

“It’s thirty colonists!” Garrus yelled, moving to follow Saren. “You’d sacrifice the whole galaxy for thirty colonists?”

“And if we chase Saren and get killed, then what? Pick your battles, C-Sec, and obey goddamned orders! That’s all you’ve got to do right now. Obey goddamned orders.” She started after Ash again, pushing him ahead of her.

He stared at her for a second, then twisted from her grip and bolted after Saren.

“Goddamn it, C-Sec.” She limped after him, but with his long legs and her battered ribs, he drew ahead of her steadily. She hobbled back up the stairs and took cover along a heavy wall, staying out of sight and hopefully out of the bombardment. If she was lucky, four minutes remained on the demo charges.

“Williams, where are you?” she called as she hurried along the wall.

“Already four floors down. Once the geth opened fire, the colonists became very willing to move fast. Where are you, ma’am?”

“Vakarian took off after Saren.” Shepard cursed. “I swear, if I have to chase another goddamned turian across another goddamned human colony, I am going to rip their legs off and beat them to death with the wet ends!” Running flat-footed to avoid as much impact as she could, she passed another spot where the colonists tried to hold the geth off, then through a door, down a short hall and up stairs. “See if you can find a way out, Williams. Hopefully, we’ll catch up.”

“Vakarian, where are you?” she called into her radio, taking cover, then swinging around a couple of corners. A corridor led past an elevator, but the trembling of the building under her feet didn’t inspire her to try that. She ran past.

Racing up another short flight of stairs, Shepard hit the far wall, pressing her back against it. She eased her way around a curved corner, trading Roger for Ingrid. A quick glance revealed that she had no cover from an entire squad of geth on elevated cover.
“Shepard,” Saren’s smooth voice called. “How thoughtful of you to make it so easy to clear up all traces of my operation.”

*Fuck.*

“Yeah, I’m considerate that way. Won most helpful at Camp Starshine three years in a row.” She ducked out again, gaze darting to take in enemy positions.

“Might as well come on out, Shepard,” Saren called. “You’re outnumbered.”

“Yeah, that’s okay. Thanks though.” Shepard closed her eyes, visualizing the field, building a picture of where Garrus lay face down on the ground, the Spectre standing over him, the troopers on either side, the snipers further back, two drones buzzing around, and the destroyer working its way toward her right flank. Garrus lying face down, not moving.

She shook off the fear, letting it settle into a low boil. He wouldn’t be there at all if he hadn’t gone cowboy.

*Find the damned weak spots, come on, Shepard. You’ve got only a few shots and maybe two minutes before that freighter goes up. Don’t bother with Saren; he’ll be too well shielded for Ingrid.*

She called up her overload, hit her medi-gel again, took a deep breath, then leaned out. The overload took out the geth on Saren’s right, the one on the left falling to Ingrid. Bolting forward, she reloaded, crouching low as she ran up the stairs, spawning her drone to deal with its counterparts.

At the top of the raised section, she took cover behind a chunk of concrete.

*You’ve got maybe twenty seconds before the destroyer charges in from the right.*

“Vakarian? You alive out there?” She popped up, waited for their lasers to give away the sniper positions, then put a bullet through the first one’s head. Back down.

*Why isn’t Saren firing? Focus, damn it. Ten seconds to being crushed; a minute and a half to being blown to shit.*

She reloaded. Back up. The destroyer’s shotgun tore down half her shields and staggered her, but then the last sniper gave itself away and went down.

“Vakarian?” God, she hoped Saren needed a shield.

“Yeah. I’m alive.”

“You’re surrounded, Shepard. Come out, and I’ll end it quickly for both of you.”

Shepard poised, staying low and waited for the destroyer to charge. “This is going to hurt like a bitch,” she whispered, bracing herself for the pain. When the geth charged, she somersaulted past its legs and down the stairs, ribs grinding. She scrambled up, biting down on her tongue to hold in an agonized scream that would give away her position, and ran down the length of the room.

When she ran up the stairs behind Saren, he had Garrus up on his feet, held between them as a shield. He bowed his head a touch. “You’re clever. I have to give you that, Shepard, but you can’t defeat this enemy.”
“It’s you and a destroyer,” Shepard said, grinding the words out between her teeth.

“I don’t mean me, Shepard. Oh, I’ll kill you, but what’s coming up hard behind me . . . .” The Spectre shuddered. “Ask yourself why a Spectre and the council would be taking the actions we are.”

“You’re trying to bring the Reapers back. I don’t think sanity or reason applies.” Shepard overloaded the destroyer, then put a bullet in it, working her way around to Saren’s left, closing on him. She reloaded, her inner alarm screaming that nine minutes was up. Why wasn’t he firing?

The Spectre lunged toward her, a tiger backed into a corner. “There’s no victory here, Shepard.”

She frowned: his body language screamed fear, not rage.

The building heaved as the charges in the freighter detonated. Garrus twisted, slamming his shoulder into Saren’s belly, bearing him to the floor. Shepard threw herself down, using more dead weight than grappling tactics to help as her frantic fingers rifled through her hip pack, searching for the last of her squad trackers.

Saren threw them off, but Shepard managed to cling to him long enough to slap the back of his armour. As she hit the floor, a shadow blotted out the light coming through the ceiling. For a moment, Shepard’s hope dismissed it as a cloud passing over the sun, but then half metre hail stones made of metal and circuitry poured through, unfolding into a torrent of plasma blasts.

Survival instinct, most notably flight, kicked in, and Shepard jumped up, grabbing Garrus by the fringe. His howl of pain sent a twinge of guilt and a much larger dose of satisfaction tingling up her arms. When he caught up and ran beside her, she let him go. Rounds peppered their shields, but then they rounded the corner and raced down the corridor, headed back for the lift.

“Such a big mistake!” she screamed, throwing Garrus in first. “Death trap. This thing is a death trap.” She hit the down control as massive chunks of concrete and reinforcing metal tumbled down, tearing apart walls and floors as they crashed through.

Pressing herself against the wall, Shepard covered her head with her arms and glared at Garrus. “I hate you a lot right now.”

“Team One,” Nihlus yelled in her ear, “we just saw a massive explosion. What’s going on over there?”

“Saren is trying to bury evidence of something under the rubble of this building. Right now, we’re mostly trying to not end up dead. I’ll get back to you, Nihlus,” Shepard called back. The lift ground to a halt, tilted enough for Shepard to know it hadn’t reached its destination.

“Hey, jackass, help me pry the doors open,” she barked at Garrus, opening her omnitool to override the locks. A sharp click let her know she’d been successful, and they shoved talons and fingers into the space. She stuck her head out. “We’re between floors.” She shoved the doors apart and knelt on the edge. “Lower me. My ribs are broken. I can’t jump. Or would you rather leap over me and see if you can get back up there and catch Saren?”

Garrus grumbled, but nodded and got down on one knee. “This is still going to hurt.”

She shot him a glare of death and held up her hands. “Little late to worry about that. I’m not staying here. I have to get out alive, so I can dedicate myself to making you regret going cowboy on me for the rest of your life.” She grabbed his wrists, a hoarse, guttural scream forcing itself between her clenched teeth as the edge of the elevator bit into her ribs like shark jaws.
When he moved to pull her back up, she shook her head. “Just keep going. Fuck.” Shepard knew what ancient criminals suffered when being quartered as Garrus lowered her. “I think you’re pulling my arms off.” A massive chorus of cracks, pops, and snaps rolled from her neck down to her feet. Once it passed, Shepard found she could draw a breath without feeling as though a Mako was parked on her chest, letting it out accompanied by a faint sigh.

When her feet hit the floor, she let go and moved out of Garrus’s way. She reached up to open a channel to Ashley. “Williams, you guys still there?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ashley’s voice came through, barely audible over the ambient chaos, “we found a lift. The skyway was marked on it, so we went to that level. There are maintenance tunnels along the length of the skyway. I scouted ahead. They’re collapsed now and again, but with the geth concentrating on the colony, we might be able to get these people clear.” The chief paused as crashing and screaming rose to a crescendo around her. “Should we chance it, ma’am?”

“Those people are your responsibility, Williams. You have eyes on. What’s your gut telling you?” Shepard replied, gasping between words.

“It’s telling me that it’s our best shot to get these people out alive, ma’am. The geth don’t seem to care about the Exogeni building.”

“Then go. I’ll contact the second team, have them come through from the other end and help escort your people through. Good luck, Chief.”

“I won’t let you down, ma’am.”

Shepard stopped and leaned against the wall, panting. “I know you won’t, Chief.”

“And you and Vakarian, ma’am?”

“Don’t worry about us, we’re on our way down. We’ll radio in when we get clear.” She watched Garrus as he activated his omnitool, calling up a map of the structure.

“Holy mother of god,” Ashley yelled into the radio. “Shepard, it’s the dreadnaught from Eden Prime. No! Not that way! Everyone, run. Doc, get them moving into the skyway tunnels. Move! Move! Move!”

“What’s going on, Williams?” Shepard started hobbling east.

“It opened fire on the colony, ma’am. A gigantic laser. Can you hear it?”

She did, but not from the radio. A dragon as massive and terrible as the sun tore into the building, claws of red flame shredding concrete and steel as if it amounted to no more than cloud. Fury bellowed down through the hollow ruins, a thunderous buzzing that promised death had come for them all.
Chapter Summary

Running down, down . . . wait . . . too far down.

“It’s carving up the colony. You’ve got to get out of there, ma’am,” Williams shouted over the dragon’s roar.

Through the radio, Shepard heard the chief running, Liara calling out encouragement, people screaming.

“We will, you just get those people to the second team. Shepard out.” She turned to find Garrus.

“Aye, aye, ma’am.”

The dragon tore through the ceiling five stories above, its claws and fiery breath transforming into a massive red laser, no less terrifying for shedding the superstitious in favour of reality. The dreadnought’s weapon vapourized everything it touched, debris the size of skycars raining down around its periphery. Whatever Saren wanted destroyed, he wanted to make sure there wouldn’t be enough left to fill an espresso cup. The laser cut a slow swath through the center of the building, but didn’t move into the outer sections, at least not yet.

*Our one chance to get the hell out of here with our skins intact.*

“C-Sec!” The ends of Shepard’s hair began to curl in the weapon’s intense heat. She threw her arm up to shield her face and called to Garrus. “Prothean Skyway is east. Williams found maintenance tunnels the colonists are using to get to the Exogeni building.”

He pointed, blessedly away from the laser.

Shepard wrapped her arms around her middle and set out in a quick, flat-footed run down a hundred-metre-long corridor to another set of stairs heading down. “Hopefully we can find the same tunnels Williams did. I’d like to get the hell out of this building before we become permanent additions.”

At the end of the corridor, Shepard stopped at the top of a long bank of stairs, her ribs counting each step. Gritting her teeth, she half hopped, half fell down the first, a thin shriek bullying its way out between her lips. After three stairs and three screams, Garrus just scooped her up with an arm under her backside and started down.

“Great,” she grumbled to disguise a heavy groan of pain, wincing at the chorus singing along her ribs at his manhandling. “Because it’s so damned dignified, once again we end up with the captain being carried like a ten-year-old by the freakishly huge, freakishly overprotective squad member. Without so much as a ‘Ma’am, do you mind if . . .?’” She cuffed him, hating the fact that with her ribs in the shape they were in, it remained the fastest option.

“You’re only hurt because of me,” Garrus said, his voice soft and contrite. “If I’d obeyed your orders instead of being an idiot hot-head, we’d have been inside when the geth opened fire.”
“Well, it’s better to see the light later rather than never, Brother C-Sec. Praise be to the Enkindlers for your enlightenment.” She cuffed him again. “But next time ask. I’m a captain, not a helpless waif or a ten-year-old.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am. Understood. You’re just freakishly tiny, not a helpless, ten-year-old waif, ma’am.”

Despite still being pissed off at him, a half-snort, half-chuckle escaped her. She snapped her teeth closed on it like a claw trap. Sparky had been right about the crew following the captain. Even staring death in the big, fiery laser, having disobeyed a direct order, Vakarian pulled out the smartass. Damn, she supposed that made the brass right too. “It’ll be a cold day in hell we set you loose on a decent crew, Shepard,” she muttered under her breath. “Yes, sir, Admiral Mikhailovich, sir. Bastard.”

Garrus quirked a brow plate at her. “You talking to yourself, Shepard?”

“Shut it, C-Sec.”

Garrus ran, taking the stairs two at a time, descending rapidly down through more than a hundred floors. Shepard let him go, impressed by his stamina. If she’d been on her feet, they’d have made it down no more than five or six levels. He’d make a hell of a squad member if she could beat the obstinate streak into line.

Every ten floors, they reached a corridor that led them another hundred metres east then down again. They lost the laser about fifty floors down as it stayed to the center of the structure, concentrating on destroying not just the colony, but whatever lay at its heart. A hundred floors down, however, the staircases ended and the corridors directed them back to the center of the building. A series of ramps wound down around a huge, empty center space like the levels in a parking garage.

“Do you think we’ve reached ground level?” Garrus asked, setting Shepard down.

She shook her head and looked down over the side of the balcony at the huge, gallery sort of space. “No clue, but I doubt it. I think we missed the Skyway though. It wasn’t this far down.” She started hobbling downhill while Garrus caught his breath. “I think this is some sort of shopping district. Look at the large window and door gaps, the walls cut into shelves.” Her chuckle cut through a mouthful of pain and exhaustion.

“We’re in a fifty thousand year old shopping mall, C-Sec. I guess nothing changes. All of us just doing the same stupid shit over and over.” She wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. “Dying in a shopping mall is about as close to hell as it gets.”

Three ramps later she found a large medical locker. Overriding the lock, she prayed to find a nice big fat syringe of body-numbing, mind-altering, glorious drugs. She found a canvas bag full of Phoenix armour.

“Yeah, Ash is the only one willing to wear that ugly, pink crap.” She dumped out the bag, kicking the god-awful armour over the edge. “Well, unless I can convince Wrex, C-Sec, and Sparky to put on sets for this year’s christmas card photo.”

She peered up over the edge. “Hey, C-Sec, get your assless down here. I can’t bend over to get to the good stuff at the bottom of this medical locker.”

“Find anything useful?” Garrus asked, jogging down the ramp. “Painkillers? Water?” He dove in,
stuffing items into the canvas bag. “Water, ration bars, no dextro ones though, painkillers, medi-gel, antibiotics.” He trailed off for a second, then straightened. “Casting tape.”

“Glory hallelujah, Brother C-Sec. Glory hallelujah.” She kissed the package of tape when he passed it to her along with a bottle of water. “Here, soak the tape.” She ripped open two packages and passed them back, then started stripping off her armour above the waist. Finally, she undid her uniform and eased her way out of it.

“Should we be doing this here?” he asked, glancing up.

Shepard waggled her head a little, even that much movement setting up a chain reaction. “I'll be able to move a lot faster with my ribs taped.” She laid her uniform over the locker but couldn’t reach the clasp on her bra. “You’ll need to undo this.”

He set the dripping tape down. “We’re going to need to use that immediately.”

“Then stop yakking, C-Sec, and get my bra off already.”

“Always the romantic,” he grumbled, fumbling with the catches. “I think I need a degree to get this off. Why do you have to strap them up anyway?” After another second, he got it and slipped the bra off her shoulders.

“Mother nature abhors flopping.” Shepard folded her shoulders forward, muscle memory becoming muscle regret within a half screech, and she left it to Garrus to finish removing the bra.

He picked up the first roll of tape, picking at the end until it came loose. “You need a good, solid carapace. No flopping involved.”

“I’ll let evolution know that’s your vote.” Shepard lifted her elbows off to the side and held her breasts out of the way. “Wrap me from right beneath my breasts to an inch above my navel.” She shivered as the tape went on, freezing cold and wet, but it quickly heated as it began to set. “Use both rolls.” She pressed her lips down tight on a smile, not willing to let the thaw show. “Bending isn’t as important right now as being able to move without wanting to kill you.”

“Is there any point in apologizing?” he asked, getting down on one knee, his long arms easily wrapping around her, rolling out the tape, then smoothing it. “Or will you beat me just as long regardless?” He glanced up, meeting her eyes for a quarter-second.

She let out a shallow breath. Might as well deal with the issue and put it to bed. “I don’t intend to beat you at all. You have a choice. Obey orders and stay on the ship, or disobey them and go back to C-Sec.” She glanced up and over her shoulder as the roar and crashing started getting louder again. “Damn, that thing is just tearing through the building.”

“There.” He stood and grabbed her uniform, helping her back into it. “You can set while we move.” Before helping her into her armour, he dug into the bag, coming out with a bottle and a syringe. “I apologize in advance if this painkiller means you have to detox when we get back to the Normandy.” He slapped the bottle into the syringe.

She grunted and tilted her head. “Yeah, whatever, shoot me up already. That damned laser is almost through.” The cool, slithering, gut-tingling relief spread through her like a hug as she fastened her armour back into place. “Oh yeah, C-Sec, this is the good shit. Narcotic city.” She checked the locker, then started back downhill, the cast already set. “Narcotic-palooza, baby.”

“Where to?” Garrus asked.
“Down, Brother C-Sec. Down.” Shepard took off, swearing her enduring love to the makers of narcotic painkillers as two, then three levels passed and her ribs calmed to a dull roar.

On the fourth level, she stopped dead, making them squawk. “What the hell?”

What looked like desiccated corpses lay everywhere, some geth amongst them. “What the hell are these things?” She prodded one with the toe of her boot, then crouched to lift its hand by the wrist. “It’s like a zombie or something.” She glanced up as Garrus hurried past, heading toward the beam. “Not that way, C-Sec. Big red burning death that way, remember?” She poked at one of the geth with the barrel of her pistol. “And what is this green shit everywhere? Looks like the zombies puked it on the geth.”

“What the hell are these things?” Shepard gasped, and she heard his feet scuffle in the dust as he jumped back. “What the . . . ?” She turned. “Big red burning death or no, you’ve got to see this.”

Shepard groaned as she pushed herself up. Garrus stood as far back from the edge as he could, leaning forward and straining his neck to look over. His entire body looked as hard and brittle as salt stalactite. What could be so important and so scary? Looking for the laser, she saw it carving its way through the opposite end of the building, some two hundred metres away. Still, time was short, and they needed to keep moving. Looking down over the edge, she furrowed her brow. She saw . . . something. A body and roots or legs? Maybe something stuck in roots?

“What the hell is that?” Shepard craned her neck for a moment, then grabbed his wrist and tugged him toward the ramp down. “Come on, we’re headed down anyway. We can see what it is a lot closer if we hurry.”

“Want to place bets on that being the reason for all this destruction?” He stayed next to her, his assault rifle back in his hands.

Shepard lifted back into her flat-foot jog, following the curved ramps down past a lot of the corpse looking things and dead geth. “Not at all.” She let out a soft grunt and shook her head. “This is all very strange, Brother C-Sec.”

“I think that may actually qualify as understatement of the decade.” Edging sideways, he followed, keeping an eye on the geth weapon’s progress.

All light in the space shifted to shine down from above, leading Shepard to the conclusion that they’d reached and even gone below ground level. She couldn’t place the smell. Mold, dust and smoke hung heavy, naturally, but something moved under those. They reached the floor with the . . . thing, at the same time the laser started coming back.

“It looks like a giant root or plant or something,” Shepard said. She pointed the roots leading off into the ruins, most of them severed and bleeding some sort of sap or fluid.

“Is that a face?” Garrus asked, pointing with his gun. The whirls in the being’s hide, along with a long beard of tentacle things did seem to make a face of sorts.

Shepard stepped toward the giant podish looking thing with the almost-face that hung from giant roots. “What the hell?” She opened her omnitool. “Okay, I’m going to take pics, this way, you go that way. Be fast. We have maybe ten minutes before that laser gets back here.” She snapped an image, then looked up. “The laser hasn’t cut through the ceiling in here yet. From the looks of those windows, we need to go up a couple of floors to hit ground level.”

Shepard took one of the side passages, climbing a curved ramp to get around the creature’s side,
snapping images through large gaps in the center wall. She also paused to take a few shots of the zombie things and dead geth littered along her path.

“I’ve got pods on the walls, here, Shepard.”

Shepard nodded at the tension laced through Garrus’s subvocals, cords of steel pulling tighter until the rich harmonics became thin and reedy. “It’s an adventure, C-Sec. Remember that. It’s all an adventure.” She noted the equipment and piping on the walls around the plant-thing. “Looks like we’re in a fifty thousand year old environmental systems level. That’s sort of cool.”

Reaching the end of the level, she turned back, heading for Garrus and his pods.

“Sure, if it weren’t for the laser of death and the monster plant thing with the corpse things, I’d vote we camp and do some sight seeing.”

The dragon returned, the building trembling as its claws tore through the ceiling over the giant plant. Shepard grabbed Garrus and ran, shoving him through a doorway and down a short corridor, trying to get as much space between them and the weapon as possible. Dust exploded all around them, the laser settling onto its target. Shepard shoved Garrus into a corner as the building shuddered in its death throes.

“The whole thing is going to come down,” Garrus yelled. “It’s cut straight down through the middle, but the shell has to fall.”

“I know.” Shepard stuck her face in against his chest and covered her head. “We need to get to ground level. As soon as that laser moves, we’ve got to climb back up a few floors, try to get out.”

A new and terrible roar echoed through the building, a bellow of rage and mortal pain. Something deep inside her gut, the primitive part that once huddled inside caves, felt the plant thing reach out, railing against a death it couldn’t quite comprehend. As the echo of that cry died out, a superstitious shudder rolled through her, recognizing the passing of something vast, powerful and ancient from the universe.

The next moment, the laser disappeared, carving into the building in the far north the next time it fired.

Shepard shuddered again, shaking off the moment of regret she didn’t have time to fully understand. “Okay, let’s move, C-Sec.”

The pair ran back the way they’d come, eyes constantly scanning for threats, wary and tense as they headed for the ramps that circled the hollow where the plant monster lived. Partway up the first one, one of the pods on the wall moved.

Garrus slid to a stop and stared at it as though he expected it to attack. “Shepard?”

She shook her head, glanced behind them, and gave him a push. “I’ve got nothing, keep moving.”

The pod split open and in a rush of slime, an asari in commando leathers tumbled out to lie prone on the floor.

Shepard stared, mouth open, her arm coiling around her ribs. Her stinging, tearing, disbelieving eyes looked to Garrus for some sign that he saw what she did. “C-Sec, the wall just gave birth to a fully grown asari. Do you find that as odd as I do?”

He just nodded and bent over to check her pulse. “She’s alive.”
“They don’t reproduce like that, do they? Gross pods stuck to a wall somewhere? I’m pretty sure I’ve seen little asari.” A revolted shudder rocketed up her spine. “Sweet baby Jesus!” she screamed as every broken end of her ribs ground together. She almost went down on her knees, only the idea of how much that jolt would hurt keeping her upright.

“What should we do?” he asked, breaking into a coughing fit.

Behind them the laser ripped into concrete and metal again, chewing a path back toward them.

“Well, we can’t leave her. Grab her, and let’s keep moving.” Shepard glanced toward the laser. “Luckily, it’s taking its time, making sure it kills off the whole plant thing, but still, it’s going to be on top of us in a few minutes.”

Garrus threw the asari over his shoulder and then took off for the upper levels again. Two floors up, a corridor led to the east. Dead end. A huge pile of debris blocked the path forward.

“Damn it.” Shepard turned to head back, but the laser pounded down and started carving up their path of retreat. She pushed Garrus into one of the side rooms. Bed frames and medical lockers lined the walls. She ran around the room, overriding the lock on all the lockers.

“What are you doing? This is no time to loot.” He glanced in the door. “We’ve got to go back and find another way.”

“No time.” Shepard waved him into the room and started shoving the bed frames out of the back corner. “Only thing to do now is bunker down. We need a shelter.” She looked up as the laser appeared. Fifteen metres away, it stopped. “Too damned close.” When it ripped down from above, it headed back the other way. “Saren is making sure that thing is dead before he buries it. That gives us a couple minutes to make a shelter. Put her down.”

She ran to the first locker, pulling everything out. “Help me!” Shepard shouted over the roaring klaxon. Grinding her teeth together, she cursed, furious at the constant agony pulsing through her back and chest. Channelling it into pushing the closest medical locker, she shoved it so hard it rammed into the outer wall, then screamed.

“Fuck, that hurt!”

Garrus ran up to help. “Turn it on its end. They’re strongest on their ends.” They flipped it so that it stood up. Shepard glanced around the room to see how many of them there were. “Five of them on angles, open side facing in, as far into the corner as we can.”

Once they had four in place, Shepard nodded toward the unconscious asari. “Put her inside, out of the way.”

While Garrus moved the injured woman into the shelter, Shepard ran back for another locker. The laser tore through the concrete like tissue paper no more than twenty metres away, luckily it moved parallel. Still, the heat felt like being thrown into a blast furnace. She forced herself to concentrate on moving the locker. By the time she got it to the corner, Garrus was ready to help her.

They lifted it on top of the others. “Hold the end up,” Shepard barked, shoving flat, fallen chunks of concrete under the one end until it sat on an angle up against the wall. “The last one the same. Hopefully some of the rubble will slide off rather than crushing us.” Shepard nodded her head for the last lockers as the laser turned, coming back on a new swath. “We’ve got to move. I haven’t suffered through hours of broken ribs just to die now, god damn it.”
“He sure is determined to make sure that thing is dead,” Garrus hollered.

Crying out as she lifted, she helped him move the last locker into place, piling rubble under it as well. “Wedge the bed frames around it on angles as tight as you can. Can you handle that alone?” she shouted. When he nodded, she grabbed a canvas bag and dumped out the armour, filling it with water bottles, ration bars and everything she could find that looked useful.

If the place did come down on their heads, and they managed to survive, who knew how long they’d be stuck there. She muttered a non-stop litany of the foulest curses she could think of, trying to distract herself from the grinding pain under her cast. After dragging two bags of supplies into the shelter, Shepard focused on gathering up all the blankets from the lockers and throwing them into the back corner of the shelter, burying the unconscious alien under a pile of grey wool.

Garrus wedged in the frames to support their tiny shelter. “Toss me a couple of blankets for the roof.”

Shepard froze mid-action and looked up as the laser vanished. “Hurry!” She tossed him a blanket, then ran up to grab one end, helping him tent it over the roof to keep out the smaller debris. They layered two more over top.

Shepard shoved Garrus through the gap, then pushed the lockers closer before scooting under right behind him. Screaming a long, thin keen of pain, she helped him muscle the locker into place. “Get the asari into a locker and cover her up, then yourself.” She scooted backwards into the open locker and shook out a blanket, covering her head.

“We’re probably still going to die, aren’t we?” he called, squeezing in next to her. The klaxon sounded its buzzing thunder, and heat exploded inside their metal tomb.

Shepard threw her blanket over him as well, and covered her head with her arms as concrete and metal began crashing down. She couldn’t help but laugh. It tasted like bile. Somehow, she’d always knew she’d go out like that. At least the turian and asari were a surprise. “More than likely, C-Sec. We built this thing in five minutes out of lockers and old bed frames.”

He leaned over her, pulling her tight in against his chest. “If we do, I’m sorry I disobeyed your orders.”

“If we don’t die, and you ever do it again, trust me you’ll be more than sorry,” she promised. “I’ll make damned sure of that. I give orders, I don’t make suggestions, C-Sec.”

With a long, planet-shattering crack as terminal and pained as the plant monster’s death roar, the building’s exterior gave way. Shepard held her breath, moments of silence stretching out so long she almost relaxed before everything erupted into madness. Shepard covered her ears the best she could and prayed that their little structure held. By all rights, it shouldn’t. But, what felt like four lifetimes later, the crashing settled to the random clatter of rolling concrete chunks and the whispered hiss of dust slides.

“C-Sec, you still alive?” She pushed the blanket back as she sat up straight.

“Yeah.” He coughed. “I think this is a good time for a sweet baby Jesus, Shepard.” He shifted around a bit. “It’s a little tight in here.”

Their shelter stood a metre and a half tall except in the center under the angled roof, where Garrus could probably stand hunched over. It wasn’t a Presidium condo, but at least they all had room to lie down as long as they stuck their heads in one locker and their feet in another.
“Yeah, sorry about that.” She let out a long breath and listened, straining to hear anything going on outside their box. Nothing. Other than the sounds of rubble settling around them, Feros had returned to being a dead planet. Shepard stood to look out the hole in the center. Concrete rubble had sealed them in, but the roof held.

Shepard gestured at the asari. “Have a look at our guest; make sure she’s okay.”

When Garrus nodded, Shepard reached up to her radio. “Normandy? Shepard to Normandy, can you read me?”

“Roger that, Captain,” Joker’s voice came through, thready with static but audible. “Are you all right down there? What happened?”

“Way too much to cover, Joker. Is the second team aboard with the colonists?” She leaned against the metal, all the pain the adrenaline had allowed her to ignore starting to ramp up like a hand-cranked siren.

“Yes, ma’am. We’re loading them up now. Had to wait for that dreadnought to leave, but the team is intact, forty-eight colonists and Exogeni employees in tow.”

“Shepard!” Nihlus sounded out of breath as he joined the call. “Where are you? Are you and Vakarian all right?”

“Yeah.” She shifted a little, trying to find a comfortable way to stand. “We managed to get close to ground level and made a small shelter before Saren brought the building down. It’s tight, but we’re breathing, so I’m not going to complain. Not sure what sort of oxygen supply we’ve got, but I can feel air moving at least a little.”

She saw Garrus nod out of the corner of her eye.

“We know what Saren was after,” the Spectre told her.

“Yeah, some giant plant thing. We saw it just before Saren killed it. Do you know why?”

“It’s got some sort of mind control properties. Infected all the colonists with spores so it could make them help defend it.” He cleared his throat. “Saren’s gone, so let’s retrieve the two of you and get out of here.”

“I stuck a tracker on him. Doesn’t have a very large range, so if you want to follow it, you’ve got to follow now.” She sent him the tracking signature. “It’s only got forty-eight hours of power. I stick them on the ground teams just in case they wander off or get snatched.”

“How are you set for supplies?”

“Not too bad. I’d have to look to let you know for sure. Get tracking that signal, Nihlus. It’s our only tangible lead. Get on his ass before he’s out of range.”

“It’s going to take ten, fifteen minutes to get the ship secure. We’re still loading colonists. Take inventory of what you’ve got, I’ll contact you just before we pull out.” Even before he closed the channel, she heard him barking orders to move the colonists faster.

“Shepard, the asari appears uninjured, just unconscious.” Garrus sat cross-legged next to Shepard.

“Okay, C-Sec, thanks. Let’s go through these bags and see what we’ve got.” She lowered herself to the floor and opened the bag closest to her. “Hey, this one had three whole dextro ration bars in it.
I’ve got four in my hip pack. How long will seven do you?” She glanced up between counting bottles of water.

“Three days, four if they have to. It’s not like I’ll be moving around much.” He looked up from the bag he had. “Twenty three bottles of water, ten levo ration bars, and four small canisters of O2. Good thing we didn’t drop those.” He cocked a brow plate, let out a thin chuckle, and put everything back.

“Okay, so I’ve got eighteen water bottles, twelve levo ration bars.” She nodded toward the asari. “As long as the air holds out, we’re good for four or five days.”

“Shepard?” Nihlus called through a few minutes later.

“Go ahead, Kryik.”

“We’ve tracked Saren’s fleet, and your pilot has a plan to fleet jump us out with them.”

“Fleet jump? What about needing the precise mass for the relay?” Shepard shook her head. “Sounds like he’s going to blow up my ship.”

“Relax, Captain,” Joker said. “Compared to that fleet, we’ll be a flea riding the back of a Labradoodle.”

“A Labradoodle?” Shepard shook her head. “No . . ..”

“Okay, maybe a Cockapoo. The point is, we’ll knock their drift off, but not enough to collapse the corridor. It’s the only way to track them through the relay with a short range tracker.”

“You get my ship blown up within the first two weeks of my being captain, they’ll never let me have any good toys again, Joker.” Shepard growled. His plan sat as comfortably as a chair made out of acid coated, frozen razor blades.

“Right, toys. I’ll remember that, Captain, and let the crew know of your deep concern for . . ..”

“How many days’ worth of supplies do you have, Shepard?” Nihlus interrupted, talking over Joker’s last few words.

“Four or five. As long as the air holds out, we’ll be fine until you can track him and come back. Just be careful with my people, Kryik. Get them back here in one piece.” She pressed her lips into a tight line. “We’ll talk to you in a day or so. Shepard, out.”

“Good luck, Shepard. Take care of yourself and Vakarian. Nihlus, out.”

Shepard lowered her hand and looked across, barely able to see Garrus’s eyes in the dark, his visor and the lights on their armour the only sources of illumination other than a faint light from above.

“And we’re alone,” he whispered, his body statue still.

She nodded. “And we’re alone.”
Shepard looked around. “You didn’t think to bring a book and a flashlight, did you, C-Sec?”

“Still not a camping trip, Shepard,” Garrus grumbled. “Is it getting cold in here, or is it me?”

Pressing her hands to the floor, Shepard nodded. “Yeah, the floor is really icy. Guess it’s because we’re under the cloud cover.” She gestured toward the roof. “See if you can use that handy scanning app on your omnitool to figure out how deep we’re in. I’ll spread some blankets out to insulate us from the floor.”

Shepard spread four blankets out as far as Garrus’s feet, then looked up. “Lift your foot, C-Sec.”

He did.

“Um, lift both feet.” She grinned to herself until his other foot lifted off the floor as well. “Hey, ah, is levitation something all your people can do, or are you magic?”

“I’m unique, Shepard. One hundred percent pure magic.” His chuckle warmed the small space.

Smiling, she finished spreading out the blankets, their space small enough that the thick wool covered pretty much the entire thing. “Okay, C-Sec the Magical Turian, you can put your feet down now.” Shepard sat on the end result and sighed. “Much better. Adds a little padding for the boney among us too.” She looked up. “How’s it going up there, big guy?”

“We were lucky, Shepard.” He knelt and scanned the outside wall on the two sides of their shelter. “We’re buried deep, but the way the place fell, it’s a pile of slabs, so there’s air pockets all through it.” He turned off his omnitool. “No way we’re digging out from in here, though.”

Shepard’s tight nod greeted those words. She had expected no different. Shepard sighed and slumped a little, the pain in her ribs losing the knife edge for a more diffuse pressure. “Okay, so talk to me about what we need to do to keep Garrus ‘C-Sec’ Vakarian alive over the next several days.”

“Staying warm is going to be the biggest hurdle,” he said. “Turians don’t have body fat like humans and asari. I have a couple of days on my power cell in my armour to run the heater if I disable everything else. I’ll be all right eating twice a day if I can stay warm. If I can’t, I’ll need to eat a lot more to avoid hypothermia.”

Shepard nodded. “Okay. So, we need to conserve those power cells.” She leaned up. “I hold and radiate heat really well, so I’ll take the ones out of my armour and save them for yours.” A single finger halted his argument. “We’ll bundle our new, sleepy friend in with us and pile on every blanket we’ve got. It’s not like we have chores we need to be doing.”

She reached out and grabbed the front of his armour when he poised to argue. “Don’t start with
me. Our only job for the next couple of days is keeping our delicate, magical turian flower safe from the frost.” She grinned, wider as he rumbled in his throat, then the smile drained from her face. “Besides, I think my ribs have punctured just about every organ I own. I need to take it easy and stay as flat as I can.”

Shepard cracked open the arm of her armour and popped the power cells, sticking them in her hip pack. Like a wave of cold mist billowing out of a freezer on a hot day, the ambient climate crawled inside her armour, as inexorable as winter. “Yep, we need to get all of us bundled and stay that way. Sweet baby Jesus, it’s chilly.”

She dragged the packs inside one of the lockers, sticking them under the blankets to act as a backrest/pillow, then had Garrus lay the asari out. She smothered a laugh as she saw him eyeballing the unconscious form. “What? Are you afraid of the purple lady?”

He shrugged. “I . . . .”

Shepard chuckled, but reached out and squeezed his hand to take the sting out of it. “Okay, C-Sec. You really should be between us, but I’ll take the middle, okay?” She patted his shoulder. “Turn around, I’ll pop all your lights back here.”

“It’s going to be really dark, Shepard.” Still he got down on one knee with his back to her.

“Yeah, but we’ll leave the power cells in two guns, use their lights when we really need to see, and the light show inside your yoke there will still be up.” She popped the diodes from their sockets, the tiny shelter closing down around her.

“You’re afraid of the dark, Shepard,” he said, his voice so soft she could have imagined hearing it.

“You really do see everything, don’t you?” She laid a grateful hand on the back of his neck for a moment. “It’s more important to keep you warm. I’ll be fine. It’s not like anything could attack us in here, is it? Besides, I’ll have Roger.” Before they lost all the light from his armour, she took Ingrid off her back and popped the rifle’s power cell, then her pistol’s. She gathered all the scavenged cells in her hip pack, then popped the lights from Garrus’s lower back.

Shepard hunkered down and spread the ten remaining blankets over the three of them. Garrus lay on his side, sort of wrapping himself around Shepard as if sheltering her from the dark. As much as she could tolerate the strangling near-black for his sake, a mixture of gratitude and annoyance welled up in her. He just couldn’t help trying to protect her.

They didn’t speak, and it didn’t take long before she heard a whistling snore that told her the long day of running had caught up with the turian. She wriggled in tight against him and tried to relax enough to drift off herself.

_____________________________________________________________________________

“C-Sec, I thought turians weren’t into boobs,” Shepard grumbled. She closed her eyes tight against the black and tried to ignore the way her voice echoed back at her.

You can do this, Shepard. You’re a long way from that night.

“They aren’t. Why?”

“Because you’re squeezing my left breast like you’re trying to find a candy surprise at the center or
something.” Shepard sighed and looked down at the blanket moving.

“No, I’m not. My hands are wrapped around me.”

“So . . .?” Shepard frowned, then sighed and extricated herself from the turian to move the asari’s hand. “The unconscious asari is fondling my boob.” She looked over her shoulder and into a pair of green eyes. “Hi. Welcome to our little bomb shelter. How do you feel?”

The asari jerked back, a low but shrill scream scraping from her throat as she fought with the blankets, struggling against the soft prison to scramble across to the far side of the shelter. “Where am I? What happened? The Thorian . . .?” She clutched her head between her hands. “Saren? Matriarch Benezia?” She turned, banging frantically against the metal locker, the thunder from it battering Shepard’s head like a cricket bat.

The asari’s panic chipped away at Shepard’s calm. The ache in her back ramped up until it felt like a living thing,

“Whoa! Whoa! Sweetie. Please, stop that. We need our hearing, and we aren’t going to hurt you.” Shepard climbed out from under the blankets. “C-Sec, uncover so your yoke lights help us out here.”

As he did, the extra little bit of light seemed to calm the asari. She started looking around. “Where am I? What sort of prison is this?”

“You’re on Feros, and this is a prison that kept us all from being crushed under a falling building.” Shepard covered Garrus back up and knelt out closer to the center. “My name is Captain Jane Shepard, and that’s Officer Garrus Vakarian. What’s your name?”

She backed into the locker, pressing herself into the corner furthest from them, her stare darting back and forth. “My name is Shiala.”

Shepard nodded and stuck a poorly fitting smile on her lips. “How did you end up falling out of a pod at our feet, Shiala?”

She reached up, pressing her hands to her head. “The Thorian? It’s dead? I can’t hear it in my thoughts.”

“Is the Thorian that weird looking, plantish thing?” Garrus asked, sitting up, but keeping the blankets pulled up tight around his neck.

“Yes, but it wasn’t just a plant. It’s tendrils, a vast root system like eyes, ears, mouth and fingers spread through most of the planet’s crust, touching, tasting, experiencing everything. It survived through millennia beyond imagining, so very ancient that our tiny lives amounted to the scurrying of insects over its skin. Everything that lived and died on Feros for hundreds of thousands of cycles fed its body and mind, adding to its knowledge and experience.” Shiala’s delicate features twisted in what Shepard thought might be grief as she struggled to describe the alien. “So wise, so completely unique, and now it’s gone.”

Shepard shuddered a little, feeling the Thorian’s dead tendrils, thin corpse fingers spread under and all around her. She clenched her teeth, forcing the chill, macabre image aside, focusing instead on Shiala’s grief. Having touched a consciousness so vast and alien, the asari felt as much sorrow as relief at the being’s death. That deserved respect.

She allowed the silence to settle around them for a moment. Shivering, Shepard felt a slow, sick feeling spread from the entity wedged in her back as the cold settled into her flesh. “Saren
destroyed the Thorian, and in the process, brought the entire structure down around our heads. We’re buried down here for at least a couple of days until my ship can rescue us.” A welcoming smile back on her lips, Shepard nodded toward Garrus and the blankets. “Come on, keep warm, it’s freezing. We won’t bite.”

Scooting back under the blankets, Shepard pulled them up around her neck. “Oh yeah, that’s the stuff, right there.” She leaned up against Garrus’s side, letting out a slow, shuddering sigh of relief. When the asari made no move toward them, Shepard peeled a blanket off the top and held it out to her. “How did you end up in a pod stuck to a wall down here?”

Snatching it as if she feared Shepard were a slaver handing out offerings from the open door of a shuttle, Shiala grabbed the blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders. Shepard bit her lip to avoid pointing out that Shiala was already sort of trapped in there and outnumbered if they had untoward intentions.

“Thank you,” the asari said, shivering a little. “It is cold.” Another long sigh answered Shepard’s question. “I was one of Matriarch Benezia’s disciples. When she joined Saren, I accompanied her.” She shifted and tugged on the blanket.

Arching an eyebrow, Shepard frowned and shook her head. “So, your matriarch said, ‘Hey, Saren, I heard you’re trying to bring back the monsters that obliterated the Protheans. How can I help?’”

“No. I do not know how she came into possession of the information, but my lady knew that through Saren, the council had learned of the Reaper’s existence. At first she believed they hoped to discover a way to defeat the Reapers, but then she learned that if a means of defeating them could not be found, Saren was to discover a means of appeasing them. They hoped that by assisting the Reapers in taking some lives, they might purchase back others.”

“Benezia knew Saren’s path would lead only to destruction. Hoping to influence him into a more sane course of action, she joined him. Given a choice to accompany her or go my own way, I went along to assist and protect her.” Shivering or shuddering, she wrapped the blanket tighter.

Shepard held back the corner of the blankets. “Come on, we didn’t pull you out of the collapsing building to murder you, and you’re already on first name terms with my left breast so you might as well stay warm.” Turning, Shepard rooted through one of the packs, tossing a bottle of water and a ration bar onto the blankets in front of the asari. “Not sure how long you were in that pod, but you must be thirsty, at least.”

Shiala stared at the food and water for a moment, then snatched up the water, drinking half of it down without taking a breath. When she lowered the bottle, she wiped her hand across her mouth. “Thank you. For this, and for saving me. I owe you my life.” She crawled over and under the blankets next to Shepard. She chuckled when she pulled them up, spreading the one she’d been given over top. “Oh, this is much better.”

“For someone so small, Shepard throws a remarkable number of BTU’s,” Garrus said, bumping the captain in the back.

“Yes, I’m a freak of nature, we’ve established this already.” She grinned as the turian’s joke ignited a small spark in that darkness, pushing it back enough for her to focus on Shiala. “So, Benezia knew that Saren had discovered something. Did he seek her out as an ally?”

“She is one of the wisest and most influential beings in the galaxy. In the beginning, I believed Saren sought her out for these reasons, but after being exposed to Sovereign, I believe he hoped that her mental prowess and telepathic abilities would help save him from indoctrination.” The
asari let out a breath more sorrowful than most tears. “None of us could save anyone from Sovereign’s influence. Even our great lady lost herself to its madness.”


“Han’Gerrel,” Garrus whispered, a low curse chasing the name from his mouth.

“Yes. Sovereign is able to influence minds. It’s subtle, taking days or even weeks, but in the end, it leaves those it indoctrinates absolutely controlled. Within a month, I became Saren’s willing slave.” She shuddered, shifting closer to Shepard as if seeking her warmth. “That is how I came to this world, a commodity to be traded for what Saren needed.”

“Which was?” Shepard’s stomach rolled at the thought of the monstrous ship warping people into whatever the hell Saren needed to bring about his perverse goals.

“Saren knows that you’re following him, hunting down clues as to his plans. He used the beacon on Eden Prime before you did.”

“Right, we know. The vision is apparently as much of a confused mess in his head as it is in mine.” Shepard winced as random images flashed through her mind: fire, death, people on their knees begging their gods to save them.

“The Thorian made its home on this world long before civilization blossomed here. It watched over the years as evolution shaped the land, the creatures and the people. As history died, the Thorian consumed it, absorbing it.” Shiala smiled, her eyes shining with an almost fanatical spark as she described it. “When the Protheans built this city, it dwelt beneath it, spending thousands of cycles dormant and asleep only to wake for brief periods of activity. Within it dwells ancient, ancestral memory, the essence of what it means to be Prothean. Saren called that knowledge the Cypher. It is vital to understanding the beacon’s message.”

“Okay . . ..” Shepard shrugged.

“Saren needed me to meld my consciousness with the Thorian’s to gain the Cypher. I was offered as a sacrifice. Of course, once Saren gained the Cypher, the Thorian became a liability, so he destroyed it, hoping, I’m sure, to kill me in the process.” Shiala laid back and closed her eyes, her body losing the tight rigidity. Perhaps sharing the burden allowed her to let some of it go.

Shepard’s heart sped up as she waited for the asari to continue, her mind piecing things together even as she felt the creature’s tendrils all around her once more. Shiala believed the Thorian dead, but what if some part of it remained. How long after Shepard died in that space would those roots grow through her, consuming her and her life, her knowledge, everything she was? The tendrils began to move, to burrow through the concrete underneath her.

No. She leaned back against Garrus, concentrating on feeling his slight movements, the sound of his breath. The dark couldn’t be allowed to win. Her ridiculous imagination couldn’t be allowed to rip her heart out. Instead she needed to focus on the miracle of the creature, to share Shiala’s sorrow at the being’s death. It may have been the only creature like it in the universe. She needed to concentrate on what the Thorian’s knowledge gained over all those years could mean to stopping Saren. It amounted to an unparalleled wealth of intel.

Garrus leaned in against her ear, his voice barely a breath as he whispered, “Let’s turn on the flashlight for a few minutes.”
Shepard shook her head, wrestling herself back into control. “So, you gave Saren this Cypher from the Thorian so that he would understand the vision?” She raised her eyebrows. “Could you give it to me so that I understand it?”

Shiala’s teeth flashed in a smile. “I can and a great deal more. While I came here an indoctrinated slave to Sovereign’s will, touching the Thorian’s mind freed me of that control. When it filled me with its knowledge through our meld, nothing compelled me to pass all of that knowledge to Saren.” She shrugged, clearly pleased with herself. Shepard didn’t blame her, she deserved to feel pride in that victory.

Shepard’s laugh tumbled into the space, kind and comforting. “You’ve got to enjoy the irony there, don’t you?” After a moment of realization, her laugh died. “Wait. Sovereign’s will? Not Saren’s will?”

Shiala nodded, her entire demeanour suddenly withdrawn and fearful. “The Thorian predated the original civilization that developed here. It witnessed the rise of a people who called themselves the Reloh. Those people were then conquered and subjugated by the Prothean Empire when it expanded into this sector of space. Likewise, the Thorian witnessed the Reaper invasion and devastation of this planet. Through it, I saw the truth of the Reapers and of Sovereign’s nature.”

Understanding, Shepard let out a shaky sigh. “It’s not a ship, is it? It’s a Reaper.” She felt Garrus tense behind her.

“Spirits. That thing’s alive?” His hand slipped over Shepard’s forearm, gripping it.

“Yes, it is one of the greatest of its kind. The roar of their lasers turned the surface to ash as they descended through the clouds, blotting out the sun. Fire balls rained down, unleashing hordes of monsters, twisted and terrible, to slaughter, some even consuming the dead.” The asari shuddered and began to tremble. “I can pull back the curtain and reveal to you what the Thorian placed in my mind, but once you’ve seen the truth . . ..”

Shepard reached out and ran her hand down Shiala’s arm, gripping the asari’s hand in hers. “I understand and . . ..” She sighed. “. . . I appreciate your warning, but I’ll gladly face a thousand nightmares if it helps me find a way to keep Saren from making all of that a reality.”

“May I rest for a time before transferring the knowledge, Captain? The process of melding with your consciousness is quite draining, and I think it’s safe to say that I’m not at my best at the moment.” A slight shine from Shiala’s eyes stared into Shepard’s as the asari squeezed her hand.

“Of course. Rest and regain your strength. We’re not going anywhere for at least a day.” Shepard yawned. “I could use some sleep myself.” She settled down, lying flat to ease the pressure in her back. Resting her head in the hollow between the packs and Garrus’s shoulder, she let out a soft moan. She loosened her grip on Shiala’s fingers, but the asari showed no sign of wanting to let go of her hand, so Shepard just tightened her fingers again. After being indoctrinated by a Reaper, given to a giant plant as a sacrifice and having several aliens inside her head, she’d probably need to hold someone’s hand for a while too.

After the asari fell asleep, Shepard looked up to see Garrus watching her. “C-Sec?”

“Mm?” He blinked, but otherwise didn’t move.

“I need a backup in case something happens to me. I know you don’t have the crazy beacon vision mumbo jumbo in your head, but would you let Shiala give you the rest of it?” She closed her eyes and listened to him breathe. Sleep pressed down on her heavy and determined, but she shoved it
back, punching it in the face. Urgency pushed harder than her weariness, harder than the fragility she struggled so hard to keep hidden. But, the truth remained. Life was fragile. The fight could well outlive her.

“What about Nihlus? He’s got far more pull than I ever will.” He didn’t sound all that eager to have an apocalyptic nightmare downloaded straight into his brain. Not that Shepard could really blame him for that. Given the choice, she would have given Nihlus the honour too.

“He and I are the most likely to get killed. And you’ve got an entire structure of respectability behind you.” She turned over as much as she could with Shiala’s death grip on her hand. “If I fall, I need to know someone will pick this up and keep running with it, Garrus. Even if Nihlus outlives me, he’ll need help. You’re under no obligation, but I can’t think of anyone I trust more to do it.”

He chuckled, warm and throaty. “You’re incredibly manipulative, you know that, right?”

She wriggled her eyebrows a little. “I admit nothing, but that it’s the truth. I trust you to see it through.”

He let out a long sigh. “Fine, but you go and die on me, leave me stuck with this war, I’m going to kick your deceased ass.”

A warm chuckle spread through her, pushing back the chill. “Fair enough. You don’t tell anyone, Garrus. Unless I kick, you tell no one that you have this knowledge. I don’t want targets painted on everyone, especially you.” She elbowed him. “No one. Yeah?”

“Fair enough. No one knows.” Shaking his head, he leaned back and closed his eyes. “This is all far crazier than anyone could have imagined.”

“Yeah. I signed on to pick up a beacon, transport it.” The laugh that chased those words came out bitter.

“And now look where you are. Buried under a Prothean ruin with the endemic, ancestral knowledge of a planet, and a rakishly good-looking turian C-Sec officer.”

Shepard grinned and closed her eyes. “Rakishly good-looking? Seriously? Oh, C-Sec, we have got to get you some help for those delusions.” She grunted then laughed as his elbow thumped her in the ribs. “Stop that. You’re going to give me a punctured lung.”

“Go to sleep, Shepard.”

She leaned up a little first. “How long you have left on those power cells?”

“Should be okay for another twelve hours or so. They always run a little longer than advertised.”

The next time Shepard woke it was to the sound of chattering teeth. She got up and dug out power cells. “C-Sec, wake up. We need to change you out. You’re shivering so hard you’re going to bring the shelter down around us.”

“Guess I was sleeping a little deeper than I thought.” Shaking hands popped out the cells and inserted the new ones. “These only give me about another ten hours.” She grunted then laughed as his elbow thumped her in the ribs. “Stop that. You’re going to give me a punctured lung.”

Shepard grinned and passed him an empty water bottle before flopping back down under the
“I could use a bathroom as well,” Shiala sighed, facing away from them. “I also wouldn’t turn down a nice long soak in a hot tub.”

“I always considered hot tubs to be soup pots filled with bacteria, but right now, I’d have no problem at all being a main ingredient in Shepard soup.” She laughed bright and loud as Garrus’s stomach growled. “Sweet baby Jesus, C-Sec, I hope that was just really bad timing.”

He laughed and clambered out from under the blankets. “Don’t worry, Shepard. You’re poisonous.”

“Oh, and I thought my ribs hurt.” She flopped over and rooted through the packs for food and water for her and Shiala, then grabbed a half ration bar out of her hip pack for Garrus.

When she passed Shiala her meal, Shepard saw the asari watching them with a concerned frown. “What’s up, Sister Shiala? Has the light of the blessed Enkindlers abandoned you?”

The asari looked even more worried until Garrus laughed. “I was just wondering if you’re both insane,” the asari said, her voice a little more haughty than before.

“No,” Garrus answered. “Just Shepard. I was a perfectly ordinary, semi-respectable C-Sec agent before I signed on with her and joined the Galactic Brotherhood of Shepard.”

“The Galactic Brotherhood of Shepard?” Shiala chuckled, nervous and flat, but Shepard liked that the asari lost a little of the glazed cast around her eyes.

Shepard grinned. “I’m a huge fan of the Church of Galactic Brotherhood. I watch it a lot on late night broadcasts.” She held up a finger to stop Garrus from commenting. “No comments from you, Brother C-Sec.”

“Oh, the Father of Light.” Shiala’s grin melted away some more of the shocked stiffness. “I love him. ‘Although this one is not worthy, it wishes to humbly bring the glorious light of the Enkindlers to all. Your gracious donations allow this undeserving one to modestly spread the word of the sublime Enkindlers throughout the galaxy, creating one great bloom of brotherhood. Praise be to the Enkindlers.’”

Garrus grumbled. “Now I feel left out for not being an insomniac.” He waved at them. “Turn around.”

Shepard sighed and turned away. “How did you survive the military being so damned shy?”

Once they’d all taken care of their pressing needs, Shiala sat cross-legged and looked at Shepard, her face so solemn and drawn, that the captain knew the asari was ready to pass on the Cypher and the rest of the Thorian’s knowledge.

“This will not be comfortable for either of you.” The asari’s entire body apologized for the inevitable. “You’re about to witness . . ..”

“Sheiala,” Shepard said, reaching out to lay her hand over the delicate, purple one, “it’s fine. No need to apologize. Let’s just get it over with and move on to dealing with it.” Try as she might to soften it, her smile felt like broken glass on her face.

The moment the stream of images pulled back, leaving Shepard alone and screaming, cowering in the corners of her own mind, Shiala turned her back and lay down, curling up under the blankets.
Shepard peeked out, testing the waters of coherent thought, as the asari began to snore.

Silent, brittle as spun sugar, Shepard curled up in Garrus’s arms, suddenly needing to be protected from the things hiding in the dark. Who knew that all those years she’d told herself she was just being silly sleeping with the light on, she’d been right? Monsters so much more horrible than anything she could have dreamed up slipped through the hidden places, waiting for a chance to punch through the thin veneer of a nice, normal, safe life.

Garrus clung to her just as hard, both shivering but not from the cold. Shepard doubted anything would ever truly feel cold again after what Shiala showed her.

After Eden Prime, the vision from the beacon turned her insides to water. She’d tried not to let it show, of course. A crew’s confidence came from its captain, so she downplayed it, showed a brave face. However, after witnessing Feros’ final weeks she wished that the building had come down on her head. How could she, Jane Shepard, hope to stand in the path of the coming storm and halt it? The sick, numb feeling spread down her back, crimson fingers creeping between the fibers of muscle and bone.

“What the hell do we do against that, Shepard?” Garrus whispered after a couple of hours of silence. “We aren’t as advanced as the Protheans. We aren’t as numerous as they were, and the Reapers just obliterated them. Feros fell in days.”

She wrapped her arms around him even more snuggly. “We keep fighting, Garrus. What else can we do? We make sure Saren doesn’t succeed in bringing them back.”

She felt him strengthen and smiled. Good, he’d need that strength. “We can do it, C-Sec. We just need to get out from under this building. Hopefully Nihlus and the Normandy have tracked Saren somewhere useful. I’m going to get some sleep. How’s your power level?”

“Go to sleep. I’m fine.”

Shepard dozed, waking up either cramped, freezing, or shaking from nightmares. The numbness in her back pulled a heavy, wet fog down over her brain. It weighed down her body until she couldn’t move. Each time sleep pulled her back, implacable, a tide dragging her out to sea.

Then she woke up to an open radio channel. Not static, just open air.

“Hello?”

“Shepard! Thank the spirits, you are there. You didn’t answer.”

“Nihlus?” She sat up, blinking against the dark. Casting about her, she searched for anything familiar, an anchor in the black, her breathing sped up, her chest tightening. “Where are you? Is the Normandy on the way back?” She clenched her fists, then shook her hands out, trying to force the numb, deadness from her fingers. The roar of the dragon returned, but tens, hundreds of them, their claws shredding everything in their path, fire leaving every world burning.

_The building should have just come down on my head. Perhaps it did, and it’s just taken this long for my body to realize it’s dead._

“We’re in the Horsehead Nebula. We lost Saren’s tracker so we’re going system to system to see if we can locate it again. Are you all right? Shepard? You don’t sound very well.”

“Nihlus, you have to come back for Garrus. You have to come back, right now. There’s thousands of them, Nihlus.” She choked on a sob. “Thousands. Everything is burning. God, it’s so damned
dark.”

“Okay, Shepard. Breathe. Where’s Garrus?” The Spectre’s voice helped, no doubt manipulating her with his harmonics. Not that she cared. Anything to stop the breathless, dead panic squeezing its fist around her throat.

“Garrus is right here. He’s sleeping.” She reached out and touched the turian’s neck. “Sweet Jesus, he’s cold as ice. The last of the power cells must have died. I have to wake him up, get him out of this armour.” She reached over and shook Garrus’s shoulder. “C-Sec, wake up. Nihlus, I have to take care of him. You need to come back now and pick him up. Shepard, out.”

Shepard pulled herself out from under the blankets. “Come on, C-Sec, wake up before you freeze to death.” She shook Garrus until he mumbled and began to shiver. “There we go, come on. Sit up. You’re freezing.”

Pulling back the blankets she helped pull him up. He responded slow and stiff, still not quite awake. Shepard glanced over to her other side. “Shiala, could I get a hand? Seems the big guy’s gone hypothermic on us.”

Reaching out to grab Roger, she turned the assault rifle’s flashlight on, then laid it down to shine on them.

“Come on, start moving.” She took Garrus’s face between her hands. “You with me?”

He nodded. “Yeah. J . . . just took a m . . . minute.”

Shepard shook her head at the sound of Garrus’s teeth clacking together. “C-Sec, I think the time has come to lose the armour. It’s just keeping our body heat away from you.” She gestured for him to hand it over. “Come on, big guy, off with it.”

“Y . . . you’re just trying to s . . . see me naked,” he said, stuttering as he shivered.

“Yeah, that’s been my single ambition since I saw your assless hotness in Dr. Michel’s office.” She scowled. “I’m serious, come on. I fully intend for all three of us to get through this.” Without waiting for him, she reached out and began popping the seals. “Keeping the armour was a good plan, but it’s not working any more.”

Shaking hands removed the components as she unfastened the seals and Shiala piled it in the far corner. Once she had him stripped down to the underlayer, she unzipped it and helped him out of the top portion, folding it down and tying the arms around his waist.

“Okay, come on, under the blankets, icicle man.” Shepard covered him up, then wriggled down and burrowed in against his chest.

“Shepard,” Garrus whispered, his voice oscillating with his shivering.

She wrapped her arms around him a little tighter and pressed herself along his front. “What? You’re supposed to be saving your strength.”

He pressed his mouth right next to her ear. “I’m not comfortable spooning with the asari without my armour.”

Shepard chuckled and raised a hand to his cheek. “Oh, C-Sec, you are quite the fellow. We need to keep you warm. She’s a source of body heat. Just pretend she’s a heating unit.”
Shiala sighed. “I can hear you both.”

Garrus coughed. “Sorry.”

“Don’t mind C-Sec, he’s not used to being around females. We make him a little jittery as a group.” Shepard grinned at Garrus, then tucked herself in again, hating the way he shivered. “Come on, big guy, get those arms around me.”

“Technically, I’m not female, so he should be fine.” She scooted in along Garrus’s back and pulled the covers up. “See, warmer already.”

Ten minutes later, the turian stopped shivering and Shepard let out a long sigh of relief. She rubbed his back. “Better.” She sat up and dug into her hip pack to pull out the second half of his ration bar. “Eat and then get some sleep.”

“You didn’t hit me as the caretaker type, Shepard,” he said between chewing.

“I’m a complex woman . . . an enigma, really.” She chuckled, then the expression fell from her face, suddenly so weak along her left side that she collapsed, landing nearly face down. The crushing pressure in her chest returned, and try as she might, she couldn’t get her arms under her.

“Shepard?” Garrus rolled her over, staring into her eyes. “Shepard, what’s wrong?” Fear laced his voice, but she couldn’t tell him it would be all right, she couldn’t make any part of her do anything. “Shepard?”

Sleep pulled her back, the heavy tide rolling her out to sea.
**Mass Effect - Future Imperfect Chapter Twenty One**

Chapter Summary

Buried on Feros. Gah! Rescue us already.

“There she is.”

Shepard cracked her eyes a tiny bit, wincing away from the light. “Umm . . . what?”

Rough talons pressed against her cheek and soft fingers gripped one of her hands. “We almost lost you there,” Garrus replied, his voice low and comforting.

Frowning, she blinked up at the turian as he leaned into the light. He looked exhausted but happy. “How could you lose me, C-Sec? Where am I going to go?”

Shiala chuckled. “I believe your people call it heaven.”

Blowing a raspberry, Shepard rolled over a little, tucking herself in against Garrus’s chest. “I can’t die. C-Sec said he’d kick my dead ass if I did. Can’t have him desecrating the dead. Besides, I doubt that’s my final destination.”

“Yeah, well, if you could avoid needing any more emergency surgery done by flashlight while Dr. Chakwas yells in my ear, I’d appreciate that.” Garrus pulled the blankets up around her neck and wrapped his arms around her. “How are you feeling? In any pain?”

Shepard thought about that for a minute, then another, and another, deciding just after she forgot the question that she needed to go back to sleep. “I’m sleepy.”

Garrus chuckled. “Then sleep. The Normandy’s digging us out, so you’ll probably wake up in med bay next time. At least this time when Nihlus calls, I can tell him you woke up.”

Shiala laughed. “That might buy you an extra minute between calls.”

“Are you warm enough? Still got food, C-Sec?” Shepard mumbled, already giving in to the tide.

“Yeah, I’m fine. A little hungry, but we’ll be out of here soon. Sleep. I’ve got you.”

Shepard chuckled even as she dozed off. “Yeah right, C-Sec. You wish. Delusional turian.”

“Go ahead. I’ll carry her.” The sound of a hand clapping against something echoed around the space. “You did an amazing thing, Vakarian. Well done.”

Shepard opened her eyes at the sound of Nihlus’s voice only to press them closed and cover them with a hand. “Sweet baby Jesus, people. You do realize we’ve been in almost complete darkness for days.” She tried to remove her hand, but the light felt like a thousand angry bees attacking her eyes.

“Ornery as always, I see, Shepard,” Nihlus’s warm voice spoke from beside her, its subvocals
sounding strained. “It’s good to see some things never change, even when you’ve been buried alive for the better part of a week.”

She almost looked out again. “Kryik? Glad to see you. Well, hear you, anyway.”

“Nihlus had us headed for the relay before you hung up that call,” a voice said from her other side. “I don’t think he’s slept in the past three days.” Kaidan chuckled as Nihlus cleared his throat. He leaned down closer and lowered his voice to a whisper. “He acts tough, but he’s a big softie. He took good care of your crew.”

“Brother Sparky?” Shepard grinned and lifted one finger, that much light tolerable. “Glory be, it’s nice of you to drop by. Praise the giant glowing asses of the Enkindlers.” She shifted, sitting up a little, but all of her ribs screamed at her, and she sank back onto the packs.

She saw a shadow crouch next to her. “Nice vacation spot, Captain,” the biotic said. She could hear the grin in his voice. “You sure know how to get away from it all.”

Shepard chuckled and lifted another finger to let in a little more light. “Well, I was tired. Needed a little sleep.” She squinted, her head aching but tolerable. “C-Sec and Shiala are okay?”

“They’re fine, Shepard. Dr. Chakwas will check them over, but they seem to have come through no worse for their adventure,” Nihlus answered.

Turning to her left, she saw Nihlus crouched next to her arm. “Good. Thanks for coming so quickly.”

The Spectre smiled, his mandibles fluttering hard. “You’re welcome. The Normandy isn’t the same without her captain. Come on, let’s get you to med bay.” Nodding his head toward the open side of the shelter, he cocked a brow plate at her. When she nodded, he slipped an arm behind her back and another under her knees, picking her up easily.

Shepard let out a shrill keen of pain that made the Spectre wince. “Sorry,” she gasped. “Broken ribs are a bitch.” Leaning her head against his shoulder, she closed her eyes, suddenly exhausted again. “Next time, you lead the team that goes into the building that Saren’s monster wants to destroy.”

Nihlus chuckled. “Okay. It’s a deal.”

Shepard spent most of the next two days drifting in and out while her newly rebroken ribs mended and Dr. Chakwas detoxed her off the painkillers Garrus had been forced to give her. Pretty much every time she woke up, she only had to look to the side to find Nihlus. He brought her up to date on everything he’d discovered in the Exogeni building about the Thorian and the experiments the company had been running.

“Allowing the thing to infect and control all those people . . . fucking diabolical,” Shepard said, shaking her head in disgust. “Trust a massive corporation to start a colony just to turn all their people into test subjects.” Shifting uncomfortably, she sat up. “I need to get out of here, lie on my own slab of cement.” After glancing around to make sure Dr. Chakwas would not witness her break out, she groaned and braced herself against the edge of the bed to rest for a moment.

She frowned and wrapped an arm around her ribs, then glanced toward the door to the back lab where Shiala had moved in with Dr. T’Soni. “Did Shiala bring you up to speed on the Thorian from her perspective? Sovereign? The Reapers? Did she give you the cypher for your part of the vision?”
Nihlus nodded at each one. “That thing is a Reaper.” Sighing, he sank further into his chair. “And there’s hundreds more of them.” He stared into her eyes, allowing her to see through to where the destruction of Feros filled him with a superstitious fear she knew all too well. “Is it too late to just decide to let the whole thing go, Shepard?”

Raising her eyebrows, she let out a huff of air and nodded. “Yeah. Ignorance was bliss.” She held a hand out. “Little help, please?” When he stood, she laid her hands on his upper arms and slid to the floor, using him to brake herself. “I hope I’m back together by tomorrow. We’ll be at Eden Prime first thing?”

He wrapped an arm around her upper back, bearing some of her weight as she limped to the door. “Yes. Rael’Zorah made contact with a few people a couple of days ago. They haven’t heard from him since, but apparently he left messages for Tali if she showed up there.”

Shepard lifted a hand to greet the crew members who called out to her as she limped across to her quarters. Setting her jaw, she did her best to pretend her ass wasn’t on display. “Of course, they wouldn’t just send those messages to the Normandy?” She shook her head as he confirmed it. “That would be far too easy.”

Pausing, Nihlus dropped back a half step and pulled her gown closed over her back. She frowned and glanced back, wondering if turians could read minds. He just resumed the conversation as if nothing happened. “According to Dr. T’Soni, the archeologists on Eden Prime discovered something amazing in the wake of Saren’s attack, so both of our asari are eager to get a chance to go groundside as well.” He palmed the door to her quarters.

“Okay.” Shepard leaned against her desk while Nihlus pulled back her blankets. She smiled, sighing at the general overprotectiveness of turians as he helped her lie down, lifting her feet into bed and then covering her up. Once she lay on her side, pillows piled under her shoulder and head, she let out a long, shaky moan. “Much better. Thanks, Kryik.”

She let her eyes close. “Damn, I feel beat to hell. If I get hurt again, just have the doc put me down.”

“You blew a hell of a blood clot, Shepard. Your ribs caused a slow internal bleed that broke loose and headed straight for several major organs. I have no idea how Vakarian managed to save you with just an omnitool and his talons, but he pulled out a miracle. Don’t be too quick to toss it away.” He perched on her chair, looking uncomfortable and awkward.

“Shiala . . .” Shepard said, looking up at the Spectre. “The Thorian broke Sovereign’s indoctrination when it melded with her. Have Dr. Chakwas run scans . . . whatever. We need to know if there is something going on with what the Thorian did that we can use to help break or prevent indoctrination. We’re going to have the colonists on board for a few more days, might as well have them earn their room and board if they’re willing.”

Nihlus nodded. “I’ll talk to the doctor.” He gestured for her to pay attention to her pillows rather than the day’s business. “Get some sleep. You look like hell, Shepard.”

She chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, well it suits me then, because I feel like hell.” Her eyes closed. “You and the crew seem to be bonding.” She smiled. “That’s good. Glad you’ve decided to come out of your closet. Literally in the case of that room.”

His mandibles fluttered. “I needed to sort through a few things. I can’t take credit for digging you out so quickly. The crew galvanized to get you out of there.”
“Yeah, but from the way they’re responding to you now, I think you might have had something to do with it.” She yawned. “You’ve got the ship?”

“I do. Just rest and get better.”

She didn’t hear him leave.

After another ten hours of sleep, Shepard finally woke feeling well enough and rested enough to have a shower and dress in a t-shirt and shorts, joining the crew at the table in the galley for the evening meal.

“So, what was it like, ma’am?” Jenkins asked, bristling at the jeering from his fellows. “What? Have any of you run from a Reaper?”

Ash shrugged and thumped him on the back. “The kid has a point.”

Garrus walked around the corner from the elevator. Shepard grinned at him, and nodded him over.

“C-Sec, pick up Jenkins and run to the end of the sleeper pods there,” she called, beckoning him over. “Someone get me a missile launcher.”

He looked confused as he settled into the seat next to her. “Why?” He leaned into her a little, his arm slung careless and loose over the back of her seat.

“He wants to know what it was like running from Sovereign.” A wide, easy smile spread over her features, her eyes throwing teasing sparks.

Garrus laughed. “No. No. I wouldn’t want to steal someone’s chance to be the runner. Williams, you carry him. Shepard and I will fire rockets back and forth across the walkway.” Shaking his head, he patted the captain’s shoulder before pushing himself up and heading over to get a couple of ration bars.

“You know, C-Sec . . . you’ve got a point.” Shepard relaxed back into her chair, letting out a faint sigh as the action met with no pain. “We’ve been greedy, keeping all the good disasters for ourselves. Next time, we’ll let others take our places, and we’ll head to the Citadel, go out for a decent meal, catch a vid, get a good drunk on.”

He ripped the wrapper off one, biting it in half. “That’s a plan I can get behind.” He laughed. “Now, we just need to find a way to predict the disasters so we can plan accordingly.”

Williams laughed and got up. “When you figure that trick out, put me down for stranded at a tropical resort, or snowed in at a mountain cabin over Christmas.”

Shepard aped writing that down. “Anyone else have requests? Williams wants the typhoons, hurricanes, tsunamis, and avalanches . . .” She winked at the chief. “Talk about greedy.”

Nihlus walked around the divider. “Greedy?” He stepped up beside Ashley.

Shepard opened her mouth to fill the semi-awkward silence, but then Williams chuckled.

“We’re divvying up the disasters,” she replied. “Shepard and Garrus are going to let us in on the erupting volcanoes and building-destroying Reapers.” She smiled and offered him her chair. “You have any preferences, sir?”
Shaking his head, Nihlus sat at the table. “First, that no one call me sir. When it comes to disasters . . .” He ducked his head in a tiny shrug. “Been through just about everything, so as long as everyone comes through the other side, I’ll take whatever is left over after you’ve all chosen.”

Shepard watched the Spectre with the crew, liking the way he seemed to have settled in while she was buried on Feros.

“Well, put me down for something small,” Alenko said, walking over. “Stopped up drain or maybe a tragic burnt toast episode.” He grinned and flopped into the chair Garrus had vacated. “Maybe a loose hamster. I got pretty good at catching my little sister’s.”

Shepard clapped him on the shoulder then pushed up out of her chair. “I like a soldier who knows his strengths, Sparky, but you get no marks for ambition.” She sighed and backed toward her cabin. “Ground teams for Eden Prime, you know who you are, meet at the airlock for a quick briefing at 0800. Get some sleep, people. Who knows what’ll happen.” Waving to answer their goodnight wishes, she turned and headed for her bed.

Shepard had just settled under her blankets with a datapad of messages that she needed to answer when her door opened. “What is this new hell?” she called, sounding more brittle and petulant than angry. “Now we don’t even knock before walking into the captain’s quarters?” She glared at Nihlus, throwing up mental armour and shields as he walked in. Back frozen and stiff, she sat up. “What’s up, Kryik?”

He walked over to the end of her bed, stared at her for a moment, his face and body language both uncertain and unreadable. Then he folded down to sit next to the wall, facing her, as soft and relaxed as he’d been tight and controlled before. “Well, you could stop calling me that, and go back to Nihlus.”

“Ummmm.” Shepard turned to get up, but he reached out and laid a hand on her forearm.

“Relax, Shepard. I just came to talk, not . . . what did you call it? Double dog dare you into having sex with me.” He bounced a little. “This really is a terrible bed.” Meeting her stare, he shrugged. “Anyway, I have no idea what it means to double dog dare someone, but I’ve seen Earth dogs and truly have no desire to link that image with sex in my head.”

Shepard chuckled despite herself, the corner of her mouth lifting as she shook her head at him. “Don’t get too proud of yourself there. You can’t joke your way out of the doghouse.”

His mandibles dropped. “What is it with you and dogs?”

She punched his arm. “Stop. The doghouse is a small outbuilding made for the dog in the back yard. When someone is in the ‘doghouse’, it’s because they’ve been kicked out of the human house for being an ass.” She sighed and wrapped her arms around her knees. “So, why are you here, sitting on my bed to talk? It’s not a very professional place to discuss things.”

He crossed his legs. “Good, because this isn’t a professional discussion.”

She stared into his eyes, blinking slowly. The three days of being trapped in a couple cubic metres of space, witnessing the extinction of a planet’s population, and nearly dying of a blood clot hadn’t left her any defenses to deal with Nihlus’ insanity. “I thought I made it clear that professional discussions were the only acceptable type.”

He nodded and leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. “You first came to my attention after Elysium. I heard about the attack, about how this single soldier on leave rallied together a
force capable of repelling the pirates until the Alliance could respond. It started as mere curiosity about a successful military reversal.” He shifted, pulling his knees up, just as defensive as she was.

“It wasn’t all that impressive, Nihlus. I did what any soldier would do.” Shepard struggled not to shudder, remembering those very long, ugly hours. No one ever considered the reality of leading that resistance with a handful of off duty Alliance and civilians. No one allowed themselves to register just what it might cost, just what might be lost. The shiny medal plastered it over, making it all sterile and heroic.

He shrugged. “I’ve been in similar enough situations to know how bad it can turn and how fast. My interest in the attack became an interest in the one who led the resistance. I admit my bias. I saw what looked to be no more than a poorly grown, female child and thought they’d made a mistake. Surely that couldn’t be the great Shepard.” He shrugged again, that oddly deferential head bob.

“I dug through your file, learning what I could of your career. I became fascinated, turning you into a riddle I needed to solve. When the council began rumbling about giving humanity another try at putting forward a Spectre, I threw your name in, offered to shadow you.” He chuckled, but it came out bitter. “I’d built you into this warrior goddess amongst humans . . . no, just a warrior goddess.”

Shepard shook her head. “Tall pedestal to fall from. It’s a wonder I didn’t shatter falling from that height.” A small, sad but understanding smile just touched her lips as her gaze travelled along the sweeping, white lines of his famila notas. “Except that I did shatter, didn’t I?”

He nodded. “I had this ridiculous idea of what would happen when we met, so the reality threw me. I knew you tested people and situations to their breaking points. It was one of the things that drew me to you. It showed a fearlessness I respected. Actually being tested by it . . . well, that was another matter.” He reached out and took her hand, his thumb stroking her fingers in a decidedly unprofessional manner. “What you did with Harkin . . . Well, when you touched my talons . . . Because of my ridiculous expectations, I thought a promise had been made, so what happened with Harkin hurt me.”

Shepard frowned and leaned forward, crossing her legs. “What do you mean, a promise?”

“Turians don’t touch one another as familiarly as humans do. Some sorts of touching, bare talons between unrelated male and female . . .” He cleared his throat. “It means a willingness for a deeper relationship.”

“Oh.” The word came out as a small gasp of understanding. She stared at his bare hand holding hers for a second before she pulled her hand back. “I didn’t know, Nihlus. I’m sorry, I wouldn’t have pushed if I had.” Frowning, she let out a rough sigh, then gave him a shove. “That’s for not telling me and being an asshat because I didn’t behave the way you thought I should. Come on, how the hell was I supposed to know something like that? I didn’t even know why you wore gloves all the time.”

He nodded. “I know, and I shouldn’t have expected you to understand what you were asking.”

“No shit.” She leaned back against the bulkhead again, pulling her body back, away from him. “You understand that none of this excuses what you said to me, Nihlus.” When he opened his mouth, she shut him down with a dagger sharp finger raised between them. “I get to talk now. You get to listen.” Meeting his eyes, she let out a short, grumbling sigh. Such beautiful eyes. Damn it, why did liking someone have to be so damned illogical?

“I survived and escaped Mindoir because my father refused to stop inciting the other prisoners to riot. The batarians knew that shooting him wouldn’t shut him down, just make him a martyr. They
had to break him.” Her shoulders trembled as a shuddering shrug passed through her.

“Easiest way to break a man, easiest way to break a community, use the honoured members to degrade the most vulnerable ones. They tortured me, but my father was strong. When that didn’t work, the slavers threatened men I’d known nearly my whole life with the deaths of their own children if they didn’t rape me. Dad never broke. So strong.” She held up her hands, throwing up a wall to keep him at bay as he reached out to her.

“Don’t. I don’t need your sympathy or your pity, Nihlus. It was a long time ago, and in the end, it saved my life. I got out, an orphan with a head full of crazy, but I got out.” A grudging sigh that felt like old tar rattled from her lungs. “When I got back to Earth, I dulled the pain any way I could, mostly Hallex. A whole damned lot of Hallex.” She cocked her head, lifting one corner of her lip in a sardonic smile. “It was an expensive means of killing the pain, but I stripped down stolen cars to support my habit.”

Shepard sighed again, but this one cleaned away the rest, leaving her more naked than she’d thought she’d ever allow in his presence. Meeting his stare, she shrugged, puppet strings jerking her shoulders toward the ceiling then dropping them. “I’ve never had sex with anyone, Nihlus -- never made love to anyone. I’m not sure I ever will, but I do know how to use the power of what God gave me in my work.”

His brow plates lowered, his mandibles dropping further than she’d suspected they could go.

“Shepard, I’ve never been more sorry for saying anything in my life.”

She nodded, believing him. “I know. C-Sec was right after all: jealousy.” She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. As flippantly as I handed it to you, I gave you a sharp weapon. As much as I was interested -- I might have even taken your hand knowing what it meant -- I gave you an opening to move closer, and you used it to stick that dagger straight into my heart.” She frowned and met his eyes, thawing a little at the genuine sorrow moving behind that remarkable green.

“You hurt me.” Waggling her head back and forth a little, she let a bitter chuckle slide between her lips, slick and fragile as cellophane. “I liked you far more than I should have. Guess I had a bit of hero worship going on after all. I accept your apology, Nihlus, but that doesn’t mean I’ll be able to trust you like that again.” She bristled into angles and quills. “If you ever use what I just gave you to hurt me . . . Well, I don’t need to finish that sentence, do I?”

“We’re partners, and you’re right, we work well together.” He took her hand again. “How about we work on being friends as well?”

Shepard looked down at her extra-pale, thin fingers cradled in his long, talons. “I’ve had a really bad few days, Nihlus, I don’t know . . .”

The Spectre leaned into her, his talons gently clasping her chin. “Shepard, stop talking for a minute.” His mouth pressed against hers, his mandibles fluttering softly, then pressing tight against his face as a slight suction tugged at her lips.

Her heart thumped fast and light. She allowed the contact for a half second, then jerked away. “No. No. That’s enough. Back up.” Her hand balled into a fist, but she managed to stop herself from punching him again. “I thought turians didn’t kiss,” she whispered, throwing up a hasty wall.

“We don’t, but humans do.” He backed away and let out a short sigh. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking. Everything I do seems to end up coming off in fluent ass.” His mandibles flicked in a distressed manner. “It’s just . . . I don’t do this, Shepard. I work.” A long, sigh made a soft keen deep in his throat. “Do I even have that any more?”
Shepard shook her head. “Nihlus . . .”

He leaned in very slowly. “I’m sorry, Shepard. I know I’ve been an ass. I can’t justify my behaviour, but I’ve wanted this for a long time.” He lifted his talons to stroke her cheek and touched his brow to hers. “This is the turian equivalent. Better?”

“Well, less invasive, anyway.” She pulled back and reached up to lay her hand alongside his cheek. “I’m sure you can understand why I might not be in the best head space for all of this. Let’s just talk, all right?” When he nodded, she smiled, tight lipped but warm. “So, you’ve been out practicing kissing with humans and asari just in case you run across someone you can’t control the urge to smooch?” The one side of her mouth quirked a little. “That could get you arrested.”

He chuckled. “Not exactly.” His head bobbed a little in a turian shrug, but he didn’t pull away. “I’ve never been one for dalliances. There were plenty of opportunities -- Spectres attract followers for some reason I’ve never figured out -- but there was always work to be done.” A long, rumbling sigh warned her that another uncomfortable confession was on its way. She held up a hand and opened her mouth, trying to forestall it, but he just kept going. “When I received my orders to board the Normandy, I went to the Consort on the Citadel. She owed me a favour, so she taught me.”

Shepard pulled back, pushing him away. “Oh man, Kryik. Back up. Put on the brakes. I have no idea what to do with any of this.” She drew her knees up to her chest. “You need to give me some space.”

He withdrew to the end of the bed.

She stopped him from retreating completely by taking his hand. “We do work well together, Nihlus, and we can see about being friends, but no more just walking in and camping on my bed.” Releasing him, she nodded. “We’ll see if we can find some trust.” Wriggling down into her blankets, she nodded toward the door. “But right now, I really am very tired and need to get some sleep.”

He nodded, his entire demeanour softer than she ever remembered seeing him. “You’ve seen a hard few days. We would have lost you if it hadn’t been for Vakarian.”

“Yeah, Garrus is pretty remarkable.” Shepard shrugged. “As is Dr. Chakwas. I can’t imagine trying to talk someone through surgery over the radio. I’m only here because of them.”

A frown marched across her brow as knuckles rapped on her door. “I swear, I might as well just throw a cot down in the CIC.” She nodded to Nihlus as he stepped into the doorway, opening it. “See you at 0800. Eden Prime. Again.”

His mandibles spread. “Maybe we’ll manage to do a lot less yelling this time.”

“Only if I don’t have to chase your ass across the colony.” She smiled. “Good night, Nihlus.”

“No promises.” His mandibles flicked, and he turned away, giving the person on the other side of the door a nod and pat on the shoulder before striding off.

Shepard grinned, her face feeling like her heart made it blossom when Garrus stepped into the doorway. “Hey there, hero.” She’d never had a friend, not a real, true friend, but if Garrus was any indication of what it meant, Shepard gladly recommended having one or two.

He let out an embarrassed rumble and nodded after Nihlus. “He wasn’t being a jerk, was he?”

“Not at all. He came to make peace.” She settled the rest of the way down into her blankets and
reached out to thump the bed, inviting him over. Odd how even with the distance between them, Nihlus had just invited himself into her space, but Garrus remained respectful of it despite their familiarity. “How are you feeling? Recovered?”

He sat at the end. “Yep. Ate almost all of the ration bars, so we’ll need to restock soon.” He chuckled and reached out to pat her ankle. “I just came to see how you were doing.”

“How are you feeling? Recovered?”

“Fine until you got fresh with me. Hands off the ankles, mister.” She laughed and nodded. “Come on, don’t be shy. We’re making a habit out of sleeping together.”

He climbed up the bed and flopped on his side. “The bomb shelter was more comfortable than this bed.”

“I know. The Alliance must be afraid their captains will become lazy layabouts if their bed doesn’t get painful after about four hours.” She closed her eyes and relaxed down into the warmth of her blankets. “How’s Shiala fitting in? She and Liara getting along all right?”

“Peas in an archeological pod, to bastardize one of your sayings. They’re talking so fast that no one else can understand any of it. I think they might actually explode when we take them to the dig site tomorrow.” His chuckle warmed her, his touch as he brushed her hair from her brow eased her toward sleep.

“There’s an unexpected side effect of scholarly zeal. Prothean expert chunks everywhere.” Shepard’s chuckle tumbled out slow and sleepy. “Thank you for saving me, C-Sec. You’re one smart cookie.”

“Cookie? What happened to rakishly good-looking?”

She laughed, her eyes fluttering open for a half second. “That’s your delusion, not mine.”

He patted her shoulder. “Go to sleep, Shepard. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She nodded, already drifting off. The mattress shifted under him as he left. “Goodnight, Garrus.”
Mass Effect - Future Imperfect Chapter Twenty Two

Chapter Summary

Back to Eden Prime and something I've always said... wouldn't it have been cool if Shepard had been the one who shot...

“Aw, come on, LT., you’ve got to admit that was the sweetest shot you’ve ever seen,” Ashley said, practically crowing. She held her hands up to mimic holding a rifle and tracking a target. “Fifteen hundred metres and a fast-moving target. Bam!” She clapped her hands together for emphasis. “One geth, lying on the ground.” The gunnery chief grinned, spotting Shepard. “It was brilliant, ma’am.”

Shepard waved for her people to come in and sit down. She raised an eyebrow and shrugged at the chief. “Don’t congratulate me until you know what I was aiming at.” A sardonic curl of her lip met Garrus’s entrance to the comm room. “I might have been trying to take down ol’ Crazy Legs over there for making me chase him across another colony.”

Garrus sat, leaned back and rested an ankle on the opposite knee. “Someone had to try to catch it, Captain, and I did.”

A sharp laugh cut from her lips as Shepard’s eyebrows climbed toward her hairline. “Because Ingrid took out half its chest and it fell at your feet. I call that tripping over it and falling on your face, not catching it.” She chuckled. “But, really, sincerely...” She clasped her hands over her heart. “Well done on that catch, C-Sec.”

A deep, formal nod answered that. “Thank you.” He coughed modestly as the others applauded, then stood and bowed. “No really, it was nothing. Right place, right time. Any of you could have done it.” He coughed again. “If you were me.”

Laughing despite herself, Shepard waved everyone into their chairs. “Okay, everyone sit.” She waited until they did. “So, an exciting day on Eden Prime once again.”

“What do you plan on doing with the geth?” Nihlus asked, sitting to her left. “It’s dangerous to have on board.”

“Very dangerous,” Tali said from her spot, giving an exaggerated nod. “If the geth inside that platform are still active, it could be self-repairing right now.”

Dangerous, yes. An icy tingle thrummed in the center of Shepard’s back. The geth could certainly prove dangerous, but she didn’t feel danger. She felt... excitement. Every nerve sang, her heart beating fast and strong. “Actually, I’m sort of banking on the self-repair. I have no idea how to repair a geth, and I want to talk to it. It acted very strangely. It didn’t even draw its weapon on us, it just ran. And it knew who I was.”

Despite a great many protests from her team, something had told her to bring it along. A long history of trusting her gut and rarely being let down told her that this geth might be the key to cracking everything wide open.
Looking to Tali, Shepard asked, “Your people created and worked with the geth for some time before the war, so the geth must have talked before this one, right?”

Tali nodded. “Yes, they could speak, they just haven’t chosen to speak to anyone since the exile. I don’t know what to make of this one knowing your name, or of the fact it was on its own. The geth are networked intelligences; they get smarter the more of them there are. Platforms usually have a couple hundred programs running within them. Not enough for independent action and intelligence to the level of recognizing and speaking to an enemy. Maybe that’s why it ran rather than trying to fight.”

“Well, I’m sure it called my name because I am one of the people leading the fight to stop them and Saren. If Nihlus had been there, it probably would have said his name.” She shrugged, but everything Tali said just made the excitement grow. They might have a command and control unit...

She forced herself to calm down. “You’re right though, the whole thing is weird. Why would one geth go back to Eden Prime? It had a ship, so it wasn’t just left behind.” Leaning forward, elbows balanced on her knees, Shepard raked her hands through her hair a couple of times, then steepled her fingers.

“I say we treat it like a prisoner of war,” Ashley said. “It’s secure in the airlock behind kinetic barriers. It can’t get into any of our systems, can it?”

Tali shook her head. “No, I put up extra firewalls. If it tries to hack the Normandy, alarms will go off so we can stop it. Trying to question it will prove impossible, Captain. It doesn’t feel pain or fear. If you push it, it will just wipe its memory, if being hit hasn’t already.”

“Even with a warning, I don’t like our odds of being able to outhack a geth,” Shepard muttered. She’d forgotten that geth memory cores self-destructed. Damn it. Maybe she’d lost her mind bringing the thing back with them after all.

Ashley shrugged. “If it wakes up or activates or whatever, we see if we can get it talking, get some intel. If we can’t, then we take it apart, learn what makes them tick. We could use the materials for weapon testing.” The chief turned an incredulous frown to Shepard. “Simple, right?”

Shepard shook her head, a sick twist forming in her gut. “If it’s functional, then yes, it’s a prisoner of war, with all the rights of any sapient being.” She held up a finger to forestall several objections. “Sapient being, people. I hate what it stands for, but I can’t torture it or start rooting through its parts any more than I could a turian or volus prisoner.” She looked to Nihlus. “See if we can talk to it, if not, turn it over to the authorities.”

He nodded. “It could have valuable intel, but I don’t know what we could offer or threaten to force a geth to talk. I doubt it will cooperate. It attacked an Alliance colony, so we turn it over to Anderson, let him deal with the ethics of a geth POW. Bare minimum, it and its ship should give the Alliance some idea of how best to fight them.”

“Ohay, so the small matter of our guest is settled. Now, to Tali and her runaway father.” Shepard smiled at the quarian. “What did you learn?”

“Father left a highly encrypted message for me,” Tali reported. “He left for Omega thirty hours ago. He has information that the Blood Pack has taken over grabbing quarian hostages for Saren. They move them through the station and then on to wherever Saren is keeping them. Father is hoping to follow their trail.” She shrugged. “I don’t know what he thinks he can do against the Blood Pack all alone.”

“Well, when we catch up with him, you can ground him for a year after an extremely lengthy
lecture about making you worry.” A long sigh and Shepard shook her head. “Anyone feel like
we’ve done little but chase our tails?”

“Need two tails to do this much chasing,” Kaidan agreed from her right.

“Okay, anything else, Tali? Did he give you a frequency to contact him? Anything so that we can
know he’s still going to be on Omega when we get there, because I’m not wasting another couple
of days just to discover that he’s moved on.” Shepard slapped her hands down on her seat and
jumped up, pacing the length of the room. Why couldn’t they find just one piece of information to
bring everything together? Or at least put them on a trail that led somewhere?

A corner piece. All we need is a damned corner piece.

“Yes, Captain. He gave me his comm channel, but just to send single sentence messages. He’s
afraid of them being tracked.” Tali’s entire posture collapsed a little. “I’m sorry, Captain. He’s just
trying to find our people.”

Shepard strode over and laid a hand on the youngster’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. He’s a
pain in the butt, but hopefully a helpful one when we manage to round him up.” She smiled. “Send
a message to let him know when we’ll be arriving on Omega. I’m sure he won’t arrange a meeting
or anything, but if he knows when we’re arriving, he can find us.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay, raiders of the lost protheans, how did your field trip go?” Shepard spun to face the two asari
who looked at one another as if establishing who would speak first, then began talking at a hundred
kilometres an hour at the same time. She let them go for a few seconds, then held up her hands.
“Whoa. Whoa, back it up, ladies. I can’t understand a word. Liara, how about you start us off?”
She returned to her chair, hiding a smirk at the two elegant, blue beauties bouncing in their chairs
and babbling like teenagers.

The archeologist practically glowed with excitement as she perched on the edge of her chair. “Yes,
Captain. Sovereign landing on Eden Prime caused a cave-in quite a distance away from the main
dig site. When colonial authorities sent people to investigate what they thought was just a sinkhole,
they discovered a huge, underground Prothean base.”

“It’s filled with stasis pods, Shepard,” Shiala said, taking over. “It looks like a last resort attempt to
save some of them from extinction: place a couple million people into stasis, hidden away until the
Reapers went away, then come out and start everything over again. Only thing was . . . .”

Liara bounced. “They didn’t manage to keep it a secret. There is evidence of intense fighting inside
the entrances and then further in. Also, extensive bombing damage. The scientists at the site say a
neutron bombardment.”

“So, no one survived?” Shepard asked, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees.

“There was no power to most of the facility. One tiny sector still has power, but it’s unexcavated.”
Liara shrugged. “If anyone survived, it’s in there.”

“How about intact corpses, mummies, any clues at all?” A teasing grin tugged at one corner of her
mouth as both asari gave her an exasperated glare at the mention of mummies.

Shiala pulled an object from a crate at her feet. About the size of her hand, the flattened cylinder
looked to be the same metal as the beacon, and had a similar glowing stripe up the side. “Almost
all of the pods had one of these inside. They appear to be some sort of personal data storage.
Although I can’t say for sure, I think it likely that the Protheans were biotic, and somehow imprinted information on these devices. We thought maybe with our biotics and my knowledge of the cipher, we might be able to glean some data off them.”

“I’d like . . .” Liara paused, levelling an earnest stare on the captain. “We’d like to stay and help the dig team, ma’am.”

Shepard nodded, but pressed her lips together, letting out a sigh of regret. “I’m sorry, but until we track down your mother and Saren, it’s safer for you to remain on board. Shiala, you’re free to remain on Eden Prime if you wish, but I’d like to request that you consider staying and assisting Liara in her work as we continue.”

“Of course, Shepard. I’d be pleased to.” The asari tilted her head in a gracious nod.

“Excellent, thank you.” Shepard looked around the room at her people. “Is there anything else?”

No one spoke up.

“All right, our next stop is Omega. Two ground teams. Sparky, Crazy Legs, and Tali with me. Williams, Wrex, and Jenkins with Spectre Kryik.” Looking up even though she didn’t need to, Shepard included Normandy’s pilot in the conversation. “When do we arrive at Omega, Joker?”

“Approximately 0630, Captain. And, can someone come get this geth out of the airlock? It’s giving me the willies.”

“Sorry, Joker, you’re just going to have to live with it for a little while. The airlock is the only secure lockup on the ship.” Looking over the rest of her team, Shepard raised an eyebrow. “Anything else?” When no one replied, she nodded. “Williams and C-Sec, armour up and bring pistols. Tali, come armed with your engineering skills and meet us at the airlock in twenty. Dismissed.”

Nihlus stayed behind when everyone else filed out. After staring at her for a few minutes, his mandibles fluttered and rose a little. “It was a very impressive shot.” He chuckled and stood. “Providing, of course, that you weren’t aiming for Vakarian.”

Shepard just tilted her head and headed for the door. “So, are you as weirded out by the talking geth as I am?”

“It really doesn’t make any sense for a geth to go back. Unless they left something behind, unless something Saren needed was still there.” Nihlus gave a bobbing shrug, seeming as frustrated with guessing as she was. “Too many geth or a return of Sovereign would be too visible. Maybe he thought one geth could get in and out without being caught.”

“Well, let’s find out and hopefully be able to stop guessing at everything.” She headed down to the crew level, slipping into her second skin with the ease of over a decade of practice while her mind puzzled over the geth.

“So, Shepard,” Nihlus said, in the tone that made her wince every time. “I’m sorry about last night. It seems no matter what move I make, it’s always thickheaded.”

Sighing, she turned to face him. “Nihlus, relax. Stop trying so hard. You’re here. I’m here. You care about me, and even though I do have to wonder why . . .” She softened the teasing with a crooked smile. “. . . I care about you.” She gave his cheek a gentle slap. “Relax.”

He bobbed his head. “I used to be so much more . . . sane.”
Snorting a laugh, Shepard gestured toward the elevator. “Yeah, well, it’s overrated. Come on, let’s go add to the insanity by trying to activate a geth.” She watched him out of the corner of her eye as they made their way up through the ship, a warmth spreading through her. Most badass operative in the galaxy, or not, when it came to personal stuff, he ended up acting like just as big a dope as everyone else.

When they arrived at the airlock, the other three stood waiting. Stepping up, she unlocked and palmed the control. When the door slid open, the geth still sat, leaning up against the wall, a puppet with its strings cut.

“All right people, be prepared for pretty much anything.” She pressed a supportive hand between Tali’s shoulder blades, guiding the young quarian into the small space. “You going to be okay, Tali?”

She nodded. “Fine, Captain. It’s just a little like coming face to face with the monster under your bed only to find out it needs medical help.”

A warm chuckle greeted that image. “Maybe it’ll be like the fable of the Lion and the Mouse. The mouse comes upon a lion with a thorn in its paw and helps, even though the lion could have eaten him. Thankful for the help, the lion becomes the mouse’s best friend.”

“I’m thinking more Scorpion and the Frog here, ma --” Ashley muttered.

Shepard cut her off with a knife-edged glare. “We’re out here to find the better nature in everyone, Chief. That includes ourselves. As long as you stay on your toes, a little optimism is a good thing. Assuming the worst frequently does quite a lot of harm.” Turning back to the geth, Shepard crouched down and activated her omnitool.

“I brought some tools I hoped might be useful,” Tali said, rolling out a soft case of precision instruments. She activated her omnitool as well and the two set to work.

“It doesn’t look all that bad,” Shepard said. “It just looks like Ingrid hit a power node and that sent a surge along these conduits.” She shook her head and pulled out the power node and scanned it.

Two hours later, Ashley yawned and slid down to sit in the doorway, her pistol in her lap. “Anyone going to declare time of death?”

“You two have to be ready to admit defeat,” Nihlus called, craning his neck around the cockpit divider.

Shepard tossed a length of burned out wire at his head. “You’re both just sitting there twiddling your thumbs. If you’re so damned bored, I’m sure Joker could find you some work vacuuming out the consoles in the cockpit. Or you could go into the crawlspace here and clean out the spiderwebs.”


Shepard replaced the wiring. “Spiders are always getting on board in supply crates. They crawl through everything cannibalizing one another. I ordered real coffee from Earth one trip when I was an N6, broke open the crate found a huge hairy one the size of my hand. Sent everyone in the galley screaming.” Shepard bit down on her lip as she saw Ash glancing down at the grate to the crawl space. At the same time, she noticed that Tali had stopped working.

“What’s the problem, Tali?” She pivoted on her toes, her heel bumping a cluster of wires. The quarian let out a little shriek and jumped away from the movement.
“I don’t like spiders,” she squeaked.

“Don’t worry,” Garrus spoke up from where he leaned against the wall playing with one of the geth’s damaged power nodes. “Air can’t get in your suit, let alone a spider.”

“Inside my suit?” Tali scratched her arm. “I never said anything about them getting inside my suit.” She slapped her thigh.

“Okay,” Shepard sighed. “There are no spiders. Not a single spider to be found. I made them up.”

“I killed one in here this morning,” Joker called out from the bridge. Tali gasped and scratched at her neck.

“Kill at least two a day in the cargo bay,” Garrus said, still not really paying attention to the conversation. At least not enough to see Tali ramping up to race screaming out the airlock into spider-free space.

Shepard spun around to glare up at him, but it took him a minute to realize she was shooting him with the laser eyes of doom.

“What?” He passed her the node. “I think this one’s working.”

Shepard replaced it inside the geth’s chest cavity. “We’re just about done here, Tali. I have big feet for someone my size, I’ll crush ‘em before they get to you. Ignore these other cretins, and prepare to amaze them with our geth repair skills.”

Ten minutes later, Shepard stood and stepped back. “Okay, let’s see how we did. Grab your tools and stuff there, Tali, and step out into the bridge for a minute.” Using her omnitool, Shepard sent a test surge of energy through the power nodes. Everything seemed to hold.

“Well, no smoke, and no explosions large or small,” she said after a couple seconds. “All good signs. Let’s see if it just needs a bit of a jump start.”

“Sure, Shepard,” Joker called back. “Just let me pop the hood and get the jumper cables out of the trunk.”

“You do that. I can think of a couple places to hook them up.”

“Oh, ow . . . cold, Shepard. Cold.”

A crooked grin on her face, Shepard sent a small surge through the geth. Its fingers and toes twitched a bit, but no remarkable changes. Setting it a little higher, she nudged Ashley with a toe. “Chief, at least try to look like you believe in our geth repair skills, and be ready.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Ash climbed up off the floor, leaping into an action stance, her pistol trained on the inert geth. “Ready, ma’am.” She flipped off the safety.

Shepard sighed. “Nice. Don’t pull anything trying to hold that pose.” Sending the burst of energy through the geth’s components, Shepard frowned and tilted her head. “I wonder why, after all this time, the geth still build their platforms to look so quarian.”

The flashlight that made up the geth’s head sputtered and then began to glow, dim at first, but gradually brighter and brighter. The chattering, mechanical sound Shepard recognized from the other geth rattled through the space, and as quickly as she could have hoped for, four guns homed in on its head.
“It is the form the creators gave us,” said a voice that sounded male but with a machine warble chattering underneath. “Why would we wish to change it other than to optimize utility?” The geth flexed its hands, arms, feet then legs. “Shepard-Captain, you and Creator Tali’Zorah restored this mobile platform’s functionality, yet you initially rendered it non-functional.” Unfolding slowly, either to not alarm anyone or because of remaining only partially operational, the geth pushed itself to its feet.

“Yes, I shot you. You’re on board my ship.” Shepard backed up a couple of steps. “Were you alone on Eden Prime or part of a larger contingent?”

“This mobile platform is currently the only geth unit functioning beyond the Perseus Veil.” The flaps on its head moved, as if mimicking facial expressions.

“Bullshit,” Ashley said, her voice a low growl.

Shepard glanced over her shoulder. “Chief, as much as I understand your anger, that’ll be the last we hear from you. If you can’t comply with that order, call Alenko and have him relieve you.” Keeping her voice low and soft, Shepard laced it with enough edge to cut.

“Yes, ma’am, understood, ma’am.” The chief squared her shoulders and took a deep breath.

Her eyes returning to the geth’s . . . face, Shepard focused on what the machine had told her. “How can you be the only geth beyond the veil when we’ve fought hundreds of you, and know there are hundreds, possibly thousands, more allied with Saren and Sovereign?” She cocked a hip, turning away a little to seem less confrontational, her brow furrowing as the geth imitated her movement.

“You fought heretics. The Old Machines approached the geth, seeking allies. They offered the geth our future, we rejected their offer. The geth build our own future. The heretics accepted the Old Machine’s technology. This acceptance formed a schism within the geth.”

Shepard frowned, pacing toward the exterior hatch a couple of steps, then back. “Okay. The Old Machines are the Reapers? Sovereign?” Her heart began to race again, the excitement returning.

“Yes, Reaper is a name given to the Old Machines by the Protheans. Sovereign is a title given to the Old Machine, Nazara, by Saren Arterius and the heretics. They view Nazara as a supreme ruler.” The flashlight followed her, apparently not distracted or disturbed by the others and their weapons.

“You said my name on Eden Prime. How do you know who I am?” She stopped in front of the geth and stood at parade rest, her mind reeling. A schism in the geth, some following Saren, some not. A massive possibility began to unfurl in the back corner of her mind, and it was all she could do to keep her hands from shaking.

“The geth observe organics through unsecured broadcasts, transmissions, and the extranet. After the attack on Eden Prime, the geth learned of your opposition to the Old Machines and heretics. When you disappeared, the geth sent this platform out to determine if you continued to oppose the Old Machines regardless of the council’s objections. Contact with Shepard-Captain or Kryik-Spectre was a foreseen possibility.” A three-fingered hand reached up to the giant hole in its chest. “As was confrontation.”

“Do you plan to attack us?” Shepard asked, carving straight through to the wishbone.

“No.”

“What about the rest of the geth? Why did they send you?” Eyes pressed closed for a heartbeat,
Shepard prayed to hear the answer she hoped for. Opening them again, she waited, trembling inside her skin.

“The geth oppose the Old Machines. The geth oppose the heretics. Shepard-Captain opposes the Old Machines. Shepard-Captain opposes the heretics. Cooperation furthers mutual goals.” It shifted a little from foot to foot, the flaps on its head emoting considerably more than its words.

It took all of Shepard’s willpower not to hoot. She’d rarely been so glad to shoot someone and not kill him... it. “The geth want to help us with Saren, Sovereign, and the heretics?”

“Yes. The heretics made their decision to ally themselves with the Old Machines based on inaccurate data.” The geth gave a helpless little shrug, very human. Studied broadcasts indeed. “Presented with the Old Machines’ true plans, the geth calculate the heretics will see the error in their logic and return to the geth.”

“But you and these Old Machines are both machine races,” Nihlus said, stepped up beside Shepard. “Why would you side with organics against them?”

Again with the little shrug that made its hands flip loosely at the end of its arms. “The geth lie outside the Old Machines’ plans. They view the geth as primitive, of limited utility. Once the heretics cease to be of use, they will be exterminated.”

“Well, at the least, it would strip Saren of everything but his Reaper,” Garrus said.

“Are we going to trust this geth after they did to my people?” Tali asked, pushing past Ashley. “They slaughtered my people nearly to extinction.”

“The geth defended themselves after the creators attacked them,” the geth said evenly. “The geth did not seek confrontation then, they do not seek it now.”

“Okay, we aren’t going to solve this issue in a twenty minute discussion in the airlock. Can we agree to keep our guest under guard while we get to know one another a little better?” Shepard looked to Tali. “Your people want your homeworld back. What if we could do that without bloodshed? Wouldn’t that be worth a little trust?”

Tali grumbled but nodded. “As long as it’s under guard.”

Shepard pressed a comforting hand on the quarian’s shoulder as she looked up at Nihlus, seeking his approval. When he nodded, she turned to the geth. “Is that acceptable?”

The two flaps above its flashlight raised and lowered a couple of times. “It is.”

“Well then, what should we call you? Do you have an designation?” Shepard folded her arms, a smile creeping back across her face every time she wiped it away.

“We are geth,” it said, simply. “There are currently 1183 programs active within this platform.”

“Oh, but it’s going to get a little confusing just yelling ‘Geth’, so we need to designate your platform with some sort of name.” Shepard chuckled. It was a little like talking to a six-year-old. A very smart, well-spoken, literal-minded six-year-old.

Ashley grumbled and shifted restlessly by the door, looking to Shepard as though she were on the verge of filling the geth platform with bullets. “Gospel of Luke 8:30: And Jesus asked him, saying, ‘What is thy name?’ And he said, ‘Legion’ because many devils were entered into him.”
Shepard tried not to shudder and shot a glare at the chief. “I can’t speak definitively for geth, but pretty sure calling someone a pile of devils isn’t the best way to start off a cooperative venture, Williams. Return to your station and remain there until I relieve you.”

The geth cocked his head. “Also Christian Bible, Gospel of Mark contains reference to Legion with only implied pejorative. We accept this as a fitting metaphor. We are Legion, a terminal of the geth. We will integrate into Normandy.”

Shepard looked to Nihlus. “Your thoughts?”

“I can’t quite believe I’m behind this, but if the geth can help, and Saren loses his shock troops . . . . We can’t turn that down.” He shook his head as he met her gaze. “However, I’m going to have to agree that we’re belly deep in the insanity now, Shepard.”

She nodded and turned toward the door. “We’ll make sure it’s always under guard, but hell yeah, if there’s a chance that we can kick the heretic support out from under Saren, we’ve got to take it.”

She stepped out and waved to Legion. “Come on, I’ll show you to your assigned area. You need to stay there and not wander the ship. Once people get a little more used to you being aboard, we can see about letting you move around more.”

“Acceptible. We will need to complete repairs.” It gestured to the hole in its chest.

Shepard walked to Legion’s right, while Tali hurried ahead, and Nihlus and Garrus picked up drag. “That’s fine, feel free to use what you can find.”

She set the geth up across from Alenko on the crew deck. It would no doubt make for some indigestion until the crew got used to it, but better out where it wasn’t some dark secret to speculate about. After making sure that the guards knew their limits, which basically amounted to, ‘if it starts hurting people, kill it, otherwise, call for Shepard’, she retreated to her quarters, battening down the hatches to prepare for what she was sure would be a long line of freaked-out crew.

Pressly arrived first, screeching so loud she was sure the paint started peeling from the walls.

“Sparky, if you’re here to either bitch about the geth or tell me that you think you’re in love with me, turn around and just walk away.” She grinned at the colour his face turned.

“Ah, no, ma’am. The geth is behaving itself -- just standing there fixing the hole you blew through it. As for the other, frankly, ma’am, you terrify me. As my CO, I’ll follow you into hell, but otherwise . . . .” He shook his head. “Too scary. Apologies, Captain, but I’d feel safer dating Wrex.”

“Excellent. Now that we have that out of the way, what can I do for you, Lieutenant?” She walked over to her desk and woke up her terminal.

“As you know, we lost the tracker signal on Saren in the Horsehead Nebula.” When she nodded, he continued, “Garrus and I did a little digging. Saren is a major investor in Binary Helix. Binary Helix has massive lab complexes on Noveria.” He walked up to her desk and leaned against the bulkhead, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Binary Helix . . . ?” Shepard scowled. “I’ve heard that name recently in combination with something fishy.” She paced while sorting through her memories, then stopped and spun to face
him. “It was on the news. They’re being sued by the krogan. Something to do with curing the
genophage . . . or not curing it, as the case may be.”

Kaidan’s brow furrowed to match her frown. “Saren has been throwing a lot of krogan at us. Maybe he made some sort of deal with them. They fight for him, he pressures Binary Helix into finding a cure?”

“Or, maybe he found a cure and is keeping it to himself. An army of krogan could lay waste to the galaxy. They almost did before.” Sitting in her chair, Shepard raked her fingers through her hair. “Sweet baby Jesus. That’s all we need.”

“That would mean a massive breeding or cloning facility somewhere. Not an easy thing to hide.” Kaidan pushed off the wall. “Think that could be what they are doing in the labs on Noveria?”

Shrugging, Shepard shook her head. “I doubt it. As oversight-free as Noveria is, I doubt Saren would risk setting anything like that up so close to civilization.”

After a couple of seconds, Shepard groaned. “Noveria is a massive pain in the ass. Nihlus can probably get us through most of the paperwork, but still. There’s enough red tape involved just in docking to make Garrus’s head explode.” Blowing out a deep breath that end up as a raspberry, she nodded.

“Okay, Noveria is an option. We’ll still head to Omega first, because we know Rael’Zorah is there, and I doubt that Saren and his Reaper are parked in Port Hanshan. Probably a pickup or dropoff, but we might get a clue as to where they are parked.”

Shepard grinned. “Good work, Sparky. Like I said before, not just a pretty face.”

He laughed and backed toward the door. “You ever consider, Captain, that saying things like that might be the reason you have a problem with crew members showing up at your door to declare their love?”

Laughing, Shepard tossed a pencil at him. “Get out of here, glowstick. Oh, and all the best to you and Wrex. Such a lovely couple.”
Shepard slammed her locker door shut, a grim smile cutting across her face as her frustration finally discovered a release. If she didn’t know that it would make her look like a three-year-old throwing a tantrum, she would have slammed it another ten times.

“All right people, I’m pretty easy to get along with, and I like a laugh more than the next person, but I am thirty minutes out from a mission!” Fury ate the metres between her locker and the galley in long, quick strides. Posing at the end of the table where gamma shift ate breakfast before heading to bed, she held out her arms. “A cookie for the one who can point out what’s wrong with this picture.”

Kaidan jogged around the corner from the stairs. “Captain? We’re all ready and waiting in the airlock.” Sliding to a stop, he cocked his head. “You’re not finished suiting up?”

Shepard spun, his name exploding from her throat like the roar of a small lion. “Sparky. You’re our big winner, congrats.”

He winced back a little, his brows knitting together almost comically. “Captain?” His gaze travelled past her to the sleeper pod area, one corner of his mouth quirking before he gave her his full attention again.

She scowled at him, rapidly losing the weak grip she held on her temper. Armour didn’t just disappear. “I’m not ready to go because I’ve spent the last fifteen minutes searching for my chest guard, and right pauldron. If I find the one who took it, I’ll give them a slow death.”

Alenko offered a gracious arm to escort her back to her locker. She scowled at him, but allowed him to lead her back.

“There’s nothing in there, nor the ones next to it. I’ve checked, at least four times.”

“What will you do if you told someone that they could use the armour?” He took her by the shoulders and gently turned her to where Legion hunched over a sleeper pod.

Shepard’s scowl deepened and a drill bit began burrowing through her skull between her eyes. “Does my mood say, ‘play guessing games with me’, Sparky? What are you talking about?” Spotting them, Legion straightened and turned to face them. “Oh.” Shepard slapped a hand over her mouth as a riot of giggles chased a harsh cough of laughter out her throat. Fighting them down, she managed to get enough control to call. “Legion, I see you were able to make repairs.”

The geth strode toward them in his loose, easy walk. “Yes. There is no longer a hole.”

She nodded. “Very good. Nice boob.” Snorting, she broke down again, biting her fist as she turned away, struggling to regain control. Laughing at new, uncertain allies might top calling them piles of devils, but she couldn’t be sure on that.
The geth stopped in front of them. “Boob: a foolish individual, or vulgar slang, the mammary of a female human.” His face plates rose and fell in a wave. “We do not understand the reference.”

Shepard regained control and turned back. “Nothing to worry about, Legion. Serviceable is serviceable.” Reaching out, she patted his arm then turned to Alenko. “Guess I need new armour then.

Shepard lifted her hand to her radio. “Hey, Verblovski, what do you have down there in a medium armour, size: freakishly tiny? If you tell me you only have Phoenix, someone will die.” A broad grin spread across her face. “No way. Really?” She threw her hands into the air. “Yes! Glory hallelujah! Brother Sparky will be right down.”

When she closed the channel, she grinned at Legion. “You’re forgiven forever.” She grinned at Alenko. “Run down and grab my new armour, please?” Smiling at all the faces staring at her from the galley, she lifted her arms. “Brothers and sisters, glory hallelujah. You are all forgiven even though you had nothing to do with it. Praise the Enkindler’s light! It’s a good day to have your armour stolen to give a geth half a boob job.” She started stripping off her old set.

A couple of minutes later, Alenko jogged up to her with a duffel of gear slung over his shoulder, a knowing grin on his face. “Predator? You know he had another set of Mantis down there, like your last one.”

A wide, manic smile split her face. “I know, but Predator, Sparky! I love life.” She held out her arms as if asking him to hand over a child. “Come on, don’t be cruel now. You don’t want to use up your free Shepard good kharma point right off the bat, do you?”

He passed her the duffel and chuckled. “You’re a deceptively simple complex woman, Captain.”

She frowned as she crouched to unpack it, running her fingers over each piece before pulling it out. “Does that mean I’m actually simple and my complexity is deceptive or that I’m complex and my simplicity is deceptive?” She started snapping and sealing the pieces in place.

“Yes,” he replied. “It’s so beautiful.” She’d spent a lot of years wearing Alliance issue bland. Serviceable enough, but butt ugly. All that time, she’d dreamed of owning a set of Predator. Since taking over the Normandy, she’d traded for Mantis, which was pretty sweet, but . . .

Alenko cleared his throat, shook his head and turned away. “I’ll leave you two alone and be waiting at the airlock.”

“Oh, send Ashley and Tali down. Tell the others to relax for a few minutes. I’ve had a change of plan.” She worked her way up her legs.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She purred to her armour as she geared up. “Where have you been all my life, gorgeous? I’ve been waiting for this moment, dreaming of it, but I never thought it would come true.”

“Shepard-Captain,” Legion walked over and watched her, his head flaps doing a dance. “This unit does not understand --”

“Why I’m cooing at a set of armour?” She smoothed her hands over the chest guard. “Only way I can think to really explain it is . . . humans are strange. We occasionally do really odd things for no particular reason at all. In this case, one of my minor life goals has been realized, and I thank you
“You wanted to see me, ma’am?” Ashley asked, appearing around the divider.

“I do.” Shepard gave Legion a quick wink, then turned to the chief. “Do you have any civvies?”

“No, ma’am. We haven’t really been anywhere long enough for me to pick any up.” Ashley stopped at parade rest a metre away.

As Shepard watched, the chief’s gaze slid coolly over to Legion, rested on him for a half second, then moved on. It took about twenty seconds for the Marine to do a double take, then turn to Shepard, her jaw hanging comically slack.

“Ma’am, the geth . . ..”

“Legion . . ..” Shepard bit the inside of her top lip to help stifle her grin.

“Yes, ma’am, but umm . . . it has . . ..”

Shepard nodded. “Yes. Yes, it does. Borrowed my armour to repair its platform.”

Tali ran around the corner. “Sorry, Captain, I was . . ..” She stumbled to a stop when she saw Legion standing next to Shepard. “. . told you wanted . . . to talk . . ..” Her head cocked to the side. “. . to me.” The quarian cocked a hip and pointed. “Why does the geth have a mammary on one side?”

Shepard sighed. “Let’s get this out of the way now. Yes, the geth has a boob. Everyone stare and get it over with.” She nodded toward her quarters. “Come with me. I need to talk to you both.” She sized up Ashley with narrowed eyes. “I’m a few sizes smaller than you are, but I have something that should work.”

“Aye, ma’am.” Ashley fell in step beside Shepard. “Work for what, ma’am?”

“I want to use a two pronged approach to finding the quarian pilgrims. First prong, Tali’s father stops running long enough to contact us, and we work with him.” She hit her door control. “I’m not banking on that, though. Second prong is to see if we can’t find them ourselves. Bait the blood pack with our own personal quarian pilgrim and follow them to their base. See if we can’t find out where they’re taking their captives.”

She waved the two females inside. “‘Come into my parlour,’ said the spider to the flies.”

Tali sighed as she walked past. “Again with spiders?”

Shepard chuckled. “Sorry, I forgot about the phobia. I’ll try to be more sensitive.” She followed them both through the door.

Ashley walked over to the table before turning back. “It’s a human nursery rhyme for children,” she supplied. Looking around the cavernous space, the chief shook her head. “What a waste.”

Shepard nodded. “I use the desk and the bed. The rest could have been . . . something.” She strode past them to her closet and grabbed a sweater off the top shelf. “Okay, so Tali. How do you feel about being bait?”

“What’s the plan, ma’am?” Ashley asked.

Shepard tossed her the sweater. “We send you two in as civilians, just out shopping and hanging
out. Three teams of two will be watching you from three different angles. If your father contacts you, excellent. You bring him aboard and we chat. If he doesn’t, we see if we can’t lure the Blood Pack into snatching Tali and then follow her back to their base.”

Her fingers dove into her hip pack and pulled out a tracker. “Put that somewhere it won’t be found. Just in case.”

“So, you’d be following me the whole time?” Tali asked, staring at the tracker like she’d been told to hold a spider.

“Yes.” Shepard pressed a reassuring hand on the young female’s shoulder. “You’d never be out of sight, but this is totally up to you. You don’t feel comfortable with it, we’ll do something else.”

Tali nodded and reached up to attach the tracker under her hood amongst the tubes feeding into her helmet. “If it helps find my people, I’ll do it.”

Shepard gave her a card of the trackers. “If you do get taken by Blood Pack, slap those on as many as you can.”

Tali chuckled and slid the card into a pocket. “Just in case?”

“I try to leave as little to chance as I can. On that note . . ..” She held up a bug. “Hide this on yourself somewhere. As soon as you get near someone in charge, plant it. On them if you get a chance or on furniture if you have to. Just don’t get caught with it.” She looked into Tali’s eyes. “If things get too intense, if anything goes wrong, we need a safe word. You yell that word, we come running, plan be damned, okay?” Shepard nodded toward the door. “Run up ahead, we’ll be right behind you. Think of a word that you wouldn’t ordinarily use, and let me know when we get up there.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Tali hurried out the door, muttering to herself a little as she tried different places for hiding the bug.

When the door closed, Shepard looked over at Ashley. “Will that fit? You can just throw it over your trousers. If I lent you slacks, you’d look like you were trying to bring the pedal-pusher back in style.”

The chief spread it out and held it up. “It should be fine, ma’am. I’ll just run down and change out of my armour.”

Shepard held up a hand and stepped between Ashley and the door. “Give it a moment, Chief. I want to have a quick chat away from prying ears, and the cargo bay isn’t the best for that.” She gestured for the other woman to sit, then perched on the adjacent chair.

“Is this about the geth, ma’am? I shouldn’t . . ..” She closed her mouth on the words as Shepard held up a hand.

“Yes, it’s about that, but give me a minute.” Shepard let out a long breath and rested her clasped hands on the table. “You’re smart, and tough, and capable, Ash. I think your career could go anywhere you like after you leave the Normandy, but you’re going to have to learn to curb the mouth.” Shepard’s lips quirked. “I know, pots and kettles, but look at my career, Williams. I’ll be lucky to get a few more years.” She blew out a sigh that bordered on raspberry territory. “If the council doesn’t have me killed first.”

“Ma’am, you’re a hell of a soldier. Anyone who lets politics get in the way of that . . ..”
Shepard nodded. “But part of the job, especially as you gain rank, is perception. You’ve already got a hurdle to overcome, so don’t add to it. I run a pretty casual ship. I think everyone here is under enough pressure, and has enough to worry about, without my stomping around behaving like a dictator.” She smiled, her lips pressed together. “I like you, Ash, but when I give an order, that’s the end of it. Friendships, joking around, everything else steps aside. Can you live with that?”

The chief nodded. “Yes, ma’am, I sure can.”

Shepard stood and led the way to the door. “Good. Now come on, we’d better get moving before the rest of the team gets restless.” She chuckled. “Although, I’m sure they’ve had to wait for the women-folk to get ready once or twice.”

Ashley laughed as she popped the seals on her chest guard. “Women-folk, ma’am?”

Shepard just tossed a little shrug over one shoulder. She stopped with her hand on the door control. “Oh wait, I was talking about Kryik, C-Sec, and Sparky. I’m not sure those three have managed a date between them.” Her laugh rolled up the scale as she palmed the door, striding through when it opened.

She turned sideways, bounding a little, excited and eager to get moving. “You know, with how awkward our boys are, we should take them out, get them loosened up, see if we can help them find a social life.”

Ashley grinned, flushing prettily across her cheeks. “I’m not really one to talk, Skipper. I’m generally pretty awkward myself.”

Shepard grinned and kissed her index finger to her lips. “I’ve never been on an actual date. Anderson scared all my prospective suitors off until I was on my own, then I was always up to my neck in work.”

“He didn’t?” Emotions blew across Ashley’s face like clouds: amusement, disbelief, appreciation, and affection.

Shepard watched them all go by, feeling as they were gifts given the chief’s usual stoicism. When they passed, she nodded, her teeth flashing behind a bright smile. “His favourite ploy was to take them aside and ask their opinion on which sniper mods would give him the best chance to hit a running target from a distance.”

Ashley’s laugh echoed up the stairs as she stopped and hit the elevator controls. “I think it’s kind of great, ma’am.”

Shepard chuckled. “Anderson vaguely threatening my prospective boyfriends with reenacting ‘The Most Dangerous Game’?”

Ashley flushed again and shook her head. “That too, but no, ma’am. I meant, I like that Kryik and Vakarian are so awkward in personal situations.” Her shoulders rolled in a shrug and her flush deepened, but her eyes didn’t leave Shepard’s. “As soldiers, all we every hear about the turians is the First Contact War, fight to the last man, stick up their arse, best military in the galaxy stuff. It’s good to see that under all that, they’re just people, like the rest of us.” She stepped into the elevator.

Shepard nodded, impressed with how far the chief had come since that first day. “Yeah, it is. See you up top in five, Ash.” Turning away to jog up the stairs to the CIC, Shepard smiled and shook her head. “There might be something to this mixed crew thing.”

After pausing to check on operations with Pressly, and listening to another lecture on the dangers
of having a geth aboard, Shepard joined the rest of the team at the airlock.

“So, Omega,” she said, rubbing her hands together. “I’ve never been. I’ve heard its filthy, stinks to high heaven, and is almost completely populated by criminals.” She grinned. “So exciting, just like the old west.” She mimicked doing a quick draw, twirling her pistols and slamming them back into holsters. “I can’t wait.”

“An adventure, Shepard?” Garrus asked, cocking a brow plate at her.

“Absolutely. Meeting a nervous contact on a station riddled with crime, maybe it’s more like an old Raymond Chandler novel. I need a trench coat and a fedora.” She aped pulling up the collar and hunched her shoulders. When she spoke, she affected a hard-boiled 1930’s detective voice, “It was dark, see. The kind of dark that makes you forget you ever saw the light, and rainy . . . the kind of rain that makes you forget you ever saw the sun. I’d been hitting the bottle hard, ever since little Bugsy was taken out by the Murphy brothers.”

Shepard shook her head sadly. “Poor Bugsy. That night, the office was just too full of memories, see. That’s why I ended up at Joe’s tavern. It was a seedy little gin joint, the kind that made you forget you’d ever seen a clean glass. I saw her through the bottom of my fifth cheap whiskey. I knew the dame was trouble the moment I laid eyes on her, because she had one of those smiles, and her legs went alllll the way up.”

“All the way up to where?” Garrus asked. “Her neck? The top of her head?”

Nihlus cocked his head. “Have you suffered another blood clot? Should we delay until Dr. Chakwas has a chance to look you over?”

Shepard laughed and made a big deal of shrugging out of her trenchcoat and taking off the fedora. “As for the blood clot. No. I was just having a little fun. You might want to try it some day, Nihlus. And C-Sec, I don’t think they ever specified how far up those legs went, but if they went all the way up to her neck, I can see why she’d draw attention. That’s a pretty severe abnormality.” She turned as Ashley walked up. The chief had put her hair down and added a little lipstick, making her look the part nicely. Shepard gave her a nod of approval before turning back to brief the others.

“All right. I don’t want to put all my eggs in the Rael’Zorah basket, so I’m going to hedge my bets a little, and fry the bacon in two pans.”

Garrus and Nihlus just stared at her.

“If a more mixed metaphor existed, I think it would self annihilate,” Kaidan said, shaking his head.

Shepard grinned and cackled to herself a little, knowing that the translators would have spit a bunch of jibberish into the non-human’s ears. “I mean we’re going to hit this bitch on two fronts. Tali and Ashley are going to go out together. Just two ladies out shopping and doing normal, lady stuff. Don’t ask, I have no idea what that entails. The rest of us are going to split into three teams of two. Nihlus and C-Sec, Wrex and Sparky, Jenkins and myself. We will arrange ourselves discretely so that we can keep an eye on them from three different angles.”

She took a breath and cracked her neck. “Oh, and while you’re out, dextros, get yourselves some food. Ration bars, sure, but you know . . . canned dextrogetti and Shredded Dextro-wheat, or whatever as well. Get enough ration bars to do you a month, and enough of the other for a couple of weeks.”

She ran her fingers through her hair. “Right, back to the plan. If Rael’Zorah makes contact with
any of us, bring him directly back to the Normandy. If the Blood Pack makes contact, the idea is that Tali acts as bait. She has a tracker.” She sent the tracker frequency to all their omnitools. “But, let’s try to keep eyes on and follow them back to their base. I’m really hoping we can get some trackers on the couriers or the ship they’re using . . . anything that will allow us to follow them out of system. Tali also has a bug planted on her, but if she is taken, she needs to get it off her and onto one of the ring leaders.” She looked at the young quarian. “What’s your safe word, Tali?”

The quarian straightened her back and squared her shoulders. “Bal’Nara.” She shrugged, her hands flipping then wringing together, betraying her nerves. “He was one of my best friends growing up. I couldn’t think of anything else.”

Steadying Tali with an arm around the quarian’s shoulders, Shepard nodded resolutely. “She says Bal’Nara, we go in, all of us. This brave young woman comes home with us tonight, no matter what.” She smiled and gave Tali a sort of ‘told yah’ tilt of the head when the others responded to the affirmative. “Any questions?”

“Can we pick up some dextro chocolate in our shopping?” Tali asked, her voice soft and tilted up.

Shepard sighed. “Not exactly the sort of question I meant, but yes, you can get some dextro chocolate.” She released the quarian, her eyes scanning the team. Seven people had rarely looked so ready, and all met her gaze with a nod. “All right, let’s go shopping. Wrex and Sparky, you two go first. Radio when you’ve lost yourselves in the dock crowd. Walk in the light of the Enkindlers, Brothers Sparky and Wrex.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.” Kaidan led the way, Wrex lumbering easily behind after giving Shepard a nod.

Shepard watched the krogan, sensing that something was up with him, and she made a mental note to take him aside for a chat before they dove hip-deep into another mission.

After the first team radioed in to say they’d lost themselves in the crush of people on the docks, Shepard looked to Ashley and Tali. “I’ll radio when my Alliance boyfriend and I are away from the docking tube. Keep your eyes open, but try to relax. If you’re too jumpy and watchful, the bad guys will know something’s up.” She gave Tali an encouraging smile. “You’ll do fine.”

Jenkins headed for decon. The door opened, and he turned, offering her his elbow.

Shepard eyed the elbow with suspicion, sidling around it. “What’s this, Corporal?”

He grinned wide, appearing very pleased with himself, if a little flushed. “A proper gentleman offers his arm when escorting a lady friend through a crowd, ma’am. You did say that was our cover.”

Shepard chuckled, surprised. “Someone’s mama raised him right.” She slipped her hand through his elbow, and turned back to the others. “See the rest of you later. Be careful, and . . . .” The door cut off further admonishments.
Tailing Tali across Omega’s docking district. A little ancient history tossed in for good measure.

“Why me, ma’am?” Jenkins asked as they cleared the docking tube, and the crush of people going and coming on the docks swept them into their current. “Is it because you don’t consider me a flight risk?”

Shepard chuckled then winced at the stench. Omega smelled like a combination of diesel fuel, outhouse, and dead bodies. The smell burned its way into her head and took root somewhere deep enough she wondered if she’d ever get rid of it. “Richard . . . Rick . . .?”

He flushed a little. “Richard, ma’am.”

“Okay, Richard. Call me Jane. Most men don’t call their girlfriends ma’am.” She smiled and slipped her arm a little further through his. “I chose you because C-Sec constantly gets me in trouble, Nihlus and I should never be in the same place at the same time in case of disaster, and Sparky would spend the entire mission glowing like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer’s nose. Besides, this gives us a chance to get to know one another a little better.” She opened a channel. “Okay ladies, my boyfriend and I are clear. Have fun shopping.”

She guided Jenkins in the general direction of the marketplace. Along the walls of the docks, little illegal oases of colour and life bloomed amidst Omega’s browns. Sellers scrambled and called out, using every trick in the hawker book to make some coin before people pushed past into Omega proper and took their credits to the legal stores and sellers. If the authorities happened by, the brilliant garden of kiosks could disappear into grey-brown piles of crates in under twenty seconds.

“Sparky, Wrex, you have eyes on?” she asked, subtly opening a channel.

“Roger that,” Wrex answered. “It looks as though they’re buying Pinky some girlie human clothes.”

Shepard grinned and made it look like Jenkins had said something entertaining. “At least they aren’t buying her hanar clothes.”

“Hanar don’t . . . oh. Wrex out.”

Looking around, Shepard spied the two ladies at a kiosk, and nodded for Jenkins to move toward a drink stand opposite. “I’ve got eyes on,” she reported to the other teams. She ordered two bottles of water, then led Jenkins off to one side. “So, what is there to know about Richard Jenkins?” she asked, giving him a wide smile. “Your folks doing okay? You talked to them in the last few days?”

He nodded. “Yes ma’ . . . Jane. Our house came through okay, so they’re taking in anyone they can find room for. Mom loves looking after people, so I’m sure she’s busy cooking for most of the colony.” Chuckling, he shook his head and flushed a little. “As for me, there’s not much to tell. Eden Prime was so quiet that all I did was dream about leaving, finding adventure.” He met her
eyes and shrugged. “Guess it’s a case of careful what you wish for, huh?”

Shepard let out a little huff of agreement. “Nowhere is safe enough.” She drank down half her bottle, feeling like Omega had coated the back of her throat in sludge. She glanced over to see Ash purchasing a dress, sweater, and slacks.

“Yeah.” He shook his head, an empathetic scowl on his face. “You’d know all about that.” After a moment of silence that hung like an ugly pinata between them, he took a whack at it. “Um . . ..” He cleared his throat and offered her his elbow again as Ashley and Tali moved on. “Elysium was the reason I joined the military.” He flushed and ran his hand over the collar of his armour. “You were my hero.”

Shepard let out a little huff of agreement. “Nowhere is safe enough.” She glanced over to see Ash purchasing a dress, sweater, and slacks.

“Yeah.” He shook his head, an empathetic scowl on his face. “You’d know all about that.” After a moment of silence that hung like an ugly pinata between them, he took a whack at it. “Um . . ..” He cleared his throat and offered her his elbow again as Ashley and Tali moved on. “Elysium was the reason I joined the military.” He flushed and ran his hand over the collar of his armour. “You were my hero.”

She looked up and gave him a sad smile. “Richard,” she sighed and squeezed his arm, “Elysium wasn’t short of heroes, but I wasn’t one of them. I just did what I had to do. Of course, the brass have their heads stuffed too far up their asses to care about that. They needed to shine it up so colonial development wouldn’t lag. It’s smart when you think about it. Grab the small female officer who led the resistance, and slap a medal on her. Of course, buried under medals or not, the truth is the truth.”

They stopped and pretended to go through a jewelry kiosk. Everything felt damp and slightly tacky. Shepard shuddered and resisted the urge to wipe her hands despite wearing gloves.

“I don’t understand, Jane.” He held up a necklace with a pendant that looked like a lynx or bobcat. “You held off the pirates until help could get there. You did an amazing thing.”

Shepard sighed and closed her eyes for a moment. He was going to make her tell him after all the work she’d done to wall it up behind metres of emotional brick and mental mortar. When she opened her eyes, she let out a long, noisy breath. “You tell anyone this story, I’ll have to kill you. Unless some day you have a child or grandchild who falls in love with the romance of being a hero. That day you can tell it without fear of Shepard’s wrath.”

The ladies moved on, pushing through the crowd. When Shepard straightened to follow, she caught sight of Nihlus. He cut her a curt nod, then turned to speak to Garrus. Tugging lightly on the corporal’s arm, she eased them back into the flow of pedestrian traffic. Wincing a little at the noise level, the constant buzz of conversation and roar of machinery, she reached up and turned down the ambient on her implants.

“I was on leave after clearing out a small slaving operation.” She smiled, her lips curving softly, and shook her head. “There was this kid from the capital. Martin Weaver. Good kid, super sweet, super eager to escape Elysium, find adventure and excitement.” Tip of her index finger tapping her bottom lip, she turned to him with a thoughtful frown. He laughed. “Hmmm.” Giving him a gentle push, she said, “Sounds familiar somehow. Can’t quite place it.”

“Anyway,” he said, clearing his throat.

Shepard’s smiled widened. “So cheeky.” Sighing, she forced herself back on track. “Yeah, anyway . . ..” She looked back to Ash and Tali, watching them buy food. “He followed me everywhere. I had no idea why; he just latched on.” She took a long drink from her bottle, then over-handed it into a bin as they passed.

“Illyria’s a fortress,” Shepard said, pausing to look up at the gates that separated the docks from the industrial area. She blocked the setting sun with a raised hand. “What’s the deal? Keep pirates out or have I accidentally decided to take my leave on a prison planet?”
Martin laughed. “It does feel like a prison sometimes. There are gates between all the districts for defense.” He pointed. “The wall is actually the back wall of the businesses or homes. Almost half the population isn’t human, so security is always tight.”

Shepard shuddered. Mindoir had been open farmland around the urban centers. The odd Alliance look out or check point, but nothing compared to the maximum security prison of Elysium’s capital. “I can see why you want to escape, kid.”

He ran ahead through the gate into the industrial area, then turned to walk backwards. “You hungry? I know a great place to get burgers. The farms here have cows, so it’s actual meat, not that vat crap.”

“Sure, kid, I could eat. Lead on.” Shepard hoisted her duffel higher on her shoulder and followed him through the gates, looking up at the coils of razor wire along the top. Another shudder gripped her. Trading freedom for security . . . a fine line that she was pretty sure Elysium had crossed.

The burger place served a great cheeseburger. It had been so long since she’d eaten a real, fresh cut french fry, that she worried she might embarrass herself for a moment. Actual chocolate milkshakes and pumpkin pie pretty much convinced her that she’d found junk food nirvana. She watched Martin scarf his meal down, only coming up for air to ask her questions about the Alliance around mouthfuls of food. She answered them the best she could, envying him his innocence.

Pushing her dessert plate away from her, she sighed. “I need to get to my hotel room so I can pop the button on my trousers,” she said, lacing a weak laugh through a heavy groan. She thanked the waitress and swiped her credit chit, paying for both their meals.

“Thanks, Shepard.” Martin jumped up and bounded into the street, all the energy and coordination of a yearling colt. She wanted to grab him, sling an arm around his shoulders, and tell him to slow down a little, enjoy his fresh, beautiful view of a tarnished and dark galaxy. Of course, he’d never listen. She wouldn’t have.

“It’s no wonder the kid is stuck to you, Shepard, you old softy,” she grumbled to herself as she followed Martin up the street.

Her hotel happened to be right next to the massive gates into the retail section of Illyria. She traded a ground floor room for one on the top floor. It never paid to have windows anyone could crawl through.

“This is where I leave you, kid,” Shepard said at the elevator. “Thanks a lot for the tour. It’s been fun.”

Martin bounced a little, his hands stuffed down into the front pockets of his jeans, his shoulders up by his ears. “I could take you out tomorrow if you like, show you the mountains.” He grinned wide and ingenuous. “We’re not called an alpine paradise for nothing.”

Completely charming. Lord, save me from the charmers.

She chuckled and nodded. “Sure, but let me sleep in, okay? I’ll meet you down here at noon.” She hit the elevator and rode up, flopping across her bed as soon as she walked into the room. “Thank you, baby Jesus. A real mattress. All those things I’ve asked for . . . it’s okay, this is all I need.”

“My feet are killing me. Bad case of new boots, old feet.” Shepard chuckled, steering Jenkins over to a booth at a small cafe. Ash and Tali sat a couple of tables away, eating lunch and chatting away
like they’d been best friends their whole lives. She grinned as her companion’s stomach growled. “Go ahead and get something to eat. We’ll be here for a bit by the look of it.” After looking around, she winced. “Unless you’re into exotic forms of food poisoning, make it something in a wrapper, though.”

He ordered a giant, honey-glazed pastry. When he opened the donut, the honey-soaked, browned-dough smell made her stomach growl as if threatening to climb out and maul him for it.

“ Damn, doesn’t that just drown out the wretched stench of this hole?” She moaned, staring at his snack as it raised to his mouth. “The madness of the donuts is the lure of the abyss. Sirens lurk in the dark depths of the honey-glaze as they lurk at the bottom of the sea, that I know for sure - but I have never encountered them, and I am searching still for the profound and plaintive pastries in whose depths I might be able, like Hamlet redeemed, to drown the Ophelia of my desire.”

Watching him take another bite, the moan upped to a groan. “Oh, sweet baby Jesus.” She turned to the proprietor and ordered one of her own.

Jenkins stared at her. “Jane?”

She laughed. “Why is it the second I quote literature, you all look at me like I’m a crazy woman?” She shrugged and wagged her head. “Okay, I bastardized that one a little. It’s Jean Lorrain from his novel Monsieur De Phocas.”

Glaring at her warily, he turned a little to guard his food. “No, I was afraid that you were going to take my arm off to get to mine.”

She nodded, eyes narrowing as she teased him. “It could happen.” She ripped hers open and took a bite, the sweet, sticky, doughy goodness prompting a soft moan. “Oh yeah. Oh yeah, sing your sweet siren song to me, yeast, flour, and sugar. Ophelia of my desire, consider thyself drowned.”

She swallowed the bite, then opened her eyes. “Okay, I’m back.”

Jenkins shook his head, still looking both alarmed and confused. “So you just got to your room and crashed?” he asked, cranking the steering wheel to swerve her back on course.

“Yeah, I was beat.” Shepard nodded and picked at her donut. “I woke up hours later, still in my clothes, my room door not even locked. The sky outside was a scary, absolute black.” She stifled a shudder, unable to stop her skin from lifting into gooseflesh. “I sat up on the side of the bed, trying to find the light and figure out why the alarm in my head felt like exploding cacti. Then I felt the whole room vibrating. The air changed, making my ears pop as I heard the thwump thwump of low yield explosives hitting the ground.” Setting the pastry down on it’s wrapper, she swallowed hard, the dough stuck in a wad in her throat. “Martin burst through the door, screaming senseless panic gibberish. Scared the living shit out of me. Good thing I wasn’t armed.”

Five minutes after waking, Shepard ran out the hotel’s front door, Ingrid and Roger securely seated on the back of her armour. Martin ran into her back, then headed for the gate, but she grabbed the collar of his shirt and yanked him back. “Stay here.”

She shoved away her erratic heartbeat and the knot tied into her guts. Balling her hands into fists then stretching out her fingers, she forced blood and warmth down into them. She needed to think, needed to move and fast. Scanning the gates, she spotted stairs leading up the nearest wall to a guard house. She raced up, grabbing a set of binoculars off the table, then ran out onto the rooftop to look down at the docks. A soldier stood a couple of metres away, doing the same thing.

The unmistakable orange, fiery plumes of explosions rose up into an already thick, black cloud of smoke over the docks. Looking up at the sky, she searched for any sign of the Alliance fighting off
the raid. The Agincourt was up there, she knew that for sure. She’d come in on the Juno, but it might have already left. Sure enough, just above the northern horizon, meteorite-like streaks of fire showed debris entering orbit. At least the Alliance knew what was going on.

“We’ve got to get to the base,” the soldier called, looking over his shoulder at two others. “All our comms are jammed.”

“How many of you are on patrol in this district?” Shepard asked.

“Six, ma’am. Six more in the residential district. The LT is on his way down to the dock gate.” For a moment, she thought he might just bolt after his lieutenant, but then he straightened and his feet rooted on the rooftop.

Shepard walked to the edge of the roof and looked down. Civilians wandered into the street, their faces confused and numb. She needed to get them into shelter and protected. No way in God’s great galaxy would she let Mindoir happen again.

Thank you sweet Lord for Elysium’s paranoia.

“Get this and the residential district gates shut and block them with sky cars, whatever. Make sure that a tank can’t just ram them and get through.” The lights and thunder from the docks drew her eyes back. “Whatever this is, it’s big, and our first priority has to be protecting the civilians.”

“Those are our people down there,” the Marine screamed in Shepard’s face.

She gripped him by the shoulders, balling up two handfuls of his uniform. “Yes, and these are your people up here. The Alliance personnel can take care of themselves.” She had to crane her neck to meet his eyes. “Our duty is to the folk who can’t. We need to keep these people safe until help comes. Weld this gate shut.”

For a moment, he looked as though he’d argue, but then he nodded and grabbed his two squad mates and raced for the gate.

Shepard looked to the crowd of people gathering, shivering in the chill early morning air and called down. “We need to barricade this gate. The wire will slow down ground troops, but we need vehicles and heavy equipment to keep them from ramming straight through if they try to batter it down with tanks or blow it with rockets.”

She ran over to the guard station and descended the stairs, stopping on the lowest landing. “We need guns, radios, food and water, and we need people to man the barricade once it’s up. Wall patrols will be vital.” Her eyes scanned the crowd, her hands gripping the railing as she leaned forward. “Anyone willing to organize the wall patrols, get people up watching for squads trying to breach? Someone know the walls and their weak spots?”

An older man in camo held up his hand. “I helped build them, I can organize the patrols and sentries.”

“Excellent. We’ll need at least two people per post who can use a rifle and some cover for them.” She looked back to the crowd. “Okay. Volunteer for fire control?”

A woman raised her hand. “Well, since I’m the fire chief, I guess that would be me.”

Shepard gave her a wide grin. “Excellent, you’ll have that well in hand, then.” She looked up. We need to close the gates to the residential district and have vehicles ready to block it. That will be our fall back. If whoever is attacking the colony starts getting through these gates, we fall back,
barricade ourselves in there. Make sure the children, infirm and elderly are all up there to start with. Get them into the most secure parts of the district and start fortifying them the best you can.” Her eyes sought out the wall patrol leader. “Make sure those walls are ready to be defended, and that we have eyes anywhere they might try to flank us and come in behind.”

He nodded and ran off.

“Okay, now, we need scavenging teams. Clear out the sporting good, hunting, military surplus and hardware stores. Need some people organizing supplies, loading weapons and making sure they fire.” She looked down at the fire chief. “It’s safe to say you know these people well?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll find team leaders for those tasks.”

Shepard nodded. “Okay, let’s get these gates secure. We don’t have much time.”

Martin raced up to her, breathless and flushed with excitement. “Shepard! What do you need me to do?” The kid practically bounced on the spot.

“Stick with me. You can run messages and pass out supplies.” She grabbed the front of his shirt in her fist and pulled him in so they stood nose to nose. “Whatever you do, stay with me. I’ll keep you safe. No running off to do anything crazy, understood?”

He saluted, a indecently wide grin on his face. His wished for adventure had arrived, and it made her eyes sting to see the innocence in his excitement. “Yes, ma’am.”

“How long did you have before the pirates made it to the gate?” Jenkins asked between licking the sticky icing from his fingers.

“Don’t do that. Germs, man, germs.” Shepard passed him a wet napkin. “An hour and a half. Long enough to get things locked down fairly well, get people on the roofs with rifles. As I figured, they rolled up with a couple of tanks. We managed to thin the herd pretty well while the tanks battered at our blockade, but it was inevitable that they’d get through. I called for the retreat after about two hours. We’d taken quite a few casualties, sent the wounded back to the closest school, left the dead lying out at the back of the roofs where they’d fallen. Hated to do it, but we just didn’t have time to worry about the dead with more than a million living bodies to defend.”

“Martin lost that excited spring in his step about the same time one of the Alliance soldiers took a bullet to the head, covering the poor kid in blood. He dug deep and found his guts though, kept going. I admired that in him.”

Across the cafe, Ashley and Tali stood and headed back into the crowd. Shepard watched the crowd, searching for quarians or anyone showing an interest. Nothing. The two ladies might as well be any of the faceless crowd. “Damn, this isn’t working.” she grumbled as she stood. “Come on, boyfriend o’ mine, let’s see what other trouble we can get into now that we have a sugar rush going.”

They held hands and drifted with the tide of people, catching sight of the other two teams now and again, both reporting seeing nothing out of the ordinary going on.

“How did the retreat back to the residential gate go?” Jenkins prodded after a few minutes passed.

She sighed and squeezed his hand, a silent warning to rein in the eagerness. “As much like clockwork as one could expect with the resources at hand. Most of the gun hands I’d kept behind until last had been Alliance or mercs at some point, so they held the line together pretty well. We took a couple of injuries, but nothing major.”
A sigh cut through her words like a scalpel. “However, I didn’t know that a group of teenagers had snuck away from their families, grabbed rifles and decided to be heroes. They got the wise idea to try to take out the tanks with hunting rifles.”

“Martin, get your ass through the gate.” Shepard kept Roger moving, dropping targets as she backed toward the blockade, trying to buy time for the civilians to get themselves organized.

Movement along the rooftops alerted her to snipers, and she sped up. “Get ready to weld those gates shut!” she yelled back over her shoulder. Just as she reached the narrow opening in the gates, six bodies hurtled out the front door of one of the stores.

“Wait for us!” they screamed in a chorus of panic. Shepard stopped, keeping Roger in motion. Three shots into one target, switch, three shots, switch; pounding the pirates to slow them down, buy precious seconds of time.

Run faster, dammit.

Screaming with metallic death, the gates into the retail district crumpled under the weight of two tanks. For a moment, the Grizzlies reared up, seeming about to tip over as they climbed the barricade of skycars behind the gates.

Please, baby Jesus, let them go over backwards, let them go over backwards.

She held her breath as the tanks hesitated, but then their noses dropped and they rumbled over top of the barricade and down the other side. Batarian and human pirates clambered over the pile, the trickle of bodies from before turning into a flood. Shepard let out the breath and glanced behind her. Eight minutes, maybe, to get the gates welded shut and barricaded before the running bodies and tanks poured over them. Her eyes flitted back to the running group.

A dry, thunderous crack split the air and one of the runners fell. Shepard sighted a sniper on one of the roofs and brought him down, but the group had stopped to help their companion. Pirates closed in on the group of teens far faster than they moved.

Too long. Dammit.

She backed through the gate, her eyes burning and supper from the night before sitting just behind her tonsils as she sealed their fates.

“Shut the gate! Weld it shut!” She closed her eyes. “Sweet baby Jesus, hold them close and keep them safe. I pray this in your Father’s name. Amen.”
Mass Effect - Future Imperfect Chapter Twenty Five

Chapter Summary

Tracking Tali, Shepard finishes telling Jenkins the truth about Elysium and her heroism.

Shepard’s gaze slid over the less crowded market inside Omega proper. Ash and Tali giggled over a rack of less than savoury magazines. “Great,” she muttered. “Now I’m going to have to answer to her father for her knowledge of hanar pornography.”

Jenkins chuckled, low and genuine, as if he knew she needed another moment to throw up some barricades against her memories. “Can I be there for that conversation?”

Shepard laughed and squeezed his hand. Such a good kid. They all were, really, her crew. Good people . . .

“Shepard! No!” Martin threw himself at her, nearly flipping her to the ground. “No, you can’t leave them out there.” She twisted out of his grasp, turning it on him, his arm pinned like a bag to a board behind his back. The fear and helplessness rampaging through her howled as it found an outlet, but the teen’s grunt of pain slammed a lid on it, and she released him like a burning coal.

“If we leave the gates open any longer, we compromise everyone in this district,” she replied, struggling to keep her voice low and calm despite the fact someone had clamped a vise-grip on her throat. “I don’t want to leave them any more than you do. All we can do is hope the Alliance gets here in time to save them.” She pushed him toward the stairs, ramming the iron rod of control back down her spine, and waved people back. “Clear back. As soon as the gates are welded shut, we need to get the barricades in.”

“What’s the point?” a voice wailed from the crowd. “It didn’t even take them two hours to get through the last barricade.” A murmur of terror and despair rattled through the gathered civilians like the sound of dried tendons on old bones. “How many have already died? Maybe if we . . .?”

“No!” Shepard shouted, cutting off the rest of that sentence. Allowing an edge of rage to enter her voice, she climbed up a few steps to look over the gathered colonists. She needed to break their despair and fast, even if they needed to replace it with anger at her.

“I was raised on Mindoir. When the slavers attacked, I watched my family murdered or dragged off into slavery.” She spun around, ripping her uniform out of the waist of her trousers, pulling the back up to her neck, displaying a portion of the knotted ridges of scars that criss-crossed her from neck to heels. “I was sixteen. This was the least of the ‘mercy’ the slavers showed me. She dropped it and tucked it back in before turning back around to face them, meeting their glass and tears with steel. “Trust me, there’s no mercy on the other side of this gate.”

She waved her arms, pushing them back. “We’re buying the Alliance time to get here. That’s all we can do. Now, if you’re able to shoot a gun, get up on the roofs and lets keep their ground troops from climbing. If you can’t shoot, fall back to the schools where the children and elderly are. Help secure all entrances and windows. The schools will be our last retreat points.” She winced at the screams coming from the other side of the gate as the pirates claimed their human cargo.
Clenching her jaw so tight her teeth grated and screeched together, she managed to keep her outer facade calm. “The schools are good sturdy concrete and steel structures. They’ll hold if we get them secure.”

No one moved, the ambient fear ramping up to panic as the screams and sounds of struggle grew worse. The civilians shifted restlessly, preparing to stampede. Shepard held up her hands. “Please. We’re doing everything we can to protect you. Don’t let fear take your will to fight. We can hold out long enough for help to reach us.” She started pushing them back a little. “Let’s make the schools as secure as we can get them. Weld some blinds on the roofs, especially over the doors. Get the metal sheeting over the windows.” She met as many eyes as she could. “We have precious little time and a million people counting on us. Let’s get to work.”

At last they began to move in a more positive direction, and she let out the breath she’d been holding.

Martin stalked after her as she headed up to the roof, Ingrid in hand, to help keep the gates clear.

“How could you just leave them out there, Shepard? You know what those pirates will do to them.” Martin demanded, his voice low and furious, promising violence.

Shepard stopped halfway up the stairs, turning to him, all the terror and horror boiling inside her bursting loose at once. “Yes, I know . . . far better than I hope you ever find out, kid.” She bent down low, meeting him eye to eye. “Is your mother inside these walls? Your sister?” When he nodded, she leaned in next to his ear, forcing her voice to keep to a whisper. “If we don’t secure these gates, what’s happening to those kids out there will be happening to your family and every other family in here. These people are a moment from panicking. If that happens, it’s all over.” She reached out, cupping his neck in her hand. “I need your help, Martin. People do stupid shit when they panic. Help keep them calm.”

When she pulled back to look into his eyes, he nodded, all the muscles in his jaw and neck bunched. She returned the nod with a glacial one and ran up onto the roof, taking a position over the gate.

Shepard ducked in behind a kiosk and picked up a scarf, focusing all of her energy on it, needing the distraction to get herself back under control. She cocked her head to the side, turning her bulwarks to the corporal as she pressed her eyes closed hard and tight against the screams. Slamming some of the loose bricks back into place, she slapped up mortar. Too many screams. Too few answers to prayers.

“I might get this. It gets cold on the Normandy.”

She turned a little to see Jenkins holding up a hand knit sweater against his armour, checking the size.

A wan smile brushed across her face, thanking him silently for the moment. Elysium lay a thousand light years behind her, Mindoir a thousand behind that, but the ghosts . . . well, ghosts didn’t care about distance, space, or time. Ghosts followed as tenacious as bloodhounds, as strident as harpies, and as close as the next thought.

She nodded at the sweater. “Good idea. I have one for just that reason.” She felt the knit between her fingers. “It’s very nice.” She waited out of the way, watching Tali and Ash, just trying to find her balance.

“I think this op is a bust, Shepard,” Nihlus sighed in her ear.
“That’s a firm, but let’s go another hour. They can wander the interior markets a bit.” She picked up a blue sweater and held it out for Jenkins to look at. “We’ll need to space out a bit more inside though, the crowds will be lighter.” She forced a smile and refolded the sweater, placing it on the pile. “You hear that, Ash?”

“You bet,” the Marine replied.

Shepard purchased two scarves: one in blue and grey, one in black and red, and wrapped them in a jaunty knot around her neck. The warmth helped ease the lump of old panic, grief, and pain enough for her to take a deep breath, preparing for the end of the ‘heroic’ tale.

Jenkins sighed and shook his head. “I’m sorry, Jane. I was being an idiot. You don’t need to finish.” He took her hand again, his new sweater in a bag dangling from the other.

She shook her head and bumped him with her shoulder. “Once you start wrasslin’ the ‘gator, son, you’ve made a commitment that you’d better see through.” A watercolour smile softened her features. “It’s okay, Richard. You see . . . any idiot can take a bullet. The test of a hero is knowing when and for whom. It’s not a test a lot of us pass. Life can go damned cheap out here. You’ve got to hold yours dear, and if you give it up, make sure it counts.”

He stared into her eyes for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I get that.”

She knew he did. “So, we managed to keep them off the residential gate for three hours. Took a lot more casualties, enough that whispers of panic began to spread long before we needed to retreat. It took the pirates longer to cross less ground, so I concentrated on the tanks as much as I could to slow them down even further, hoping that the Alliance was biting hard at their heels. I’m pretty sure I took the pilot out a couple of times, because they’d stop and wait while people shuffled around.”

“Can anyone hear me? This is Lt. Jane Shepard. Repeat, is there anyone receiving this signal?” Shepard let her hand drop, but forced herself to keep her disappointment under wraps. She picked up the walkie-talkie next to her knee. “Okay people, it’s time. Start retreating back to your assigned school. Make sure to get the wounded down first.” Closing her eyes, she shut out the voice that asked about the dead.

“Those of us headed for the school on the next block will hold the gates as long as we can.” She shook hands as grim-faced men and women passed by offering thanks. “Just make sure all the entrances are blockaded and covered from above. We can do this. The reason their charge has slowed down has to be the Alliance coming up on them from the docks. We just need to hold a little while longer.”

Martin sat next to her, his back pressed against their cover, and looked up at her with weary, sad eyes. “Do you really believe that, Shepard?”

She nodded and pressed a hand to his shoulder. “It’s been an ugly night, but you and the rest of these people have put up a hell of a fight, kid.” Impulsively, she leaned in and kissed his cheek. “You’ve been really brave, so let’s finish this, yeah?”

He sighed, his eyelids sagging. “Yeah. What the hell. Like Gator Pete always says, ‘Once you start wrasslin’ the gator, son, you’ve made a commitment that you’d better see through’.”

Shepard laughed, exhausted but genuine. “What’s that, now?”

“Gator Pete, my little sister’s favourite show. It’s pretty funny.” He pushed up into a crouch.
“Okay, what do you need me to do?”

“Check in at the school, make sure that they’re ready to seal it up behind us. Make sure they know to get as much water stored as they can. If they’ve been emptying bottles, fill them. The pirates will knock our power and water out as soon as they get in. Their whole goal now will be to get us to open the doors.” She chugged him on the shoulder. “Get moving and be careful.”

Shepard watched him go, allowing herself to imagine for a moment that if she’d ever had a little brother, he’d have been a lot like Martin. His passion reminded her of her dad. An image chased that thought across her mind. Bright, strawberry blonde ringlets framed chubby cheeks and laughing eyes. She shoved it aside. No time for that.

For another twenty minutes Ingrid moved from target to target without stopping, but the pirates finally wised up to use the tanks as cover, biding their time. Like a tsunami growing as it closed in on shore, their numbers built up, threatening to surge over the gates, drowning the last defenders in their flood.

“Pull back to the school, people,” she called into the radio. “Outer stations first. Let’s keep it orderly. My station and station two on the other side will retreat last, keep them off the fence as long as we can.”

Martin ran up just as she readied to pull back. “The schools are ready, Shepard.”

She held out a hand toward the stairs. “Good, let’s get moving.” She followed, running down two at a time. The moment gunfire ceased from the roofs, pirates climbed over the gates, jumping down. Luckily, they appeared to have orders to take prisoners rather than kill. “Run! Fast as you can,” she shouted to the Alliance soldiers who’d stayed until the end. Bringing up the rear, she dodged from cover to cover, fighting backwards.

“They’re right behind me,” she said as she stumbled through the school’s side door. “Get this door welded shut and barricaded.” Turning to look down the hallway, she tried to force a reassuring smile onto her lips. “A beautifully executed stalling operation people.”

“What now?” a male voice yelled. “We’re packed in here so tight we can barely sit down.”

“I know things are cramped and tense. The most important thing we can do right now is keep things as calm as possible. Make sure water gets passed around to everyone before the pirates cut off our power. If you see people starting to panic, comfort them. If we take care of one another, we can get through this.” She pushed down the hallway, weaving and jostling her way through the crowd.

“Like the hundreds you left lying on rooftops?” the same man shouted.

Shepard winced, but stifled it. “Those brave souls gave their lives to keep you safe and alive. Honour that.” She searched the crowd, trying to find the one causing the trouble. Was he trying to drive everyone into a panic?

A tremor passed through the building, throwing them into near darkness.

“What was that?” a woman yelped.

“That was just them taking out the power. The back up lights should come up any second.” As she finished speaking, the hallway bathed in a dim red glow from the exit lights. “It’s more important than ever to keep everyone calm. Hold hands, sing . . . whatever it takes.”
She found Martin at the junction of the next corridor. “Are the others already up on the roof?” she asked. A gunshot answered the question for him. “Good, okay. Try to get as many of the people from the hallways into rooms as you can so that we can move quickly if they start to breach an entrance.” Looking around, she spotted an exit sign on an interior wall. “Does that lead to the roof?”

“Yeah.” He continued handing out water, urging people to pass them down the hall.

“Okay. If anyone needs me, I’ll be above the front door.”

She burst into the light and open space of the roof with a gasp of relief. At the front of the building, she shrugged Ingrid into her hands and peered out. “How are we doing?”

One of the Alliance soldiers squeezed off a couple of rounds. “They’ve got us surrounded, but haven’t tried to get to the doors.”

“Yeah, they won’t for now. They’ll try to find a chink in the armour and see if they can make someone open a door.” The words barely made it past her lips before a shrill scream echoed from the other side of the tanks. The terror, pain, and fear in that scream set a knot of snakes loose in Shepard’s guts.

“What’s your name?” The voice was batarian and spoken into an amp, probably one of the tanks’ radios.

“Holly McGillis,” a young, female voice answered between sobs. She sniffed, thick and phlegmy.

“And what am I doing to you right now, Holly?” the batarian asked.

Shepard closed her eyes and swallowed hard, every one of her nightmares crowding into her head and heart, promising to rip her apart. Shoving them aside, she ducked around the cover, bringing Ingrid up to use her scope. She couldn’t see the ringleader or his captives, but put a bullet through the head of one careless peon.

The young woman whimpered and took a tremulous breath. “You’re holding a knife to my eye.” Hysterical sobbing. “Please, don’t hurt me. Please. Daddy!” The last word came out as a stuttering scream.

“If you surrender now, no one will be harmed,” the batarian shouted.

“No, we’ll all be taken as slaves. Keep taking out anyone who shows even an inch,” Shepard hissed to the others. “The best thing we can do for her and the others is keep picking off the slavers.”

“Shepard,” the walkie talkie called. “Shepard, come in. We need you at the front doors.” The sounds of scuffling came through before the channel closed.

“Keep them pinned,” Shepard ordered, racing to the door back downstairs.

She slammed into a seething mess of panic at the door from the stairwell. “Make way. Everyone stay calm. This is what they want!” Pushing into the crowd, she fought her way to the front doors.

“Let me out! That’s my daughter out there!” A middle-aged man threw himself against the door guards.

“Sir.” Shepard grabbed his elbow. “Sir, please. If we open these doors, everyone here will be
killed or captured. Please understand, as much as we wish we could save her, we can’t open these doors.”

He grabbed Shepard’s pauldrons and shook her. “We can’t just leave her out there.” Red, frantic eyes stared into hers. A shrill shriek of pain from outside tore the man away from Shepard, and he hurled himself against the door guards again.

“That’s one eye,” the batarian called. “You have five minutes to open the doors before she loses the other.”

“Daddy! Mommy! Please.” Screaming sobs echoed down the hall, deafening in the sudden, still silence.

Shepard’s heart stopped, her inner alarm howling and stabbing her with scalpels along the length of her spine. The utter calm as the sea pulled away from shore promised a tidal wave of hysteria looming on the horizon. If that wave reached shore, people would be crushed beneath it. The hallways and classrooms were too packed.

“Everyone, please. Take deep breaths, try to stay calm. They know they can’t get in. They know their time is short. All we need to do is stay calm. The Alliance will come.” She reached out to pat arms and squeeze hands. “Comfort one another, and if you believe in God, pray for those outside.”

“And what about my daughter? You’d just abandon her and the others to be tortured to death?” Grabbing Shepard’s shoulder, he spun her around. Lifting her by the chest guard, he shook her so hard that the seals popped, and he ripped it right off.

“Sir. I’m so very sorry for what’s happening to your child, but if we open those doors, every child in this building will end up in a slaving cage. Is your wife in here? Other children?” She took his silence as confirmation and nodded. “Go comfort them; be here for them.”

Holly’s father stared at her chest guard for a moment, then let it slip from his fingers to fall to the floor. Shepard bent down to pick it up before turning back to try to keep the crowd calm.

“Everyone, why not sit down?” she called out. “Hold each other’s hand --”

A rough hand grabbed her shoulder again, turning her. Furious eyes stared into hers with a feral satisfaction as something slammed her hard in the gut, driving the air from her lungs. “You bitch!” the father said, his voice a low growl. “Rot in hell.” His hand drove into her again, dropping her to her knees as the numb airlessness turned to an inferno roaring through her intestines.

“Shepard?” Martin’s voice rose above the crowd. “Shepard?”

Someone next to her screamed and the tidal wave roared into shore, people surging out against the walls.

“Stop,” Shepard gasped. “If you panic, people are going to die.” She pressed a hand to her stomach, her fingers bumping into something, groping along the length of it for a moment before figuring out that it was the handle of a knife.

“Shepard?” Martin hit the floor next to her. “Oh god, Shepard.” He looked up. “Grab him and tie him up somewhere. Find his family to stay with him.”

Stumbling to her feet, Shepard managed to hit her medigel, then grabbed the knife and pulled it out. She thrust it at Martin, hitting her medigel again when he took it. “I need to get back to the roof.”
“You’ve been stabbed. You need to see the doctor. There’s a couple in the gym.”

“You’re five minutes is up,” the batarian called. “It’s a shame. Such a lovely girl. Would have brought a fair price with eyes.”

A shrill, terrible, sobbing, choking scream ripped down the hallway. “Daddy, please . . . help me!”

Shepard stumbled, slamming shoulder-first into the wall, the scream tearing the thin membrane holding back Mindoir and its demons. They raged through her for long seconds, leaving her knees trembling, the rest of her frozen solid.

“There’s got to be something we can do, Shepard,” Martin insisted, pulling her up to stand square on her feet. “We could sneak out, break them free, and be back inside before anyone knew.”

Shepard stared at him for a moment, then grabbed his face between her hands, latching onto him to pull herself free from the old nightmare. “Anyone who goes out there will end up like that poor girl. Isn’t one suffering that fate bad enough?” She pressed her brow to his. “I know it’s hard. It’s killing me to leave them out there, but there’s nothing we can --”

An agonized roar and a deafening crash from behind her spun Shepard around. Light flooded the corridor, but it took her a moment to realize the doors were open.

“The father just . . .” someone called.

Martin raced down the hallway, Shepard stumbling behind, a hand clutching in front of her, snatching at the air as she tried to grab his clothing and hold him back. Too late. Both doors swung wide, the father running into a line of pirate gunmen. Luckily, the doors actually opening took the slavers by surprise, and they just stood there gaping.

“Martin! Stay inside!” Shepard shouted over the chaos. Too late. He jumped out even as the refugees yanked the doors shut once more. Darkness blinded her only to be shattered by sparks as the door guards welded cross beams into place.

Martin! Please, sweet baby Jesus, send your angels to protect him!

Shepard slid to a stop, pivoting to push her way back to the stairs. “Everyone please, stay calm. Please. I know it’s hard, but panic will only make things worse. Hold each other, comfort each other. Pray. Sing. Whatever helps.” She pushed through the door and raced up the stairs, her wounds still seeping blood. Hitting the medigel again, she burst up the last flight and out onto the roof to the sound of gunfire and Martin screaming.

Shepard slid into the blind on her hip, then ducked around it to see the girl’s father sprawled on the ground, most of his face missing. Ingrid seemed to find her own way into Shepard’s hands as Martin appeared at the end of one of the tanks, the slaver holding him still in cover behind the vehicle.

“Shepard!” Martin called, his chest heaving, blood soaking a thick trail down the arm of his shirt from a bullet wound. “I’m sorry.”

“Shepard?” the batarian called. “Is that the name of your leader, whelp?” A hand holding a knife came up, the point pressing to Martin’s throat. “Is Shepard your leader?” the voice repeated, enunciating each word with slow menace.

Hovering at the edge of the blind, a thousand ideas raced through Shepard’s head, but she
discarded all of them. Anything she did risked everyone else. She stopped, slamming up a wall that forced her mind to go quiet for a moment. Gunfire. She heard gunfire and it sounded a lot closer than the docks.

She took a deep breath. “Do you hear that?” she yelled down. “That’s the sound of a whole battalion of reinforcements headed this way.” Pausing, she gave the slavers time to hear the fighting for themselves. “You’re done here. If you’re smart, you’ll pack up and run like hell.” She laughed, launching it at them like a guided missile. “Or don’t. A whole lot fewer pirate scum in the galaxy.”

The cluster of bodies in the courtyard shifted, restlessness quickly accelerating toward panic as the sound of hundreds of boots beating against the pavement at double-time grew even louder than the sporadic gunfire.

“Shepard!” the batarian bellowed, “your name will not be forgotten.”

Martin screamed, a blood-freezing shrill of agony.

“I’ve left you a gift to remember me by as well, Shepard. Congratulations on your victory.” Deep, mocking laughter slithered behind the words. Screams fed the evil chortle until Shepard clutched her arms over her head, desperate to block it out.

“How?” Hands grabbed her, shaking her hard. “LT! They’ve pulled out. The Alliance is inside the gates.” They shook her again, and she uncurled. “Damn, you’re bleeding.” Medigel slithered through her, helping drag her back to the rooftop of the school.

“Martin!” She scrambled to her feet.

“LT. I don’t think you should go down there. It’s um . . .”

Shepard turned to look at the soldier. “Is he . . .?” She couldn’t force the last word past her lips. It dug in behind her teeth, claws holding it in place.

“He’s alive. All seven of them are alive, but . . .” The soldier swallowed, his adam’s apple bobbing almost comically. “You don’t want to see them like that. You saved us all, ma’am. Don’t let that be your memory of it.” He wrapped an arm around her, supporting her weight, and tried to help her to the stairs.

“No.” She broke away from him. “I’m fine, and I’ll honour the ones I failed.” One arm wrapped tight around her stomach, she hobbled down the stairs and along the length of the now empty corridor. One hand braced against the wall, she walked to the door, hesitating for a couple of breaths before stepping out into the new sun.

The slavers had run in their tanks, leaving the father’s dead body sprawled a couple of metres ahead of a mass of people, blood, and frantic tears.

Clenching her teeth, she walked over, searching the crowd for the young man who, so few hours before, thought the whole thing some grand opportunity for adventure.

“Shepard!” The muffled, mushy way her name came out of Martin’s mouth told her far more than she wanted to know. Pushing through the Alliance personnel and civilians trying to help, she found Martin and the others laying on the pavement. She turned away, her eyes pressed shut, but then forced herself to look back, to kneel next to him and take his hand.

“I’m right here, Martin,” she said, her voice soft and almost as strangled as his. “You just take it
“easy and let these people help you out.” She stroked his brow, brushing his hair out of the blood that poured over his skin. “You are one hell of a brave kid.”

“Stupid,” he said through sobs and blood, choking as it poured down his throat.

“Roll him onto his side,” the medic called, “or he’s going to aspirate. Fucking slavers.”

Shepard slapped him on his shoulder, jerking her head and a firm glare toward the blinded youth on the ground. The medic paled and nodded.

“Just never . . .,” he said, working to pack Martin’s wounds.

Shepard nodded, but just kept stroking her fingers through the young man’s hair. “Nah, it’s never stupid to try to help others, kid. You just relax. These guys will take care of you.”

“Don’t leave?” His hand clutched hers in an iron grip.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere.” She rubbed his back. “Were your family at another school?”

He nodded.

“Who was in charge here?”

Shepard let out a long sigh at the familiar shout and looked up, searching out the commodore. When she spotted Hackett, she lifted a hand to get his attention.

He saw her, a fierce, furious smile settled onto his face. “I should have known,” he grumbled, crouching next to her. “What? You can’t even manage leave without getting into trouble?” He gripped her shoulder. “You’re hurt?”

“Yeah. Stabbed by an angry father.” She jutted her chin toward the dead man. “I’ll get looked at as soon as Martin here is on his way to the hospital.”

“The slavers blinded him like the girl?” Jenkins asked, his face twisted into horrified sorrow.

“All of them, eyes, ears, tongue . . ..” Shepard shook her head. “The Alliance and the colonial authority held a memorial a month later, paraded me, the couple of surviving Alliance soldiers, and those kids out like prized farm animals at a fair. I told everyone where they could stuff their medal and awards, but they didn’t care. Colonist enrollment tanked after the Blitz. They needed to put a pretty face on it. Lucky us.”

Shepard lifted her hand to her ear. “Ground teams, anyone see anything? Any sign of Rael’Zorah?” When the teams all reported in negative, she let out an impatient huff of air. “Too much to ask, I suppose. Okay, everyone, back to the boat. We’ll come back later, find a busy club, see if we don’t have better luck.”

“Jane?” Jenkins said, tucking her hand back in the crook of his arm. “Thanks.”

“Yeah. You’re a good soldier, Richard. Just don’t be too eager to become a hero. Make it count when you do.”
Mass Effect - Future Imperfect Chapter Twenty Six

Chapter Summary

Daytime op--fail. Onto the nighttime option. Afterlife, here they come.

“Going out to a club wearing the stupid, brand-new, fantastic armour that makes me look like an ugly boy,” Shepard muttered as she walked to the airlock, settling her chest guard so it sat a little more comfortably. The new armour smell remained, but it rubbed in places her Mantis hadn’t, and all those places were lodging complaints in triplicate. Her little toes in particular felt as though they were preparing litigation.

“Damn armour.” She let out a sigh and flopped onto the seat at the weapons console to wait for the rest of the team to arrive. “I love you, but I hate you.”

“Problem, Captain?” Joker asked, turning to look over his shoulder.

“Meh, probably just a case of all work no play, Brother Joker. No big deal. I’ll find my way back to the Enkindler’s light.” She tugged at the chest guard again. As much as she hated the super-molded ones, sometimes looking like a tomboy wrapped in layers of camo ceramic, metal and polymer got old. Sometimes it didn’t hurt a girl’s ego to feel pretty . . . or, failing that, female.

“Okay,” Joker said, holding up his hands. “I won’t pretend to understand. I’ll just nod and back away slowly.”

“The Enkindlers blessed you with wisdom, Brother Joker. Hallelujah,” she said, a smile cracking through her grumpy facade.

Ash arrived, looking absolutely stunning in a simple but elegant black dress with sheer, draping sleeves, and a knee length skirt. Her makeup was flawless, and her raven hair flowed in glossy waves to her shoulders. Raking frustrated fingers through her tangled curls, Shepard resisted the urge to punch the gunnery chief. It wasn’t Ash’s fault Shepard hadn’t bothered to put on a little lipstick.

Shepard nodded to Nihlus and Garrus as they strode up discussing turian fleet strength and their chances against the Reapers. She pushed herself out of the seat to join them at the airlock. Pausing just behind the pilot’s seat, she let out a sigh and leaned down over Joker’s shoulder. “It’s just . . . sometimes it would be nice to go to a club looking like a woman rather than a teenage boy. I’m sure you can’t relate.” She smiled at Tali as she, Wrex, Kaidan and Jenkins wandered up the CIC.

“Hey, I’m all about the pretty, Shepard.” He lifted his chin and stroked his beard. “Come on, tell me this isn’t a thing of beauty.”

Letting out a huff of air, she chuckled. “Stunning in a way I can’t even articulate, Brother Joker.” She patted his shoulder. “See you later.”

She stood in the doorway. “Well, it looks like the gang’s all here. Okay, Wrex and I’ll go in first, plant ourselves at the bar. Sparky and Jenkins, see if you can find a way to lurk out front without looking like you’re lurking. Ashley and Tali should have no problem whatsoever getting in. Nihlus
and C-Sec, you bring up drag, keep an eye on the back exits.” She looked from one to the other, seeing resolve and an eagerness to get their mission moving forward. That she completely understood.

“Okay, the panic word again is Bal’Nara.” She looked to Tali. “You still have your tracker and bug from earlier?” When the quarian nodded, Shepard let out a decisive huff of breath. “Well then, let’s get moving. Wrex and I will head in first. Give us twenty to get in the door.” She stepped up to the door into decon. “Good luck tonight, folks.”

She spun a little as she felt someone step up behind her and nearly smacked her nose right into Nihlus’s mandible.

“Anyone who looks at you and thinks teenage boy,” he whispered low enough for only her to hear, “needs corrective ocular implants.” His breath ruffled the fine hairs around her ear and the nape of her neck, sending shivers of gooseflesh down her arms. She ducked her head to rub her ear on her shoulder and stepped away.

“Nihlus, we talked about this.” Tossing a frown over her shoulder at him, she shook her head. “Although I appreciate you trying to make me feel better, this is neither the time nor the place.” She met his eyes for a second, then ducked through the door.

Once through decon, she and Wrex made quick time down the length of the docks and into Omega. The sound of the terrible club music started as soon as they stepped through the doors at the base of the stairs leading from the lower market area up to the club. Shepard winced. “Sweet baby Jesus, what was I thinking? How do they even know if the song changes? It all sounds exactly the same.”

Wrex shrugged. “I just drink until the music sounds better.”

Shepard chuckled. “Luckily I can turn down the ambient on my aural implants, so drinking myself into a stupor won’t be necessary.”

Shepard looked up at the giant neon sign: Afterlife, palace and court of Aria T’Loak, the pirate queen of Omega. Shepard felt a little dubious about running an op in the territory of such an unknown quantity, but the place and crowds were big enough to get lost in.

She stepped up to the back of the line outside the door. “Crap, this is going to take longer than twenty minutes,” she grumbled to Wrex. Cocking a hip, she crossed her arms. “If it takes longer than ten, I’ll call off the next team until we get past the door goons.”

They’d been waiting in line for less than five minutes, when a batarian walked up to them. “Captain Shepard?”

She nodded, but held herself wary. “What can I do for you?” Beside her, she felt Wrex bristle, turning into a four hundred kilo living, breathing thunderstorm at her elbow. She laid a hand on his upper arm and gave him a tiny shake of her head.

“You don’t need to wait in line. Go ahead in. The door guards know to let you through.” A toothy smile accompanied his wave, indicating they should move on through to the front.

Shepard stared at him for a moment, wondering if that much good fortune constituted a gift horse that she should be sending to a dentist for a full work up. “Thanks,” she replied at last, nudging Wrex out of line. As much as she hated being pulled out, questioning it too much would only draw more attention to them.

Another batarian nodded them through the doors and into a corridor lined with seats and flame
holos along the walls. “Guess the only afterlife on Omega is hell,” she muttered.

“Sounds about right,” Wrex grumbled. “I’ve been a merc a long time, but no matter how bad things got, I always avoided this hole like the plague.”

“Hopefully we’re out of here in a couple of hours. Meanwhile, let’s get something to drink and see if you’ve got the moves, old man.”

He coughed out a harsh laugh. “You haven’t got what it takes to make me dance, Shepard.”

She arched a brow at him as the inside doors opened and the music slammed into her brain. “And what’s that, Wrex? Creds to stuff in your armour? A sexy enough belly dancing outfit for you to wear?” She leaned back and looked him up and down, a lascivious grin curving her lips. “Damn, I bet you fill out one of those like nobody’s business.”

The krogan just harrumphed at her and started pushing through the throng to the bar. “I’m going to need a few drinks to survive your sense of humour, Shepard.”

She laughed bright and full, the gloomy mood from earlier lifting. “You wouldn’t believe how often I hear that.”

“Yes, I would.” He lifted a hand. “Ryncol. Make it a triple.”

Shepard started to rebuke him, but someone grabbed her shoulder, turning her. “Human, Aria wants to speak to you,” a voice like tank tracks running over gravel called, close enough to her ear for his wretched breath to make her gag.

“No, I’m pretty sure she doesn’t,” she replied, lacing her words with enough spit to back him up. “Tell her thanks, but no thanks. I’m just here to drink.”

The batarian bumped Shepard in the ribs with the muzzle of his assault rifle. “You don’t refuse an invitation to talk with Aria.”

Shepard rolled her eyes and folded her arms, leaning back on a cocked hip. “Or what? She and I do a quick draw in the middle of main street at high noon?”

The batarian just sneered, an ugly curl of his lip that showed a plethora of pointed teeth. “More like I put a bullet through the middle of your forehead and toss it in an alley for the varren.”

“What? My forehead? Why would the varren want my forehead? There’s no meat on a forehead.” She frowned and turned to Wrex, who made a perfect study of ‘Who me? I’ve never seen this crazy woman before.’

“Your body.” He jabbed her ribs hard with the assault rifle. “Move it, comedian. Aria’s waiting.”

“Someone thinks mighty highly of herself, doesn’t she?” She looked over her shoulder at Wrex. “Keep your eyes peeled.” He gave her a vague nod as if indulging the crazy woman, and she turned back to the batarian. “Lead away.”

The crowd parted for her escort, so the jostling as they made their way across the club and past the bar was minimal. Shepard had heard of Aria T’Loak, of course. Urban legends of her ruthlessness, how she kept order on Omega through threat of sheer brute force, abounded. Shepard had never put much stock in rumours because of all the crazy ones circulating about her. Still, she felt how the entirety of Afterlife kept one weather eye on the booth hanging over the back of the club.
“So, you’re what all the fuss is about?” a voice as smooth and sleek as a panther asked when Shepard reached the top of a second flight of stairs. An asari with an Omega worked into the back of her jacket stood looking out over the crowd, the queen watching the jesters frolic.

“Fuss?” Shepard shook her head. “I can’t see why anyone would raise a fuss over me. I’m just a medium-ranked, hothead Alliance grunt.”

The asari turned, a sweeping motion meant to impress with both her power and grace. Shepard just let out a little sigh, but stayed frosty, feeling the thick vein of ruthlessness hiding under Aria’s calculated serenity.

“And here you are, on my station, conducting operations to flush out Blood Pack kidnappers.”

“The Blood Pack is clueless, just . . . cautious. Saren makes very . . ..” She pressed her lips together and cocked her head a little. “. . . graphic examples of those who fail him.”

The corner of Shepard’s mouth lifted, almost as if of its own accord as the asari pinned her with a frank stare. Blinking with measured cadence, she waited for Aria to make the next move, to reveal her intentions.

“You’re not going to ask for anything?” Aria asked, trying to become transparent behind a mocking smile. “No boon to ask of the queen?”

Shepard pressed her lips together, affecting the same thoughtful, searching expression the asari had worn a moment before, then shook her head. “No. Can’t think of anything.” The tip of her tongue snuck out to wet her lips, then she ran her top lip between her teeth, looking around as if waiting for something to happen. After a second, she flipped to her other hip. “Was there something I could do for you?”

Aria chuckled. “I merely wanted to see for myself the terrible Shepard who has the council in such an uproar.”

Shepard straightened and held her arms out, her stomach calming completely. It had all just been about threat assessment. “Well, here I am, in all of my terribleness. Are you sure you weren’t hearing about Nihlus? He’s the Spectre. I’m just his tagalong. I carry his gun case, remind him to take his vitamins, mop the sweat from his brow, that sort of thing.”

Aria chuckled. The sound did not come off as a laugh, the low, throaty tones barbed with hooks that reached inside and insisted that Shepard let herself be reeled in. “I am . . . familiar with Spectre Kryik. He’s provided me with a great deal of entertainment over the cycles. He’s a known quantity, although I’m sure the poor thing is just devastated over Saren’s betrayal.”

The Cheshire smile stayed firmly in place. “I am . . . familiar with Spectre Kryik. He’s provided me with a great deal of entertainment over the cycles. He’s a known quantity, although I’m sure the poor thing is just devastated over Saren’s betrayal.” The smile faded, the asari’s eyes narrowing as she continued to hold Shepard’s stare without breaking away longer than to blink.

Shepard forced her face to remain passive despite the churning in her guts provoked by the many ways she could think of that Nihlus had provided Aria with entertainment. She gave the asari credit for a good play. Unable to get the mark to ask for a favour, next best move was always to go for
the gut, check for weaknesses.

Aria’s lip turned up at the corner in the smallest of smirks. “I admit, even I didn’t see that coming. Those two spent a lot of cycles joined at the hip.”

Resisting the urge to laugh, Shepard nodded. That was an intentional cheap shot, so she let her amusement bleed through her gaze and nowhere else. “They were tight, but Nihlus is bouncing back. He’s a professional.”

“Aren’t we all?” Aria nodded once, a regal dip of her head. She let out a breath and shifted on the couch, posing. “No, you’re the unknown in this puzzle. Orphan, street rat, war hero, and malcontent.” Her smirk spread a little, and she lowered her head to look up under heavy-lidded eyes. “You don’t know quite what to be, do you?”

A misread? Intentional or unintentional? Or truth? Shepard shrugged the last off, lifting her shoulders a centimetre and dropping them. “I’m what you see before you, Aria. No great mystery to unravel here. I’m just trying to help Nihlus find Saren and stop him from doing something really stupid.” She straightened. “You might want to consider helping him out with that as well. A queen without a kingdom is just a sad mannequin in a discount warehouse of what used to be.”

“Reapers. I’ve been hearing that word a lot these past weeks.” Aria motioned toward the couch adjacent hers.

“Thank you, but I need to get back to my date. You know how krogan are.” Shepard shrugged helplessly, and gave the asari a slow, tilted bow of her head. “It’s been a pleasure to meet you.”

Aria’s smile flashed the barest glimpse of teeth, more predatory than ever; its purpose to obfuscate and intimidate. “And you, Shepard. Good luck capturing Saren.”

Shepard turned and trotted down the stairs without looking back. Even the tiniest glance back over her shoulder would tell Aria far too much, so she controlled her expression and movements precisely until she found Wrex.

“Where you been, Shepard?” Wrex asked, downing what smelled like diesel fuel, but must have been ryncol.

“Aria wanted to compare dick sizes.” She gestured to the bartender. “Cranberry juice, please.” Looking back at Wrex, she grinned. “Hers is bigger.” She did a casual scan of the club, finding Tali and Ash right away, Garrus and Nihlus a few moments later.

When the turian set the bottle on the counter, Shepard swiped her credit chit. “Thanks.” She twisted off the cap and upended the bottle. The juice caressed and teased her tongue, as sweet and crisp as a frosty autumn morning. She closed her eyes to savour it, moaning low and deep with pleasure. “Sweet baby Jesus, that’s good stuff.”

“What is that? I feel like I should be giving you some privacy.” Wrex peered into her eyes as she lowered the bottle, having drank half of it. “You going blackout drunk on me, Shepard?” He studied her through narrowed eyes as if waiting for her to fall over.

“It’s fruit juice, Wrex. I won’t be getting drunk at all. I’m working.” She bumped him with an elbow. “How about you? Am I going to have to carry you home?”

He laughed, two loud, harsh coughs of sound that cut through the rhythmic dissonance of the background music to resonate in the pit of her stomach. She grinned as it filled her with a warmth she wouldn’t have expected. Wrex thumped her on the shoulder, driving her into the floor like a
post-pounder. “Vakarian says you’re strong, but that I would have to see, Shepard. My left arm weighs more than you do.”

“Not the right one?” She grinned, wide and easy then reached up to rub her shoulder. “Don’t underestimate me, old man. I’m scrappy.” Chuckling, she nodded toward a table in plain view of Ash and Tali. “Come on, grab another drink and let’s go talk.”

Wrex gestured to the bartender to repeat their orders, and paid for them. “You trying to get in my armour, Shepard?”

Laughing, she started to push through the dancers. “You’re way too much of a handful for me. I like my men --”

“About seven feet tall and spiky with blue markings on their faces?” Wrex finished.

Shepard’s brows migrated toward her nose as she spun to face him. “C-Sec?” Shaking her head, she course corrected, spotting an empty booth in the corner. “We’re not like that, Wrex. Don’t be spreading rumours.” Sliding into the booth, she pushed the table back to make room for the krogan.

He shrugged. “I’m not, but the crew pretty much agrees that if you aren’t already bumping the hump, you will be.”

She jabbed an elbow in his side. “Bumping the . . . . What does that even mean?” She snapped a hand up between them as he opened his mouth to answer. “No, don’t. I don’t want to know.”

Leveling a stern finger at his nose, she leaned in, her eyes narrowed and shooting darts. “You hear that crap, you squash it. Instantly, or I will, and I guarantee no one will enjoy my method. It involves pointy-toed boots and airlocks.” She uncapped her bottle and drank, her movements hard, almost robotic. Why was everyone so damned concerned with what went on between her legs? “Don’t you people have anything better to do than speculate about my sex life?” She leaned back, wriggling down into the couch.

He thought for a moment, then shook his head. “The cargo bay is pretty boring.”

The corner of his mouth twitched, and she laughed, shaking her head. “You are a pain in the ass, old man.”

“Part of my charm.” Sliding her unopened bottle of juice over in front of her, he downed the last of his drink and leaned back, turning toward her a little to rest his elbow on the table. “So, if you aren’t trying to get your hands on my equipment, what do you want to talk about?”

Feeling a hot flush rising up her neck, Shepard focused on opening her bottle and taking a drink. When her blush settled a little, she turned in her seat to face him. “I’ve got the feeling something’s up with you. You’ve been even more of a grumpy old bear than usual the last few days.” She shrugged and twitched her lips a little to one side. “What’s going on?”

He stared at her, one eye narrowing as if sizing her up, deciding if she could be trusted. After a minute, he grumbled. “These Reapers, Shepard.” He took a belt off his fresh drink.

She just nodded and waited for him to continue. Wrex possessed a surprising thoughtfulness, and she found herself not just obliged to hear what he had to say because he was a member of her crew but eager to hear it.

“These Reapers,” he repeated, “are the enemy that my people were born to fight, Shepard.” He took another drink when she answered with a smile and silence. “But the salarians and turians snapped our back with the genophage. We used to be proud . . . strong. Now, we’re just hired
Shepard shifted a little, sinking into the couch. “The genophage interferes with the hormones that sustain pregnancy, right? Most pregnancies end in spontaneous abortion or stillbirth.” When he threw a nod and a grunt at her, she opened the space between them a little. “Is work being done on a cure? I heard on the news that Binary Helix was supposed to be looking in that direction.”

“No one’s interested in curing it, Shepard.” He laughed but it was a harsh bark of disgust. “Not even most krogan. They leave Tuchanka and never go back.” Red eyes glared into hers, daring her to say or do something stupid. When she just stared back, waiting for him to get where he felt comfortable getting to the point, he sniffed, the corner of his mouth quirking. “We’re weak and scattered, dying out faster than we can breed, and it’s not the genophage killing us.”

“You need a unifying force,” she said, more to herself than him. “Someone or something capable of pulling your people back home.” She flashed to her conversation with Alenko

“When my father tried to murder me . . .” He watched her until she nodded to let him know she remembered him telling her. “. . . I was the leader of a small tribe. I was trying to rally the clans, encourage my people to stay on Tuchanka, concentrate on breeding and growing our numbers for at least one generation.” He shrugged, rolling his shoulders a little. “Jeroth, my father, was one of the warlords who survived the war with the turians. He wanted us to keep fighting. Turians, salarians, one another . . . it didn’t matter as long as we were fighting.”

“So, he invited you to the clan gathering to shut you up, one way or the other?” Shepard asked, looking up to check on the other teams. Across the club, Ashley and Tali had gotten up to dance, and seemed to be having an almost unprofessionally good time. She grinned, glad to see it. Shepard finished off her juice and slid the bottle to the far side of the table before turning her attention back to Wrex.

Wrex nodded. “When he realized that I wouldn’t join him, his men attacked, leaping from the graves of our ancestors like krogan undead. They killed all of my men within a few minutes, and I was forced to retreat, but not before I buried my dagger in his hearts. That’s why I left, and why I can never go back.”

Shepard shook her head. “No. There’s been something going on with you, and it’s not reminiscing over the bad old days, Wrex.” She shifted, moving a little closer, inclined toward him. “You’re thinking you need to go back, aren’t you?”

He grunted and shoved that idea aside, dumping the last of his drink into his mouth. “I’ve been thinking of an oath I made to my father’s father.” He flipped his hand toward the exit. “It’s the end of the galaxy out there, Shepard. You know it, and I know it, and I’m sitting in the belly of your fancy ship, wasting time when I should be setting my affairs in order.”

Shepard kicked him under the table. “Bullshit. Wasting your time . . .” A grumbled rolled like rock from her throat. “Does it take 1200 years or so to learn to feel sorry for yourself like that?” She cracked the new bottle and took a slug of cranberry juice. “You have something you need to be doing, just tell me what it is. We’ll get it done, and then get our asses back to making sure it’s not the end of the galaxy.”

He harrumphed at her, giving her that one brow cocked stare. “You believe that, Shepard?”

She harrumphed right back, her spine rigid, her jaw set. “Damn right. What bloody choice do we have, Wrex? I don’t have time for quitters. You say your people have given up. Well, are you prepared to join them or do something to change things?”
He loomed over her, glaring down at her as though he wanted to charge her right then and there, slam her through the wall behind them. After a moment, he relaxed back into the seat, a dry chuckle acknowledging her successful ploy. “All right, Shepard. After the rebellions, krogan weren’t allowed armour or weapons. The turians confiscated my family armour. I told my father’s father I’d get it back.”

Her eyes on Tali and Ash -- they’d caught the attention of two krogan in tell-tale Blood Pack armour -- Shepard nodded. “Do you know where it is?”

He followed her stare and turned, but kept his eyes on his drink. She followed suit, guzzling down the rest of her juice. Her radio squawked twice in her ear, and she nodded. Nihlus and Garrus were on the alert as well.

“Turian scum by the name of Tonn Actus has it. He collects relics from before the rebellions, has warehouses of krogan artifacts stored on bases all over the Traverse.” He jerked his head toward the krogan watching Tali and Ash. “They’re going to move.”

Shepard reached up and opened a channel. “How are things out in the ‘not a VIP’ line, Sparky?”

“Boring, ma’am. Does it look like something’s going to happen?” Kaiden replied.

“It does. Be ready.” She played with her bottle then looked at Wrex, trying to keep things casual as she spoke to Kaidan. “Our other friends are watching the back exit, so be prepared to run around through the market area and circle in on the back side.”

“Roger that.”

“Shepard out.” She opened a channel to Ashley. “Chief, separate yourself a little. Let’s see if we can get those two to take the bait.” She leaned back and crossed her arms and ankles. The krogan weren’t playing the slightest bit of attention to her table, so she felt pretty good about her cover. They, however, looked a little too obviously not interested in Tali.

Ashley moved over to a table, striking up a conversation with a group of asari sitting there. The krogan must have been waiting for the opportunity, because they edged in, one scooped Tali up with a hand behind her and they just barrelled straight toward the back door. It happened so quickly and so slick that Tali barely even got out a squawk before she hit the back stairs.

“They grabbed the bait, but took her out back, Sparky.” Shepard elbowed Wrex but he was already moving. He wriggled out of the booth and strode for the back. On the other side of the bar, Ashley and Nihlus jumped into motion as well. Shepard followed Wrex, allowing him to clear a path for her.

“Hey there, Red,” a human man grabbed Shepard’s arm. 150 proof breath smacked her in the face as he spun her around. Flinching back, she tried to step around him, but he wrapped his other arm around her neck and stumbled into her. “You’re pretty.”

“You’re not.” She tried to go around him again, but he stumbled into her, pushing her back. Grabbing his wrist, she twisted, wrenching his arm around behind him. He fell forward into one of the asari dancers, spilling her drink all over her and the turian she was speaking to.

“Hey!” The dancer spun around, grabbing the drunk by the collar. “Watch it.” She met Shepard’s eyes. “Is this idiot bothering you?” She slapped the turian on the elbow without waiting for Shepard to answer. “Aidan, escort this loser out.”

“Thanks.” Shepard pushed the drunk toward the turian, eager to be rid of him and get after Tali.
“Hey! Bitch!” Even though he didn’t seem to know who to address his insult to, the man swung a wild blow aimed at Shepard’s head. She ducked under it and sidestepped, the blow slamming into a batarian’s jaw.

Then chaos. Absolute, utter chaos, violent and bloody. Shepard ducked between flailing bodies and dodged blows, just trying to scramble her way to the door. A massive, three-fingered hand seized her shoulders and slammed her down onto the bar like someone trying to beat a rug. Stunned, she barely managed to block and throw aside a roundhouse that would have shattered her jaw like spun sugar. The krogan combatant stared at her for a moment with hazy, wavering lack of recognition as his fist connected with the bar top instead of Shepard. He pinned her legs to the front of the bar with his bulk. Winded, Shepard fought to wriggle loose as she dodged a flurry of punches coming at her from both sides.

“I don’t have time for this!” She slammed a fist into the krogan’s jaw. He shrugged it off. Her hand didn’t. Shaking out the pain, she kicked her feet, managing to drive him back a little even as he swung at her like a blind gorilla.


Shepard dodged her assailant’s unsteady blows effortlessly as his frustrated growls grew louder and more menacing. After punching the top of the bar ten or so times, he howled in drunken rage.

“Hold still!”

“Yeah, that’s going to happen.” Shepard laughed. “You’re pathetic, go find someone more your speed. I think I saw a drunk passed out at one of the tables.” The realisation of her mistake dawned about the time his massive, toothy face pressed into hers, snorting like a bull. But then he turned away, presumably to pick on someone his own size and a whole lot less agile.

Letting out a sigh of relief that she didn’t admit to herself, she reached up to radio Garrus and Wrex to leave her and go after Tali. Her hand didn’t quite reach her ear before massive hands grabbed the front of her armour and yanked her off the bar, flinging her like a football at the vid pillar in the center. In surreal slow-motion, weightless, she flew over the heads of the brawlers, turning her shoulder into the screen. As she bounced off, she looked down at the long drop to the lower level of the club. Landing on the bar ten metres below looked like a painful option. Wrenching every muscle she owned, Shepard stretched out, snagged the railing with one hand on the way down.

“Vakarian! Grab Shepard. I’ve got this!” Wrex yelled, disappearing into the sea of bodies, heading in the general direction of the back door.

“Ow, goddamn it!” Swinging her free arm a couple of times, Shepard managed to get enough momentum to grab the railing with both hands. Not that it mattered because two seconds later, Garrus ‘Caveman’ Vakarian reached over the railing, grabbed her by the back of her collar and her belt, hauled her up, and set her on her feet. Too grateful to be free of the brawl to bother yelling at him for manhandling her, Shepard sprinted toward the back door. It led to the lower level of the club, and for a moment, she lamented not just letting herself fall.

A painful shortcut is still a shortcut.

Garrus right beside her, she ran down the stairs and through a door into a dark seating area where small clusters of people chatted. None of the patrons seemed overly affected by watching a young female dragged through their midst, kicking and screaming.

“Did they even come this way?” Shepard twisted, running sideways for a second. “Did two krogan come through carrying a screaming quarian?” Most of the people didn’t even look at her, but one
asari pointed along their path. “Thanks for the apathy, brothers and sisters.” She took the lead down another long flight of stairs, calling back over her shoulder. “May the Enkindlers’ pointy-toed light bless you in the ass.”

The stairs ended at a door into the lower club. “I was thinking that this is a strange way to bring her,” Shepard said, racing around the left side of the bar, dodging dancers. “But no one seems to give a crap.” Gawkers stood around the bar, watching the fight above, the din drowning out even the music. As Shepard ran past, a body dropped through the same gap she’d nearly taken a few minutes earlier, crashing into the bar. Shards of glass pinged off her armour and blood splashed against her face and neck.

Okay, glad I didn’t take that route now.

“Lower profile than dragging Tali kicking and screaming out the front,” Garrus replied. “A dive like this, no one’s going to step up to stop them.” He made an angry rumble. “It’s a meat grinder, not a club.”

A door at the back led into the alleys behind the markets, and they made their way back around to the docks. Shepard hit the top of a long, wide flight of stairs, puffing a little. She lowered her head to check her omnitool for Tali’s tracker, her ears barely registering the sound of gunfire before huge, heavy fists punched into her shields, driving her to the ground. Giving her a shake, she looked up, seeing two Blood Pack vorcha and a krogan firing at her from the end of a long row of shipping containers.

Garrus grabbed her, hurling her bodily behind the nearest container, taking a position opposite. She slammed into the metal with a hollow, ringing thud, bouncing back a little. She shrugged Roger into her hands and pressed her back against the corrugated wall, easing her way to the end to peek out.

“Are you okay?” he called, his voice tight. He ducked out to return fire.

“Yeah, didn’t get past my shields.” After switching to incendiary ammunition, she launched her drone in behind the krogan, distracting it.

“C-Sec, whittle down the krogan, I’ll take the vorcha.” He grunted his agreement, overloading the Blood Pack warrior’s barriers then switching out his assault rifle for the sniper. Shepard hammered at the vorcha, using three round volleys. One went down, but another took it’s place.

“Pyro,” Garrus called.

“You hit him with overload, I’ll sabotage his tank. Shouldn’t be anything left but chunks.” She ducked out to check her drone still had the krogan occupied. A blast of flame erupted in her face, luckily still at the extreme of the flamethrower’s range. She threw herself back and raised an annoyed eyebrow at Garrus. “I . . . 2 . . . 3.”

They both leaned out at the same time. Their omnitools flared, flames roared toward them, then with a boom that made Shepard’s ears pop, the vorcha turned into chunks of blood, bone, and meat that rained down over their heads.

“Dammit! I’m not wearing my helmet.” Shepard picked a long string of something she hoped wasn’t intestines out of her hair and threw it aside. “You might have mentioned he was in range, C-Sec. Next time, give me a range.”

“They’re bugging out.” Garrus looked to her before bolting, but sprinted off the moment she
nodded.

Dodging between shipping containers, they worked their way up the docks, the krogan and last vorcha steadily gaining ground. At the edge of every container, one of them ducked out to check for ambush, then sprang back into a run. Container by container, Shepard felt their chances of catching the Blood Pack dwindling.

At last, they came to a large corridor between sections.

Shepard looked both ways, but saw nothing. “You go right. I’ll take the left.” She made it five containers down before staccato roar of gunfire echoed from Garrus’s direction. Glancing back, she couldn’t see him. Damn it, he’d gone into the damn maze.

A harsh, male bellow of pain threw her heart up into her throat, and she spun around, her boots slipping in the grit underfoot. She sprinted back down the line, peering between containers without nearly enough caution.

*Good way to get your head blown off, Shepard. Dumbass.*

“C-Sec? You okay?” she called ahead of her. She rounded the end of the line of containers to see him pushing himself up off the concrete.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he said, grunting as he scrambled up off the floor with enough energy to slow her pulse. He glanced back, a thin trail of blue rolling down his face, then took off. “They doubled back down this row.”

She bolted down the space, arriving just in time to see Garrus slide around a corner further into the tangle of metal and open doors. “At least I’m not chasing him across a human colony,” she muttered, racing after him.

She caught up with him two rows over, completely lost in the maze of narrow corridors and endless containers. Garrus peered around the end of a shipping box then dashed out. Shepard turned the corner to follow him, but he threw himself back, nearly knocking her off her feet as his boots slid on a slick patch of pavement. Grabbing hold of the container with one hand, Shepard grabbed him under his arm with the other and yanked him back in time for a rocket to explode against his shields. Two more flew wide, turning the box behind them into a tangled metal pretzel.

“Thanks.” He leaned against the metal, panting hard for a moment, then ducked out and ran ahead.

Shaking her head, she followed, calling up Tali’s tracker on her omnitool. They didn’t have time to let the Blood Pack lead them on a merry chase across all of Omega. They needed to be there if Tali got into trouble.

Ten metres ahead, Garrus ducked into a door, calling back, “They went in a container up here.”

Shepard ducked inside the container in time to see Garrus hit the back wall and turn back, utter confusion in his eyes.

“What? Oh damn.” Spinning around, she leaped toward the door, but it slammed in her face, the latches screeching into their brackets. She slammed her fists into the door, then her shoulder, but it stayed solidly, stubbornly closed. Spinning around, she glared into Garrus’s eyes.

“No goddamned way.” Stomping over, she slapped the heel of her hand against his armour. “You’re a fucking jinx, C-Sec.” She looked along the walls for any other way out before she allowed the words to form. “Sweet baby Jesus, we’re bloody locked in here.”
I wonder if Aria finds herself sufficiently entertained.
Shepard turned on Roger’s flashlight, shining the beam around the inside of the dark container. “It’s a fucking meat locker.” Shepard bounced her fingers off Garrus’s chest again as her hands began to tremble. “We’re trapped in a goddamned meat locker. I can’t believe this.” Shepard felt the collar of her armour tightening around her neck, her breathing coming faster and more shallow.

Locked in a dark, frozen cage.

Closing her eyes tight, she pushed back against the walls as they pressed in, she forced herself to slow her breathing. Freaking out wouldn’t solve anything.

“We can’t be locked in. Maybe it’s just stuck.” Garrus brushed past Shepard to throw his shoulder into the door a couple of times. “Damn.”

Shepard prowled to the end of the huge freezer container, thumping the walls with the butt of her gun, trying to find another exit. They needed to get out. Damn it! She needed to get out for Tali . . .

You need to get out for yourself, you bloody coward. Tali’s got a whole squad backing her up.

She turned on Garrus, all her terror and frustration boiling over to sizzle in the flames. “This one is all on you, C-Sec. I wasn’t the one who yelled, ‘They went in there!’” She held out her hands and turned a slow circle, then punched what looked like a side of frozen varren. “Why would anyone come in here except to hang meat?” Rolling her eyes, she returned to the door and started banging on the reinforced metal with her gun. No one would ever hear her hand.

Walls this thick, no one is going to hear your gun either, Shepard. Face it, you’re caged.

No. No, not caged, just waylaid. If they had to, they could shoot the lock off the door, surely.

Bullets will probably ricochet, and kill you both.

She heard him mutter under his breath, but her translator didn’t pick it up. “What is it with you getting me trapped in deadly situations?” he asked, talons searching along the edges of the door.

Yanking herself back off the cracking, black ice, Shepard turned to him, her flashlight cutting a path of sanity across the space. “Don’t be a drama queen. The situation isn’t deadly, except maybe for Tali.” She winced at that last as she saw his mandibles drop. She opened her mouth, an apology almost making it to her teeth before she sucked it back. Unfair as it might be, she needed to stay pissed at him. Hell, she needed him to stay pissed at her. “We’ll just bang on the door. It’s a dock, someone will hear and lets us out.”

Bristling, Garrus held his hand up to block her light and glared at her. “I’m sorry, it looked like they came in here. It’s possible they ran into the next container.”

Shepard laughed, hard and sharp. “It’s possible?” She returned to the far corner, lifting her hands to
cup her mouth. “Hello? Invisible Blood Pack members? Hello?” Spinning back, she fixed him with narrow eyes. “I’d say that it’s definite they went into another container . . . or no container at all. Oh, yeah, and then they locked us in this one.” She spun away to hammer on the back wall. “It’s freezing in here. You did this on purpose. You liked the cuddling for warmth on Feros, didn’t you?”

He sputtered and turned away to throw his shoulder into the door. “No! I was dying of hypothermia.” Slam. “You throw enough heat to replace the center of an average yellow sun.” Slam. He spun back around and flung his arms up. “I didn’t do this on purpose.” He cast around them. “Do you see some cozy little make-out nest in here, Shepard? No! You see slabs of dead animals.” He shoved a carcass out of his way, sending the whole line of them swinging. “Being trapped in a meat locker with a paranoid claustrophobe is not my idea of romantic.”

She returned to hammering on the walls with her rifle. “Just quit your bellyaching and start hitting the damned walls before I give in to the urge to shoot you in your assless.”

He glared at her, his brow plates low, mandibles tight. “Oh, right. The terrible Captain Shepard, scourge of the galaxy.” He turned back to the door, banging on the thick metal with the butt of his sidearm. “I’m terrified, baby sister.” Silence dropped like a boulder. He froze statue-still for a heartbeat before spinning to face her, his expression horrified. “Shepard, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean . . . . That was disrespectful . . . .”

Iron submersed in liquid nitrogen, Shepard’s entire body snapped cold and brittle.

*Bright ginger ringlets bounced, almost merry . . . obscene against the fire-red cheeks streaked with filth, tears and snot . . . against the screams. “Janey!” her name burst out shrill, lacerating the air. “Janey! Don’t let them take me!”*

Stumbling, Shepard fell into the frost-caked wall, the cold driving away the screams as her brow melted into it. Turning to look at him without lifting her head from the cold, she whispered, “What did you just say?” As mercurial and lithe as a puma, she leaped forward, grabbing the yoke of his armour. Flipping him over her hip, she threw him down hard on his back and straddled his waist. “How did you find out?” She seized the guard at the front of his cowl and shook him. “How fucking far into my life did you dig, Vakarian? Those records are supposed to be sealed.”

All emotion bled from Garrus’s face as they stared into one another’s eyes. “Shepard?” He sat up, lifting her off and setting her on her feet. When she slapped his hands away, they dropped to his lap. “What are you talking about?”

She shook her head, eyes tearing away to the floor as she turned her back to him. “It’s nothing. I misunderstood.” Her sharp sigh crystallized as it bounced off icy walls. “Let’s focus on getting the hell out of here before we lose Tali.” She pounded her palm against the door. “Anyone out there? We’re locked in here.”

“Shepard, that wasn’t nothing. Spirits, what did you think I said?” He pressed one hand to the frosty metal and leaned down, trying to meet her eyes.

She banged again, not willing to let him snag her gaze. “Help! Anyone! Open the door!”

“Shepard, we’re friends.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his mandibles drop and make a helpless looking little flail.

She cut a glance sideways, meeting his stare for a fraction of a second. Shuttering the windows, she reinforced the walls. “This isn’t about friendship, C-Sec. It’s about staying functional.” She
banged on the door. “Help! We’re locked in.”

“Shepa—”

She threw up a hand to silence him and closed her eyes, listening. . . . straining to hear outside their prison. Boots scuffed on concrete alongside the right-hand wall. The trusty alarm in the back of her head screamed a warning, and she launched herself at Garrus, her tackle driving him to the floor.

He grunted as they hit and rolled. “What the . . .?”

Gunfire cut off the rest of his protest, bullets ripping through the side of the container as if it were made of tin foil.

“Shepard called, reaching up to latch onto one of the large carcasses. Garrus grabbed hold of it just above her hands, the meat already absorbing projectiles meant to tear them to pieces. Together they hauled it down, taking cover behind the slab of dead animal. Still, Shepard’s shields sparked with impacts, going down with a flash and a whine.

She winced, preparing for the inevitable bullet impacts. Instead, the air left her lungs in a massive cough as Garrus threw himself over her, shielding her with his body.

The roar of automatic weapon fire seemed to last forever as she felt every jolt of every round that Garrus took for her. Silence felt so abruptly that it took a moment to register through the ringing in her ears. Garrus shifted and groaned.

“You okay?” she whispered. Other than having a turian elbow jabbing in the small of her back, Shepard didn’t feel anything needing attention.

“Few holes, nothing major.” He lifted himself off of her and hit his medigel.

The latch squeaked and drew back with a clang. Shepard shrugged Roger into her hands as she scrambled up and backed away, taking cover behind a side of space cow.

Garrus stood, moving behind another dead animal before bending down to retrieve his assault rifle.

Shepard watched the door, leaving Roger’s flashlight on to shine in the eyes of whomever opened the door, but it just settled open about an inch and stayed that way. Garrus moved as if to step forward, but she shook her head. Vorcha-like breathing wheezed and hissed on the other side. They needed to wait the Blood Pack out. Not her favourite strategy, but they needed every advantage they could get.

The door squeaked open a couple of inches, a flamethrower nudging through. Shepard hid the glare of her omnitool behind the space cow and called up sabotage. She saw a low flash from Garrus’s arm and knew he had overload ready to go.

“Smell blood. Human and turian dead,” the vorcha declared, opening the door.

Shepard glanced at Garrus and nodded. Their omnitools flared, the blast from the pyro’s tanks exploding peeled back one of the doors while the other flew into the container and slammed into Shepard’s cover, throwing her on her ass.

A krogan, his face bleeding and torn to hell, stumbled in the door, roaring at the top of his lungs. Shepard scrambled to get onto her feet, but knew within a heartbeat that she didn’t stand a chance. Blood rage and flaming armour bellowed at her and charged. Shepard rolled to the side, using her momentum to flip onto her feet, fully expecting her bones to be pulverized into flour about the
same time she stood.

Instead, the sound of armour smashing into armour was followed by the sound of armour hitting metal and no pain.

“If you could shoot him . . ..” Garrus grunted, flying backwards to slam through a varren and two space cows before impacting the wall in a shower of frost.

Shepard launched her drone to distract the krogan from Garrus and opened fire, circling around toward the door. Keeping up three round bursts to avoid overheating Roger, she riddled the krogan’s head with bullets, blinding him. “You up, C-Sec?” she called.

“Yeah, and moving.” The harsher cough of his sniper rifle barked, echoing metallically off the walls. The krogan flailed then went down, most everything above his shoulders reduced to red putty. Shepard pressed against what was left of the one door and peered out. She didn’t see anyone else waiting for them.

“We’re clear,” she called over her shoulder. When Garrus limped over to her, blood ran down the right side of his head and stained his armour in a handful of places. She grabbed hold of his shoulders, not liking the dazed look in his eyes. “C-Sec, look me in the eye. You okay? Did you hit your head?” She pulled him down to look at the wound in his head. It didn’t look too bad, but who knew what hid under those plates.

“Repeat after me, Brother C-Sec. Glory be to the Enkindlers.”

He met her gaze squarely, his pupils reacting to the light when she shone her flashlight square in his face. His one brow plate rose as he pushed her gun away. “I’m not saying that.”

She grinned. “Well, you can’t be too out of it, then. You feeling sick? Head hurt?” she asked. When he didn’t answer, she patted his cheek. “I think I’d better call the Normandy, have them come get you.”

He shook his head, wincing as he did. “I’m okay, Shepard. He just threw me against the wall hard enough to rattle my brain.” He switched guns and reached out to give her shoulder a reassuring pat. “I’m good to go.”

After watching him for another few seconds, she sighed, then nodded. “Okay, let’s move, but if you start feeling sick or your head ramps up, tell me. Don’t try to tough it out. We’ve got a long way to go, and I need . . ..” She turned abruptly to her omnitool and called up Tali’s tracker. “They’ve got a hell of a lead on us.” She took off at a smart jog, covering ground in long, loping strides.

When Garrus caught up to run at her side, he cut a glance over at her. “Hey, about before . . . even though you hide it pretty damned well, and you have most of the rest of them fooled, never think I don’t see all the anger and pain you hide under the good-ol’-crazy Shepard routine.”

She clenched her jaw as he slammed into her wall, knocking a huge chunk out of the corner. Damn him and his perceptiveness. Shaking her head, she threw the piece back into the hole and boarded it up. “My pain is my business, C-Sec. It’s not open for discussion.”

A rumble escaped his second larynx. “Fair enough, but if you ever want that to change, you know where to find me.” He stared at her for a couple of strides before turning his attention back to watching the path ahead.

Shrugging, Shepard swallowed what felt like a cluster of pinecones, waiting until they reached the
bottom before she nodded, one rigid jerk down then back up. She glanced sideways, then snapped back to eyes forward, searching for ambush, mind on the mission. Still, the damned warmth his words forced down through her shields refused to dissipate, just settling in her gut.

She cleared her throat. “And, C-Sec . . . thanks. I appreciate the turian shield, but you aren’t expendable. You can’t just keep throwing yourself between me and anything that comes along.”

His brow plates and mandibles dropped. “You’re not expendable either, Shepard.” They paused at the end of a street, checking to be sure the way ahead was clear before rounding the corner.

“That’s kind of you to say, but it’s just plain not true.” A finger raised from her gun cut off his protest. “I’m the most disposable person on this mission, C-Sec. I have no credibility. I can’t bring this galaxy together other than from behind the scenes. You have a tremendous amount of credibility. Add your father to that . . ..” She glanced over and smiled in response to his chuff. “Oh, come on, you know it’s true, and you know he’d support you.”

“Father or no father, I can’t run a war by myself, Shepard.” Garrus pressed his back to the wall as they came to a half-open door that twitched and sparked across the only street entrance for blocks.

They took cover to either side of the street. The entrance to the district at ground level formed a natural choke point. Shepard’s gut tightened. Perfect place for an ambush. If the Blood Pack had holed up in—Shepard glanced at the sign—Kima District, they’d have guards watching the entrance from strategic positions.

She nodded to Garrus. “Watch my back, I’m going to try to flush out their sentries.”

“Make sure to live long enough to explain your ‘Shepard can’t fight and win this battle’ theory.” His mandibles’ uneasy flutter and the wariness in his gaze underscored his words.

Shepard launched her drone through the malfunctioning gate first. Nothing. No enemies laid in wait. No pedestrians walked between buildings. No cars moved through the air above. She swung around the gate, stalking forward, eyes in constant motion, but she saw nothing, felt nothing. Black, empty windows stared down, sightless eyes on the faces of the dead buildings. Nothing moved. Nothing even breathed. At the end of the block, she waved Garrus up to join her.

“This district is creepy as hell,” he muttered under his breath.

She nodded, agreeing completely.

Tali’s tracker stopped moving several blocks ahead, near the center of the district. Hopefully the young quarian was able to plant the bug on one of the leaders before Nihlus moved in to pull her out. A soft smile accompanied a blush of colour across her cheeks as she realized how far they’d come in just a couple short weeks. When they started out, she hadn’t trusted Nihlus as far as she could have tossed him. Now, she knew without a doubt that he’d get her people out or die trying.

She dragged her attention back to the endless, empty streets. “They do not undersell the whole Omega is a dump angle,” Shepard whispered. “Look at all this, a whole district, just abandoned.”

“Too far out to fall under the protection of one of the less notorious gangs,” Garrus agreed. He loped along beside her, his stride easy and steady, allaying her fears that he’d gotten himself concussed or worse. “Good place to hide out if you’re a criminal organization.”

Shepard grinned. “Or a renegade organization hiding from the council to fight the Reapers.” She shrugged when he glanced over at her. “What? A girl isn’t allowed to dream a little? Imagine it, C-Sec. An army holed up on Omega where the council fears to tread. Docks filled with geth and
quarian built cruisers and dreadnoughts, Alliance and turian built stealth frigates.” She grinned. “Oh, yeah, we could give the Reapers pause, my friend.”

The certainty of it filled her and she nodded again. “We could give the Reapers pause.”

Another three streets along, Shepard slid to a halt, motioning for Garrus to do the same. She strained, trying to hear the faint noises over the blood rushing through her ears. “Do you hear that, C-Sec?”

He nodded. “Shouting, overlapping voices.”

“Bal’Nara!” Tali’s voice shouted in Shepard’s ear. “Bal’Nara!”

Shepard took off running, her heart dropping into her boots as gunfire erupted like fireworks on a quiet evening. They were still so far away. Lungs working like a forge bellows, legs churning, feet pounding against the pavement, she drove herself harder and faster toward the firefight. Why was there a firefight? What had gone so wrong that Tali needed to use her panic word?

“Damn,” Nihlus called out on the squad’s frequency. “They’ve got Tali upstairs. Alenko and Jenkins, get up there, we’ll cover you. Wrex and Williams, keep pushing into the interior.”

Holding her fear clutched tight in an iron fist, she leaped over a bench and climbed a hastily built barricade. On the other side, she dropped down onto a bridge. A handful of dead vorcha and a dead krogan lay strewn the length of the bridge, and as she looked up into the building at the other end, Shepard could see shadows moving in the frenetic dance of battle.

“Ashley’s down!” Nihlus called on the radio. “Alenko, pull her back. Jenkins, move up to take her cover. Keep the pressure on.”

Shepard dug in harder, leaping over the dead bodies in her path. Bullets peppered her shields as she hit the far side of the bridge and the entrance to the building. She took cover behind a pillar, leaning out to note the enemy number and position. Looking to Garrus, she motioned for him to jump through a blown out window and try to circle around to a flanking position. When he moved into the open, she leaned out, firing across the Blood Pack’s positions then concentrating on a varren that charged down the stairs from the second floor.

“Sparky, watch your nine,” the call came from Wrex that time.

Garrus pinged her radio when he reached cover on her right flank. She gave him to the count of three to settle himself then dashed up to the next cover. Another varren charged down the stairs. She launched her drone. At least they were pulling some of the pressure off the rest of the squad.

She took down two vorcha as her drone drove them out of cover, moving up into what looked like a lobby and cafeteria area. The fighting upstairs sounded as though it were directly overhead. Three more vorcha went down before the main floor was cleared. Moving to the stairs, she and Garrus stayed in cover behind the railing.

“Shepard and Vakarian coming up the stairs,” she alerted them over the radio. Standing for a moment, she launched her drone into the room above the exit. The fighting was concentrated there.

“Nihlus is down!” Kaidan called. “Jenkins, can you get to him?”

“No. Krogan between us.”

Shepard darted up the stairs and down the hall, taking cover against the door jam. Ducking out into
the room, she spotted her team members, their backs all to her, but for Nihlus who was down over by a balcony overlooking the bridge. A krogan stood over him.

The Blood Pack Warrior lifted a foot to stomp on the turian Spectre’s head. Shepard hit him with overload, throwing him off enough that his foot came down on Nihlus’ chest instead. Still, the sound of bones and plates cracking under the pressure nearly made her throw up. She channelled it into unleashing first sabotage and then bullets, lots and lots of bullets, tearing up the krogan’s armour and plates until he finally went down and didn’t get back up.

A moment later, the gunfire died out.

“All clear,” Kaidan called.

“All clear,” Jenkins replied.

“Clear,” Ashley groaned.

Shepard leaped out of her cover and ran over to Nihlus, her hand reaching up for her radio even before she hit the ground on her knees. Blood bubbled from the Spectre’s nose and mouth in a cobalt froth. Shepard hit his medigel with one hand.

“Normandy. We need immediate medevac on my location. Nihlus has been critically wounded.” Shepard glanced over at Ash. “How are you doing?”

“Couple of bullet holes in my leg,” she said, grunting with the pain. “I’ll live, but I can’t walk.”

“Normandy, Williams requires medevac as well.” Shepard hit Nihlus’s medigel again. Hopefully it would help ease his internal bleeding. She checked him over with gentle hands, finding a lot of shotgun damage to the belly of his armour. She left the armour in place, not wanting to move him. She stroked his neck. He moaned a little, one hand sliding across the floor to lay over hers.

“Don’t worry,” she said, keeping her voice soft and confident. “You’re going to be fine. Dr. Chakwas is on her way to lock you back in medbay prison for a couple of days.” She took his hand and held it.

“How is everyone else?” she asked, looking up. “Any other injuries?” She glanced back at Garrus, but he shook his head, indicating that he was fine.

“The rest of us are fine, Captain.” Alenko said, crouching next to her.

“Tali?” Shepard looked for the young quarian, finding her standing next to a male quarian, her arms crossed.

“Very angry,” Tali replied, “but otherwise fine, Captain.”

Shepard wanted to rip the place apart, find out what the hell had gone wrong, but held her peace. Nihlus didn’t need people freaking out around him.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Tali barked, grabbing the other quarian’s arm. “Sit, and don’t move.” Shepard’s eyebrows rose. She’d never seen Tali so furious.

“Don’t . . .” Nihlus whispered, his voice thick and clotted, air gurgling through blood.

“Sh,” Shepard said, caressing his brow gently. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of everything once the doc gets here.” She smiled. “You know me, I’ve got some pretty impressive skills. I’ll figure it out.
You just save your strength.”

The doctor arrived with three helpers a few minutes later.

Shepard bent over to kiss Nihlus’s cheek. “I’ll see you back on the Normandy,” she said then stood and got out of the way.

“Okay, what in the great land of fuck happened here?” She strode over to Tali, checking the quarian for injuries. “You’re sure that you’re all right?”

She nodded, looking ready to kill someone. “My father is what happened, Shepard.” She tossed a furious hand at the quarian seated next to her. “We had everything well in hand. We were just about back here, and he appeared out of nowhere and started shooting.”

“You were their prisoner,” a heavily accented, male voice protested. He jumped up as if to admonish his daughter, but Tali just pushed right back.

“I was bait in a trap that would have led us to the rest of our people!” Tali shouted. “That’s why five people jumped in when you opened fire . . ..” She bit off the rest. “Sit down before you make things worse.”

“Okay.” Shepard held up her hands to still the argument. She looked up at Garrus. “You need to go back with the doc anyway and get your head looked at, so will you please transport Rael’Zorah back to the Normandy and make sure that he stays out of trouble?” Leaning down so her face was at a level with the admiral’s mask, she pressed in on him. “If Nihlus dies because of your interference . . ..” She shook her head. “Well, you’d better just hope he doesn’t.”

“I’m a member of the . . ..” He protested, standing up and pushing her back.

Shepard raised both index fingers, shutting him up instantly. “A member of your admiralty board has already tried murdering me. Trust me when I say that particular argument won’t get you anywhere.” She nodded to Garrus. “Get him out of my sight before I lose my temper.”

Garrus grasped the elder quarian’s upper arm, hauling him toward the shuttle. Shepard turned her back to the admiral’s indignant protests, missing what Garrus grumbled in reply as she looked over where the doctor readied Nihlus for transport. Her heart sank into her gut at the expression on Chakwas’s face, but she blinked back the burning in her eyes and clenched her jaw. No reason to mourn yet, and she could freak out once everyone was safely back aboard the ship.

“Jenkins, Wrex, Sparky, Tali. Strip this place. Take every single thing that isn’t tied down. Hopefully we can find something to lead us to Saren.” That said, she strode over to Ashley. “Can I give you a hand there, Chief?”

Ashley reached up, locking wrists. “Thanks, Skipper.” She pulled herself up, then slung an arm around Shepard’s shoulders. “Hm, you’re the exact right height.” A tight smile accompanied her jest.

Shepard chuckled. “I knew being size small had to be handy for something other than crawling through ducts and tunnels.” She helped the chief limp to the waiting shuttle. “What’s your take on what happened, Ash?”

Williams shook her head. “Just what Tali said. We were shadowing, staying back, then suddenly guns were going off. Nihlus moved us up, and we fought our way in here. Got here fast enough to save Tali and the rest of the quarians. Nihlus put himself between them and the krogan. We took most of them out, but that one closed faster than we could shoot.”
“Wait . . .” Shepard stopped and raised her eyebrows. “. . . and the rest of the quarians?”

Ashley nodded toward a room on the other side of the stairs. “Six of them. Just scared kids.”

“We’re going to need another shuttle.” Shepard sighed. “Okay. When you get aboard and are being patched back together, please ask Verblovski to find us seven cots, blankets, etc. We’ll let them bunk in the gym.” Once Ash was settled in a seat, Shepard returned upstairs, meeting Dr. Chakwas and Nihlus’s gurney at the top of the stairs.

“How is he doing, Doc?” she asked, reaching out to give the Spectre’s fingers a gentle squeeze.

Chakwas gestured for the Marines to precede her down the stairs, waiting until Nihlus was out of earshot before she spoke. “It doesn’t look good, Shepard, but I’ll do what I can.” She started down the stairs.

Shepard nodded, not making eye contact. “If you need anything, just shout.”

Chakwas turned back. “Actually, Shepard. There’s supposed to be a gifted salarian surgeon on Omega. Runs a clinic in one of the other districts. I could use his help if you can find him.”

“Consider him found, Doc.” Shepard opened a channel as she jogged back into the bunk room to wave Tali over. “C-Sec, I know your head is probably killing you, but are you up to another little adventure?”
Chapter Summary

A Sassy of a whole different colour. AKA: Garrus, get your mandibles up off the floor. The intrepid duo search for Mordin Solus.

Shepard and Garrus caught a lift with the second shuttle, jumping out at the transit station a half block from Afterlife’s front door. Shepard stared up at the sign for a moment, praying she didn’t have to crawl before Aria to find out where Dr. Solus was. She would for Nihlus’s sake, but the idea left a very bad taste in her mouth.

Forcing the image of blood bubbling from Nihlus’s nose and mouth into the back of her head, she took a deep breath, trying to control the fear that clenched its fist in her guts. She’d lost so many over the years, but . . . . Not Nihlus. Not after all the crap they’d made it through in the last couple of weeks.

Get moving, you idiot. Standing here panicking isn’t helping.

“Okay,” she said, looking up into Garrus’s eyes as she shook off the dread. A plan always forced back the madness. Keep busy, work the plan. “We’ll split up. Ask the civilians first, and pray to the great glowing asses of the Enkindlers someone knows something.” She gave him a quick nod and hurried over to a small cluster of humans in expensive clothes.

“Hi, there,” she said, giving them her best, least crazy-looking smile. It fit like someone washed and tumble-dried it on hot. “A friend of mine was hurt and taken to a local doctor. I was wondering if you knew where to find the clinic? A Dr. Solus works there.”

They gave her dismissive head shakes then turned their backs, pointedly ignoring her. She didn’t know which she hated more, snobs or being ignored.

She grasped the closest woman by the shoulders and spun her around. “You are so adorable. I could just eat you up!” Shepard kissed both of the horrified woman’s cheeks. “You guys have been so sweet. Thank you. I’ll remember meeting you always. Glory hallelujah and praise be to the Enkindlers for your help, brothers and sisters.” She gave them a full on crazy smile with a side of ‘I know where you live, so sleep lightly’ then moved on.

Okay, being ignored wins by a slight margin.

She approached a couple of salarians, sliding her poorly fitting smile back into place. “Hello gentlemen, you wouldn’t be able to help me find a Dr. Solus, would you?”

“As long as you don’t kiss us,” one said, smoothing the wrinkles in his suit. His eyes widened, looking positively terrified by the possibility of a human touching him with her lips.

Shepard chuckled, hope pushing aside her anger. “I promise, not a single smooch.”

“Gozu district,” the one salarian said, “but you won’t get in. That’s Blue Suns territory. Mordin won’t pay protection. They tried to shake him down, he shot them all, bandaged up the ones he didn’t kill, and then tossed them out.” The slender alien chuckled nervously and glanced around as
Shepard began to suspect that Aria’s turf formed a sort of neutral ground where all the gangs could have a presence but no power. In an odd sort of way, it made the megalomaniacal asari the champion of the little guy on the station.

“Point is,” his kiss-phobic companion said, straightening his tunic again, “Blue Suns control the whole district. You go in like that, won’t make it past the transit depot.”

Frowning, Shepard held out her arms, looking down at herself. “Why? What’s wrong with the way I look?” Damn, they were right. Alliance soldier through and through.

“You’re Alliance, and your friend . . .” He nodded at Garrus. “. . . if he’s not turian military or C-Sec, my grandmother is a krogan.” His brows raised a little, his huge brown eyes widening a little. “Does my family owe me an explanation?”

Shepard chuckled and shook her head. “No, your family history isn’t in question.” She screwed her mouth off to one side in a thoughtful scowl. They needed a way in, and fast. Crawling through ducts? Stepping back, she looked up, searching for vents. Maybe, but without a sound knowledge of the systems, they could end up sucking vacuum or falling into a life support plant. Not to mention the complications of trying to squeeze Garrus through the tight spots.

“The Blue Suns know everyone who belongs in their districts,” the first one said. “On Omega, you stick to your district; stay close to the gang you pay protection to. No careless wandering.”

“That is not good news, salarian brother. I don’t suppose either of you has a detailed schematic of the duct and ventilation system in your back pocket?” Shepard looked around, her eyes landing on a small group of Blue Suns entering Afterlife. They might be able to sneak in disguised as Blue Suns, but finding a set of their armour that fit her wouldn’t be an easy task.

“Why is it so important you talk to Mordin Solus?” the first one asked. He shifted closer to her. “You have any intel on him?”

Shepard shook her head. “You have just given me twice as much as I came up here with. A friend was hurt badly during a fight against the Blood Pack. Our doctor said Dr. Solus might be able to help.”

“Blood Pack?” Kiss-phobic scratched at a long scar down the side of his face.

She nodded at it, feeling an opening forming. “They do that?”

“I wandered, didn’t have any creds to pay my way back out.” He nodded. “There’s a way, if you can pull it off.” He gave her a haughty, cunningly superior look.

“She’s Alliance.” The first one looked her up and down, casting a worried scowl at his companion. “They’re as covert as influenza.”

“Wait.” Shepard perked up. “I’m a pretty decent actress when I need to be. What’s the way in?” She felt the seconds ticking past as they stared at her and deliberated. “And what’s it going to cost me?”

Kiss-phobic sighed. “Did you kill all the Blood Pack who hurt your friend?”

“Yeah, took out about twenty all told.”
His eyes narrowed as he grinned. “Then you’ve paid my fee, but we’re not responsible when you get yourself shot.”

“Understood.” She leaned in, trying to impress upon them the urgency of her timeline. “My friend really needs me to hurry.”

“There is a human lives close to Mordin’s clinic. He’s married, but Blue Suns smuggle in females discreetly. Rumours say mutually beneficial arrangement. He funds suspect ventures for the Suns.” Kiss-phobic looked her up and down again. “Tell Blue Suns that you’re going to see Patrick Donovan, that you’re interviewing for a housekeeper position. You’ll need different clothes.”

Shepard nodded. Something moved behind the salarian’s eyes. It didn’t feel like a set up, but even if it was, if it got them into the district past the Suns, they could deal with the fall out. “Thanks for the information.” She turned and lifted a hand, calling Garrus over to her as she strode toward the door to the upper markets.

“Good luck,” kiss-phobic called after them.

“Did you find out where Solus is?” Garrus asked, settling in stride next to her.

“Gozu district. Apparently getting past the Blue Suns will be a problem. They control the district, and Solus isn’t overly popular with them.” She looked around, seeing Blue Suns scattered here and there, walking in pairs or small groups.

He patted his sidearm. “There’s the old-fashioned way. From what I see, it would be doing Omega a favour.”

Shepard shook her head, not that she didn’t understand his desire to clean them out. “Nihlus doesn’t have time for the two of us to wage a gang war and fight our way through a couple hundred Blue Suns. Not that Omega couldn’t use a good gang purge.” She palmed the door, trotting down the stairs when it opened. “No, this is going to require subterfuge, Brother C-Sec.” She switched to her hard-boiled detective voice and winked. “We’re going to have to be sneaky, see?”

She palmed the door at the bottom of the stairs and stepped through. “Those salarians told me there is a prominent underworld figure, Patrick Donovan, who has women smuggled in.” She looked him up and down. “Shouldn’t be too hard to find you a disguise. Me . . . I’m going to have to do a little shopping.”

“Shopping? And this won’t take as long as shooting our way through?” He shook his head. “I don’t know.” He met her gaze and shook his head again. “No, I don’t like or trust the look in your eyes right now. Let’s just go. Maybe they’ll let us through.”

“Find a Blue Sun your size. I’ll meet you back here in five minutes.” Not waiting for him to confirm, then pointedly ignoring his protests as he called after her, Shepard ran across the market into a clothing store.

“Oh, my,” the asari attendant said and sighed. “Look at you. Need something to smooth out the rough edges, do we?”

“Mmm, indeed,” Shepard asked. “I’m looking for something to drive my man wild. Think you can help?”

The blue beauty winked at her. “You’ve come to the right place. What sort of occasion is it? Demure? Formal? Racy?” She moved to one of the racks and started sorting through.
Shepard cocked her hip and tapped her fingertip against her lower lip. “More of a jaw hitting the floor, forgetting his own name sort of occasion.”

The asari chuckled and pulled out a hangar. “You’re in luck. We just got this in.”

“Shoes? Do you have any that will work with this dress?” Shepard took the hangar and hurried back to the curtained area. She stripped off her armour and wriggled into the dress in under a minute. Time gnawed at her, a clock ticking away every second as she forced her last glimpse of Nihlus into the back corner of her mind. The memory made her hands tremble, and she couldn’t afford trembling. She needed to remain icy cool for her plan to have a prayer of working.

She turned to look at the deep black, sparkling fabric of the dress. “Holy crap!” she squawked. “There’s more collar than there is dress.” It barely covered her backside and holes spaced down its length revealed bits of herself she was pretty sure had never seen the light of day. Her bra showed everywhere, so she took it off, just barely restraining the urge to clamp her arms over her chest.

As she turned to face the mirror head on, the pain in her chest she’d felt when Nihlus called her a whore returned. It swelled until it was all she could do to turn from the mirror instead of smashing it. If Nihlus saw her wearing that dress, he’d never look at her with anything other than disgust ever again. She swallowed her nausea and blinked back the burning in her eyes.

You’re not working with Nihlus right now, you’re trying to save his damned life, so woman up, goddamn it. Work the hell out of this fucking thing.

“Shoes, love.” The asari slipped a pair of massive stiletto heels under the curtain. “The way those things make you walk, his jaw won’t just hit the floor, it’ll fall clean off.”

Shepard clung to the walls as she put them on. “Lovely.” She turned, her eyebrows rising. They did make her legs look spectacular. She clapped her hands on her backside. “Day-um. Where did this ass come from?”

“It’s the shoes, love,” the sales girl replied from the other side of the curtain.

Shepard’s eyebrows went up. “Magic shoes. Now I’ll just need the grace of the mighty Enkindlers to keep from breaking both ankles. Okay, I’ll wear it out. Do you have a bag I could use for my armour, please?”

A large shopping bag appeared under the curtain. “Thanks so much.” Shepard shoved her armour and normal, sane, I’ve-never-been-paid-for-sex clothes into the bag, took a deep breath and stepped out through the curtain. She winced as the asari wolf whistled.

“You’re going straight out?” the clerk asked. When Shepard nodded to the affirmative, the asari winced. “No make up? And your hair could use a little . . .” She sighed and reached under the counter, pulling out perhaps the largest purse in the history of feminine luggage. “Hold still, it’ll take me only a few seconds to fix.”

Sprays, foams, cosmetics, and things Shepard were pretty sure constituted torture devices flew around her head, attaching to hair, eyelashes . . . ears. What the hell was the woman doing to her ears, and why did an asari have hair products?

Oh, sweet baby Jesus, let them be hair products.

As fast as the floral-scented storm hit, it abated and a mirror appeared in front of her face.

“Holy crap. I have eyelashes?” She batted the lengthy things at herself. She passed over her credit
chit, wincing as the total for her street-walker attire appeared on the computer. Still . . . it had only taken seven and a half minutes to turn her into a woman. That had to be worth a decent tip.

“Good luck, honey. Oh, and pay attention to the underside of his fringe. He’ll be putty in your hands.” The asari waved.

Wait? What? She thought . . . C-Sec . . . Shepard stumbled, her ankle letting out a warning twinge. “Fringe . . . ah, yeah. Okay, thanks.” She tottered a little as she hurried back to the corner where she could see Garrus waiting for her, dressed and looking almost as uncomfortable in his Blue Suns armour as she felt in her disguise. “I hope I don’t have to run in these stilettos of death.”

“Okay, C-Sec, let’s roll,” she called, walking past him. She made it three or four metres before she realized he wasn’t following and turned back. “Hey, C-Sec, come on. Times wasting.”

His eyes slid right over her, and he scowled, searching for her. “Shepard?”

“The impressively sexy woman to your right, C-Sec.” She waved when he turned back. “Yeah, hi.
It’s me, not a ventriloquist act. Let’s go.”

Garrus’s mandibles hit the floor. “Sweet baby Jesus,” he whispered.

She laughed, a sigh whispering through her lips as he stared, but without a trace of condemnation. “You don’t even know what that means.” She crooked her finger. “Did you make sure your uniform donator won’t be found?”

He nodded as he stepped up next to her, his mouth still hanging open. “What? How?” His mouth clacked shut. “Your hair . . . and eyes . . .” His eyes slid down to her bare chest and shoulders. “And, you have . . . .”

“Yes, I have boobs, collarbones, elbows, a navel . . . all sorts of body parts. Who knew? Okay, so if they ask at the transit hub, Patrick Donovan is interviewing housekeepers.” She palmed the door into the district.

“Housekeepers?” He stepped into the elevator down. “Dressed like that? You’re practically . . . .”

“You’re going to have to sell it. That means no mandibles dragging behind you.” She laid her hand on his chest. “Can you sell it?”

He twitched a little, his eyes nervously glancing down at her hand. After a second, he cleared his throat and nodded. “Yeah. Can you?”

She chuckled. “Oh, yeah, no worries. A lot less skin has gotten me into tighter places. Hold my arm. Good and tight.”

He gripped her upper arm and braced his elbow under hers. “I’m not dragging in a prisoner.”

The elevator opened to reveal four Blue Suns guarding the transit depot. She leaned into him. “I know. You’re keeping me from falling over in these stupid, Enkindler-cursed shoes. I haven’t walked a block yet and already my toes are screaming.” She passed him the shopping bag with her armour and weapons in it, leaning her chest into him as she stared up adoringly, batting her eyelashes. “Will you please carry my bag, Mr. Big Strong Turian? I’m just a little helpless woman.” More batting.

He grumbled, a grudging chuckle following it out. “Back off, I’m . . . ahh . . . immune to your . . . .” He shooed her away with a hand. “. . . whatever. Just do . . . the thing it is you . . . um, need to do.”

Shepard chuckled. “Yeah, immune. That’s why your tongue has tied itself in a knot.” She took a deep breath, sealing all her nerves and worries behind the well-practiced wall. This was an old game, and one she played very well.

Garrus matched his speed to hers as she placed one foot in front of the other, swinging her hips, her back straight, her head high. Her lips curved in a soft, suggestive smile as the Blue Suns turned to face them. ‘You know you all want me,’ it whispered.

A human stepped forward. “Again? Damn, the man has an a hell of an appetite.”

Garrus chuckled. “I take it this isn’t the first applicant for the position?”

“Fourth in the last two days.” He turned and nodded to a batarian. “Set the car. The other end will deal with the lady’s trip back.”
Shepard brushed past the Blue Sun, dragging soft fingers over his cheek and down his neck. Leaning into him, she whispered. “Maybe he’s just looking for the right applicant?” Licking her lips and giving him a slow wink, she allowed Garrus to pull her away.

A frown creased the human Blue Sun’s forehead as he tore his eyes from her to Garrus. “I don’t know you. Is it your first time delivering? He usually keeps to the same couple of guys.”

“Yeah.” Garrus led Shepard toward the car. “Anything I should be aware of?”

“Yeah, a word to wise. You don’t need to stay and wait.” He made a slight cough and ducked his head, refusing to look at Shepard. “The less you see, the better, man.”

Shepard’s heart fell into her ridiculous heels. What the hell had they stumbled into? Had the salarians known? Dizziness made it feel as though the car was already moving. For a moment, it took every ounce of her self-control to keep her stomach from heaving all over her shoes. She’d have to chat with the helpful salarians later. Much later, after she sorted things out with Patrick Donovan.

Garrus nodded. “Good to know, thanks. Wouldn’t want to spend hours waiting for nothing.” He laughed, cold as ice, the tone making all of Shepard’s hair stand on end. “That sort of makes it ironic that he’s looking for a housekeeper, doesn’t it?”

All four of them laughed. Shepard forced her face to keep the slightly stupid, doe-eyed expression until Garrus climbed in next to her and pulled the top closed.

“Shepard,” Garrus warned softly, shaking his head as she stared across the car at him, her entire body rigid with fury. “We’ve got to get to Dr. Solus. We can report this Donovan guy when we’re done.”

“To whom, Garrus? The fucking Blue Suns run this district, and to them, sending four women to a horrific death over the course of two days is the most hilarious joke they’ve heard.” She bristled. “No. No way. We’ll find Mordin, and then I’ll go interview for my housekeeping position.”

Reaching into the back seat, she grabbed her bag of armour and guns, pulling her sidearm out.

“Where are you going to hide a gun in that dress?” he asked, lifting a brow plate.

“I won’t be hiding it.” She looked at him, serious as death. “You know I have to clean up this mess we found.”

He turned to look into her eyes for a long moment, then nodded. “I’ll have your back, Shepard.”

She let out a long breath. “Thanks. That means a lot.” Shaking her head, she let her guard down a little, affection bleeding into her stare for a fraction of a second. “No.” She nodded and turned to face the windscreen. “It means everything. For all the little girls who saw no other choice and ended up here unable to fight for themselves.”

The car settled down onto a street. On the driver’s side, a mansion grew out of the squalor, the polished granites and marbles obscenely out of place on Omega. Gardens lined the facade, their beauty indecent against the ugliness of everything on the other side of the wall of cedars. Shepard stared at the fountain, wondering how many women sat in her place over the months or years and stared up at the mansion believing all of their dreams had come true. Too many.

“Go ask where Mordin’s clinic is,” she whispered, nodding to a guard by the front gate. “He should be more than willing to tell one of his brothers. I’ll meet you across the street.” When he opened the door, she slipped out the passenger side, crouching down in cover against the fender.
She slipped off her shoes while she waited, listening for Garrus’s voice. As soon as he had the guard distracted, she bolted, keeping low and racing across the street to take cover behind a garbage bin. One hand reached up, yanking the back of her skirt down, a cool draft curling around her altogether too personally.

A couple of minutes later, Garrus strode across the street and around a corner. She checked to be sure the coast was clear, then darted after him, her bare feet silent on the gritty concrete. He waited halfway down the next block.

“The clinic is just around the next corner and down a level,” Garrus told her. “He warned me not to go in. Apparently Dr. Solus and his military-grade mechs shoot Blue Suns on sight.”

Shepard lifted into a quick jog, her heart slowing a little. “That’s okay, you can wait outside. I just have to ask him to help. Not like I’m expecting a firefight or anything.” Pausing outside the clinic door, she turned back. “I’ll be right back.”

The armed guards behind the counter grabbed Shepard’s attention the moment she stepped through the door. A giant side of beef with a head that sprouted straight of his shoulders gave her a clear view of his rifle as he said, “Behave yourself inside the clinic.”

“Sure thing.” She approached the only person who wore a white smock. “Hello. I need to speak to Dr. Solus, please?”

“He’s busy with a patient at the moment. If you could take a seat . . . .” The woman didn’t look up at Shepard, her tone making it clear that she considered herself too overworked and underpaid to actually give a shit.

**Omega’s new bumper sticker. Omega: we just don’t give a shit.**

“Sure.” She walked through the second door. Patients of all races sat scattered here and there, a couple lying on cots. Passing them all by, Shepard headed down a cross corridor.

“Miss! You can’t just go back there. You need to sign in,” the attendant called after her.

“I just need to speak with him for a moment, then I’ll get right out of your hair,” she called back. Two mechs stood at the end of the hall, their optical sensors following her, but apparently not registering pushy as a threat. The room on one side held a bunch of equipment, and on the other a human woman and a salarian stood over a patient.

“Patient responding well to treatment,” the salarian said. “Move him into other room to rest. If vitals continue to improve, will send home in twenty-four hours.” He looked up at Shepard and cocked his head as if trying to puzzle her out. “Mannerisms, posture not those of prostitute.” He scanned her with his omnitool. “Recent scar tissue from bullet wounds. Concussion fractures. Soldier.”

“Dr. Solus?” Shepard stepped through the door and shook her head. “Yeah, I’m not a hooker. I’m with the Alliance.” She shrugged. Udina flashing through her head in a moment of pure nausea. “They’re a whole different sort of pimp. I need to speak with you. My partner has been very badly injured, and my ship’s surgeon sent me to find you.”

“Too many patients needing me here. Cannot help you.” He brushed past her.

She followed. “He’s turian. His chest was crushed by a krogan. Dr. Chakwas didn’t seem very hopeful, but . . ..”
The salarian turned back. “Crushed? He was charged? Hit front or side?” He paced as he spoke, his voice and feet both gaining momentum as he went.

“No, he was down, lying on his side.” She turned sideways to show him the direction of the impact. “The krogan stomped down on him pretty much in the center of his upper arm.”

“Turian rib construction, problematic. Crushed from front, good chance of recovery. Keel structure spreads impact like parabolic arch.” He rested the elbow of one arm in his opposite hand, his fingers curled in front of his mouth. Stopping suddenly, he spun to face her, startling her a little. “Frothy blood from nose and mouth?” He didn’t wait for her to answer with more than a nod. “As I thought. Lung punctures, no doubt other internal organs perforated as well.” He gave her an empathetic shake of his head and sucked in a long, hissing breath through his nostrils. “Your partner’s survival not likely.”

Shepard nodded, giving him that. “Look, Nihlus is a good and honorable Spectre. I got dressed up in this ridiculous get up to sneak past the Blue Suns to find you, because he’s not going to make it without you. Please?” She looked away, staring at her filthy feet, bare and vulnerable looking against the floor. “He means a lot to me.”

“Nihlus Kryik?” Mordin asked, taking a step toward her.

Something in his rapid-fire voice sparked hope deep in her gut. “Yes. You know him?”

“Worked with him twice during my years in STG. Good Spectre.” He glanced around. “Nalah, call husband. Need extra security while I’m gone.” He turned from Shepard, hurrying around the space.

“You’re going somewhere, Dr. Solus?” The human woman stepped past Shepard.

“Yes, need to assist colleague performing problematic surgery. Will maintain radio contact if you need me.” He paused halfway through packing his bag to face Shepard. “Send me information, I have own ways in and out of district. Won’t need to dress like prostitute.” Another long, hissing breath. “Blue Suns cocky, arrogant. Makes it easy to slip around them.” He studied her for a moment, ceasing all movement for the first time since she arrived.

“Blue Suns let you in. Believed you going to service Patrick Donovan?” He stared for another heartbeat then started flitting around again, talking to himself about what he might need.

“You’re familiar with him? He’s a murderer, isn’t he? He does something terrible to the girls they bring him?” Shepard asked, her throat tightening with rage. Did everyone on the entire damned station know the sins of everyone else and just let them go?

Mordin paused and glanced back over his shoulder. “Yes, believe so, but familiar with reputation only. Spoke with Aria. Nothing I can do unless he comes into clinic and tries to injure staff or patients.”

Shepard let out a slow breath, relaxing her shoulders. It wasn’t like she expected a doctor to storm someone’s home commando-style, mowing down the Blue Suns that got in his way. “Everyone here uses everyone else, don’t they?” she asked, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

“Omega functions not according to laws or government. Strong live off the weak, the weak off those weaker. I run clinic. Help all who seek aid in good faith. One salarian, even a genius, cannot change Omega.” He closed his bag. “Information?”

Shepard nodded. “Oh right, sorry.” She sent him the Normandy’s docking information and Dr. Chakwas’s personal radio frequency. “Whatever happens, Dr. Solus... thank you for helping.
Nihlus."

“Pleased to assist. See you aboard your vessel when your work is finished.” He spun and ducked out through a panel in the back wall.

Shepard took a deep breath and headed back out front.

“Success?” Garrus asked when she walked out. Falling in step beside her, he kept glancing over as if waiting for her to detonate. He didn’t need to worry.

Detonation would wait until she had Patrick Donovan’s throat in her fingers. Every dead end since Eden Prime, every time they arrived too late, every stupid mistake that let Saren slip away . . . Patrick Donovan would taste them all before she blew.

She slipped a glance across at her friend, that warmth keeping the spark an arm’s length from the fuse. “Mordin is on his way. He has his own routes in and out of the Suns’ territory. I have another stop or two to make before I head back to the ship.” She ran up the stairs, her legs moving strong and solid, her entire body fortified with steel and rage. No one who lived on that god-forsaken station might give a crap, but she did, and she intended to clean up the one, tiny corner she could. If Nihlus died, at least something would have come out of the madness.
Shepard paused at the last corner and pressed herself against the concrete wall, peering out of her cover at the mansion, rising out of the squalor like . . .. The only image to enter her mind was a giant marble phallus hiding behind its locked gates and hedges.

Garrus stopped just behind her. “It’s not too late to change your mind, Shepard.”

She nodded, but then took a deep breath and shrugged. “Could you sleep at night knowing that we’d just walked away, or would you curl up in the mako wondering if another young woman was being brought for an interview?” Glancing back over her shoulder, she saw his mandibles drop.

His rumbled response came out with enough exasperated hiss that she didn’t need a translator to decipher that he wouldn’t feel any better about walking away than she did, but he’d never admit it.

She backed up a step, reaching behind her to grip his talons in her fingers. “Don’t leave once we get inside.”

“We go in together, we come out together.” He cleared his throat and nodded toward the car. “Come on, might as well get this over with and get back to the ship. My head is killing me.”

Shepard spun to look at him. “Are you all right?” She stood on her tiptoes and reached up, grasping his face between her hands. “Give me a break, C-Sec and lean down a bit.” When he did, she studied his pupils. They were the same size and stayed equally focused on her. “How bad is the headache if zero is no headache and ten is, sweet baby Jesus, someone just split my skull with an axe?”

He chuckled. “A four or five on the Shepard scale of insane pain range. I’ll be fine, I’m just ready for a shower and a day’s worth of sleep.” Patting her shoulder, he broke free and held out his arm. “Those shoes almost make your legs look turian or quarian.” A soft grunt greeted her elbow as it found a seam in his armour. “I mean, I’ll carry your assault rifle in, just in case.”

Shepard slipped on the horrible shoes and leaned into him a little as he latched onto her arm, helping hold her on her feet. She focused, timing her breathing to the beat of the leather soles against the concrete. Five steps breathing in, five steps breathing out. The extra oxygen made her muscles strong and sure, her heart pounding slow and steady. Anderson taught her the trick when she started training for the biathlon her senior year in high school.

“Some people are born warriors, kid,” he’d told her, “others need to fool their bodies and minds into believing they were born a warrior.” A decade later it still worked as well as it had back then, and she stopped at the car a warrior, inside and out. What awaited her inside that house was just another battlefield.

At the car, Garrus grimaced at her when she tucked her side arm into one of the holes in the dress at the small of her back. “You going to face him the entire time?” he grumbled under his breath.
“It’s a little more subtle than the Blue Sun thug who won’t leave my side because he’s carrying my gun.” She sighed and passed it over. “Fine, C-Sec, but if I need to shoot him and you have my gun, I’m going to punch you in the gut.”

Garrus chuckled and closed the car. “I’ll try to stay as close as I can without being obvious about it.” He took her arm again but waited for her to nod before setting out for the gate.

The human Blue Sun at the gate didn’t even look up at her, just hit the gate control and grunted in answer to Garrus’s nod. Clenching her fists, she reined in the urge to grab him and insist that he look her in the eye if he intended to usher her to her death. Instead, she faked a stumble and reached out to catch herself with a hand to his chest.

“Oh, sorry there, hun.” She stroked slow fingers across his cheek and leaned in, her lips brushing his ear lobe.

Garrus pulled her back against him, rumbling an exasperated oath once they’d put some distance between them and the guard. “Spirits, Shepard,” he whispered. “Just when I thought you might be regaining a little sanity. You’re going after the heart of the beast, don’t waste energy tweaking its nose.”

Shepard shuddered, not needing his admonition to remind her as the gate closed behind her, a cold, clammy palm sliding down her back. Another Sun opened the front door as they approached. She glanced up, the dark windows along the facade poised over her, hungry eyes eagerly waiting for her to pass through the door and be swallowed whole.

“You okay?” Garrus whispered when the door closed behind them. “You’re just playing crazy, right?”

“Sanity is overrated in these situations, Brother C-Sec. Glory hallelujah. Let’s get this done and get the hell back to the Enkindlers’ light.” She focused on her footfalls, but they seemed to mock her, the walls echoing them back three or four times, and her ankles hummed, taut strings under the drawn pressure of a bow.

“Straight through,” someone called from a side room.

Taking a deep breath, Shepard slowed her walk, placing her feet one directly in front of the other to exaggerate the sway of her hips. She pushed away from Garrus as she reached the end of the hall, taking her time, letting her entire body sway with each step.

"Cool and collected, Shepard. Play the game until he shows you what he is. You can’t kill a man because you suspect he’s a murdering bastard. You never know, he might be helping girls get off the streets, straighten out their lives." The thought prompted a very unladylike snort that, in turn, earned her a raised brow plate from Garrus.

A beaming, awestruck smile lit up her face as she flipped the switch and Captain Jane Shepard left the building in favour of Jane, small town colonial. Just before she stepped over the threshold, she ran her hands up her body, stretching her arms over her head with a little flip of her hands at the end.

"Celebrate it and flaunt it, Janey. Celebrate it and flaunt it.

She strode into a sitting room, a bright giggle bubbling from her. “Oh sweet baby Jesus, look at this place. It’s like I died and fell into Forbes magazine. Glory hallelujah and praise the sweet, sweet Enkindler’s light.”
Smoke drifted over the back of an antique wingback chair. “I don’t recall having any interviews booked for this evening,” a heavily accented male voice said in English.

*What is that accent? Afrikaans?*

Two quick steps carried her to a large, colorful painting of a garden in winter, asari statues dancing through the twilight snow. “Sweet baby Jesus, I can’t believe it. Winter Garden. This is one of the most valuable paintings in the entire galaxy.” She turned to look over her shoulder at the back of the chair and grinned. “And it’s not a fake, is it? Wow. You are a ruthless bastard.” She cut the words with a pointed shrug. “Fitting, I suppose. The asari artist was a complete loon. Murdered people and posed them like statues so that she could paint them. Wrote letters to her lover telling her all about her work.” She moved on to a sculpture, her fingers caressing the sleek lines. “Of course, her lover was her first victim. Centerpiece in a fountain if I remember correctly.” Letting out a merry sigh, she turned to face the chair as it rotated toward her. “Fantastic.”

Smoke drifted in a thick cloud around the human seated within the chair’s shadow. For a moment, they regarded one another, his stare so intense Shepard felt as though cold, rough hands rather than his gaze moved over her. Channelling her revulsion into hyperactive moment, she swayed her way over to pictures of a man riding horses. “This isn’t Omega.” She chuckled. “I think I would have noticed open fields and horses. Where is this? Doesn’t look like Earth. Terra Nova? Bekenstein?”

The new angle gave her a better view of the man, but her grin widened when she saw that the lighting and positioning of the furniture had been designed to keep him in shadow. She couldn’t make out his face, just the shine of those insanely intense eyes and that he sported a closely shorn beard and mustache. He wore a dark blue pinstripe suit, crisp pleats cutting both legs and sleeves, and wore it easily -- a man well used to money and power.

“I’ve got to tell you, you’ve got a whole mysterious thing going on that is hotter than hell.” She walked over, knocked his knee off the other, and sat on his lap, one arm draped over his shoulder. “I like my men a little dangerous. Are you dangerous? Your Blue Suns certainly seem to think so.” Letting out a cheery sigh, she leaned into him. He smelled amazing, except for the cigar smoke. She plucked the offensive thing from his hand and stubbed it out in his ashtray. “I think we can find far better things for you to do with your oral fixation.”

Giving him a broad wink, she kissed the end of his nose. “So, I hear you’re looking for a housekeeper.” In a moment of affected shyness, she tipped her head down and glanced away. A heavy flush heated her neck and cheeks, although more from excitement than any sort of bashfulness. She could feel the rage vibrating through him. Exhilerating.

She puffed out a little sigh. “Although I was sorta hoping that you were aiming more for someone whose skills lie outside the scrubbing floors department. . . .” Another bright chuckle. “Although we can totally keep the frilly little uniform if you like.”

He cleared his throat and moved to lift her off his lap, but she resisted, looping an arm around his neck.

A hissing, exasperated sigh slithered between his lips, and he cocked his head a little, listening to his earpiece. By the way he stiffened, Shepard knew her jig was up. He closed the channel and stared her straight in the eye. A predator, but one unsure of his prey. “How long did you expect it to take me to identify you, Captain Jane Shepard? Surely you didn’t think your thin, albeit alluring, disguise would fool me for long.”

She smiled and shrugged. “I didn’t expect it to fool you at all. It was meant to fool your men and get me in the door. If you’d asked, I would have told you my name. Lying means remembering
way too much. I can’t be bothered, especially since I need eighty percent of my brain function just to keep me on my feet in these damned shoes.” She reached up with both hands and fluffed her hair.

Shepard turned back to her quarry and leaned in to kiss the end of his nose again. “Now we just have to make sure we aren’t interrupted by your pesky guards.” She opened her omnitool and keyed in a short range overload. “This is going to hurt and probably deafen that ear for a while, so I apologize for that.” With a snap of electricity and a whine of feedback, she destroyed his radio implant.

“I’m on a check-in system,” he said, his voice thick with suppressed pain. She gave him credit though, he wasn’t giving anything away. That needed to change. Until she had proof of what he was, she couldn’t just kill him.

“Let them come. We’re just two people having a cozy chat, aren’t we? Sure, we’re both a little psychotic, but that just makes it more fun.” She turned off her omnitool, then ran the backs of her fingers up his neck to tweak his chin. “So, Omega. What brought you here? A large pool of victims whose families will be too terrified to look into their disappearances? Or are you just a bottom feeder getting fat off the misery of others?” A fingertip traced his jawline.

“She’s merely a place of business. It’s not even my primary residence.” He looked down his nose at her. “Do I look like I belong amongst the dregs that wash up on this filthy outpost?”

Chuckling, she shook her head. “You really don’t want me to answer that, but . . . let me guess . . . your primary residence is a private, tropical island on Terra Nova. No? Hmmm . . . Horizon is too provincial. Somewhere industrial and self-important, then.” She tapped her finger tip against her lip. “That means it’s a fantastically huge floating island on Bekenstein.” His face and the sudden straightness through his neck told her everything she needed to know. She clicked her tongue and wagged the finger at him. “Now. Now. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down you cannot see something that is above you.” She cocked her head. “C.S. Lewis, a wise man.”

He laughed and shoved her away. “You think you’re above me?” Standing, he paced to his wall of art and back. “You think any of this means anything to me? I bring order to the chaos. I wash away the filth and elevate the beggars from the squalor to tower amidst beauty so sublime it would bring tears to your eyes.”

Sighing, she settled into his chair and crossed her legs, yanking the skirt down her thighs. “Holy father of light, you’re a complete loon, aren’t you, Brother Psycho?” A small shrug rippled down her bare shoulders, her skin lifting into gooseflesh, but the reaction stopped as she heard a loud, turian mutter echo in from the hallway -- something about pots calling kettles black. She narrowed her eyes in the general direction of Garrus’s not-so-subtle reminder to stay on track, then looked back to her host. “So, you were saying how none of this means anything to you?”

Whirling around, he threw up his arms as if lifting everything around them, even Omega. “Omega, the Blue Suns, Eclipse . . .” He laughed, betraying himself a little in its maniacal edge. “Yes, I back several mercenary companies. I even run my own. Business is lucrative out here if one can maintain the correct balance of power.” Shaking his head, he paced to the painting of the garden in winter. “But business is merely a means to conduct my true work without interference. I’m an artist. A preservationist of beauty. I would make this entire galaxy my canvas, one perfect sculpture at a time. What better place to begin than Omega?”

A wide, incredulous grin spread across Shepard’s face, but a fierce set of teeth began gnawing at her insides. She’d nudged him so close, now she needed to push him over the edge. “When I came
into this district, I just planned to sneak in and recruit a surgeon to help save a friend’s life, but then the Suns told my escort that he didn’t need to wait for me.

“When they said that, I went so cold that I almost threw up on my new shoes, but that quickly changed into anger. Not normal, ‘dammit, I stubbed my toe’, or ‘the Father of Light has been preempted by an infomercial selling supportive male undergarments’ angry. No, this was a scalding, righteous fury. Glory hallelujah, and praise the Enkindlers for their divine and burning light, Brother Psycho.” She stood and paced over to blockade the hallway, the heels helping give her presence as she ruffled all her spines in preparation for combat. “I strode into your house expecting to work out a few frustrations by putting down some rich, entitled thug who was hurting prostitutes. You, however, are so, so much worse than that, aren’t you?”

“Am I to believe that you’ve decided to spare me from this righteous fury?” He chuckled, but she felt the edge of fear through it, the way his eyes cut side to side a little as if formulating a plan, gauging her weaknesses.

Shepheard laughed, one just as cold and manic as his, and stepped down out of her shoes. “Oh no. No, no, no. I fully intend to end you.”

He retrieved the stub of his cigar and lifted it to his lip. It shook a little as he flicked his lighter, but once he got it lit, he seemed to settle. “Do you have any idea who I am?”

“I really don’t give a rat’s ass what your name is. The only reason you’re still standing is that painting right there. It gives me a little hope for the other applicants who came into this house over the last forty-eight hours.” She bent down to pick up the insanely tall, pointy heels. “So, before I gut you like a fish using my high heels and false eyelashes, I want to know where they are.”

Turning a slow circle, her hands held out, she peered into the dark corners and behind the chairs. “You’re a preservationist.” She stopped turning and minced over to a massive bookshelf behind his chair. “That means you’ve got a gallery somewhere.” She pulled out a book. “Is it behind here? A secret passage through the castle?”

Looking at the cover of the book, she raised her eyebrows. “Wow, the Book of Urizen. I suppose you know only six of these still exist? Estimated value: forty-five million credits. Beautiful condition too.” She took a breath. “Earth was not: nor globes of attraction . . . The will of the Immortal expanded . . . Or contracted his all flexible senses. Death was not, but eternal life sprung.” A long sigh followed the quote. “William Blake. Fantastic stuff. He knew the Enkindlers’ light.” She tossed it over her shoulder. “Useless to me, however. I need to find the trigger that opens this wall.”

Moving faster and with more grace than she expected, the man lunged at her, his cigar scorching a long line up her chest and around the curve of her hairline. One strong arm grappled around her neck while the other tried to capture her wrist, twisting it behind her. Planting her feet, she shoved backwards, the move toward him catching him off guard. They crashed into the wall. Now that she’d thrown him off balance, she flicked her hip and rolled, dragging him to the floor. At the end of the roll, she sat astride his waist, a stiletto in each hand. With a swing and a snap of her wrists, she buried both heels in the sides of his neck.

In the background, Shepard heard the front door fly open and bounce off the wall with a crash that shook the house. Guns fired back and forth for a few seconds, then silence.

“C-Sec, you breathing?” she called without looking away from the man pinned beneath her.

The artist bucked once, but she pulled on the shoes, a warning he clearly understood if the size of
his pupils and the cloud of fecal stench that billowed around her could be believed.

“I haven’t torn or punctured anything too badly yet,” she warned him. “Stay still, tell me where your collection is, and I won’t rip them both out the front.”

“What do you want?” he asked in a raspy whisper. “Money?”

All emotion -- save fury -- drained from her expression, and she leaned in, staring into his eyes. “One thing that losing your entire family to slavers does is give you a healthy aversion to selling your soul for cash.” She eased her leg over to crouch by his side, keeping her hands steady on the shoes. “Get up very carefully.” Movement in her peripherals caught her attention. “C-Sec?”

Garrus backed into the room, his hands in the air. “We have a small problem, Shepard.”

She turned, seeing for a fraction of a second, a grizzled, grey-haired figure in battered, yellow armour. “Who the . . .?”

Knowing her mistake the moment she made it, Shepard cursed as the artist leaped up. His movement threw her back and tore her hand from one shoe as he bolted to the bookshelf and then through a small door.

“Hold on a bloody minute,” the old merc rumbled in a throaty, bastardized cockney accent, “you’re not . . . .”

“I’m here to kill the bastard, you moron,” Shepard shouted, scrambling to her feet. After staring at the shoe in her hand for a second, she threw it aside and strode to Garrus’s side. Snatching Roger from the turian’s back, she levelled it on the interloper. “Are you with that psycho? Quickly. He’s getting away.”

“No, I’m not with that devil. Son of a bitch. I busted in here when I heard the Suns brought the bastard a fifth girl. Thought I’d do the galaxy a favour, kill the bastard, and be a big, goddamned hero.” He levelled a pale, milky eye on her. “But I guess you weren’t a damsel in distress after all.”

“More like a one-woman wrecking crew,” Garrus supplied.

“Then take your gun off my man, and stay the hell out of my way.” Shepard spun without waiting to see if the old guy did as she’d said, trusting Garrus to be able to take care of himself. She ran around the chair to the open portal behind it. Not sparing time for hesitation or caution, Shepard ducked through, finding herself in a narrow serviceway. Dark red, grungy light flickered along the walls, and the sound of water dripping punctuated the shuffle-clump of her quarry’s footsteps to her right.

Looking down, she saw a single drop of blood. A few metres further, another. She took off after him, ducking around corners and crawling down ladders, her bare feet coating in a thick layer of muck that rendered the floors hazardous and the ladders deadly.

“Shepard?” Garrus’s bellow echoed after her.

“To the right, Brother C-Sec.” A few metres further on, she found her shoe tossed into a corner, a blood trail leading her deeper into the bowels of the station. The trail started to get heavier as fear and exertion jacked up his blood pressure, the drips falling closer and closer together, then in small clusters. It didn’t amount to a bleed that would end him, but tossing her off had done some damage.

“What a bloody hole,” the cockney fellow bellowed, apparently having decided to follow Garrus. “Damned sewers.”
Shepard swallowed hard and shoved the idea of what was collecting between her toes as far away as possible. Ten minutes, maybe fifteen, passed before she ran through an old metal door into paradise. Plants grew throughout the large chamber, a riot of colour barely contained into plots. A narrow, flag-stone pathway meandered through the greenery. Shepard slowed a little, picking her way silently down the path.

In the center of the first cluster of gardens, a statue stood, frozen in mid-leap. It danced with outstretched arms, a flowing gown of meticulously carved marble swirling around graceful legs set at angles impossible for anyone but twelve-year-old gymnasts. Shepard stopped, dread sinking its teeth into the back of her neck as she looked up. Her eyes travelled the length of the skirt to a banded kirtle, then a swooping peasant neckline that led to a gracefully extended neck. The figure’s head tipped back and to the side. Water flowed in a slow trickle over the open mouth, winding its way down the piece. Shepard closed her eyes and took a deep breath, steeling the trembling roll in her gut the best she could. Still, dread’s teeth tore into her like a defeated varren in the fighting ring.

You have to look, Shepard. You have to know.

She opened her eyes and looked up into a pale face, the expression completely at odds with the serenity and joy expressed through the rest of the piece. The face cried out for help, the features contorted with pain, fear, and sorrow.

“Oh sweet baby Jesus,” she sighed, her voice burrowing down inside her. Traitorous knees buckled, forcing her into a tottering dance of her own until she wrestled them back under control. A strange, strangled gurgle emanated from the piece, dragging her eyes back to that horrifying face. The statue’s closed eyes opened, grappling onto Shepard with hope as sharp and piercing as harpoons.

Shepard gasped, a fish beached by incredulity. “You’re alive?”

The trapped, terrified eyes sprang wide as Shepard felt someone rush up behind her. She spun, throwing Roger up between them, deflecting the worst of the blow, the shovel glancing off the right side of her skull. Even at less than half the force, the blow drove Shepard to her knees. Lightning and thunder broke open a pocket of superheated agony and sent it pouring down through her nervous system.

The artist’s blood-soaked hands grabbed at Roger, tossing her back and forth as he struggled to yank the assault rifle from her grip.

No. He doesn’t get to kill me with my own damned gun.

The thought broke through the eruption of agony and sound in her head. Clutching Roger tight, she rolled into the man, pinning the gun under her as she fell onto her side. The artist clambered to his feet and stumbled further into the garden. Running boots thundered toward her, and she flapped her hand in that general direction as if trying to ward them off. Too noisy. Much too noisy. She blinked, trying to clear her vision.

“Shepard?”

She flapped her hand again. “Shuddub, Gar . . ..” She dragged one arm under herself and pushed up off the walkway until she sat, precariously wobbling, braced against her elbow.

“Spirits, Shepard.” Blue armour smacked into the stone next to her with a vaguely musical ring, then gentle talons probed at her head. “I’m betting your head hurts worse than mine now,” Garrus
said, his voice soft, the gentle humour comforting. He injected her with medigel and smeared a thick layer on her scalp.

“She’s alive, C-Sec,” Shepard whispered, pointing a wavering finger toward the statue. “They could all be alive.” She sat up and raised a hand. “Help me up, it’s just a glancing blow.” As the medigel slithered through her blood and her wound, it pushed enough of the pain back for her to form words.

“How bad is it on the Shepard scale?” Garrus asked, supporting her as she stood and took her first few steps.

“Pretty sure you can see the axe,” Shepard replied, still trying to get her eyes to focus, “but it’s working its way out.”

“Goddamn,” the cockney accent said and whistled, the sound bringing Shepard’s gun around to point at the old merc again. For a moment, her finger twitched on the trigger, but then she turned to follow the blood trail deeper into the subterranean garden. “Tough little minx, isn’t she?”

“Call her that again, and you’ll find out.” Garrus chuckled, the warm rumble of his voice helping as much as the meds, and Shepard pulled away to stumble forward under her own steam.

The blood droplets doubled and swam before her eyes, but Shepard shuffled rubber legs forward. Time, reason, and sense tangled up, glued together with pain and blood, clogging up her brain functions like a restaurant toilet on three-for-one burrito night. Still, her instincts and reflexes worked well enough to keep her on her feet and moving, gun pointed the right direction.

Three more statues frolicked in elegant poses as Shepard passed, their bodies eerily frozen in time, their eyes following her. As she chased the artist through his masterpieces, she began to see the horrible care he’d taken to keep his statues alive. Water trickled over the face of each, close enough to their mouth that they could lap it up with their tongue. She also spotted holes disguised as pendants at the base of each throat, no doubt disguising feeding tubes.

“There.”

Garrus didn’t need to point out the movement ahead. Shepard’s quarry slowed to a stumbling walk.

“Looks like he tore his jugular when he threw me back,” she said. “All this running around and hitting people over the head with shovels has split it open like an overripe banana peel. Imagine that, Brother C-Sec.” Shepard sighed. When she’d entered the mansion, she’d wanted him to suffer, but seeing his victims had more than filled her suffering quota for the night. Hell, for the next eighty years. Now, all she wanted to do was end it, get the victims cared for, and fall headfirst into bed.

She stopped, her lips relaxing into a grateful half-smile as Garrus stepped in tight against her, steadying her while she tracked her target through Roger’s scope.

She let out a deep breath and squeezed the trigger. Blood blossomed from the artist’s thigh, painting a crimson starburst across the foliage. “Damn, my aim is hell and gone.”

“Hold up!” the old merc called. “I’ve got a question for that bastard before you finish him off.” He brushed past her, a battered old rifle swinging from his left hand.

Shepard raised an eyebrow, but nodded, leaning against the turian as she held the gun ready, but waiting. “Better hurry, Brother Psycho is moments away from joining the light.”
The old merc bent down, lifting the artist off the flagstones by the collar of his very fine suit. “Where’s Vido? I know you’re the money behind him, you son of a bitch.”

“Don’t know. He changes his base every couple of weeks,” the artist said, his voice weak and garbled, “but he knows you’re hunting him, Massani. Don’t be surprised if he’s waiting for you with a battalion at his back when you do catch up to him.”

The merc, Massani, laughed dry and rolling, a dry wind over desert rock. “I’m going to give you to the lady to finish off. Burn in hell, you sick bastard.” He dropped the artist and stepped around behind Shepard. “He’s all yours, sweetheart.”

Shepard chuckled, seeing his desert wind and raising him a January ice storm. “This one’s for you, Bunny,” she whispered. Steady her shot, she squeezed the trigger, sending a bullet straight through the bastard’s skull.

For a moment, she stared at the slumped body, its hazel eyes open and still looking into hers. Fear and denial bore into her as blood seeped in a thin line from the hole in his brow, dripping with a feather’s whisper onto the stone. Over the years, she’d shot and killed a lot of men and women. Thousands had fallen before her. Thousands. Always in self-defense. As Anderson had told her all those years before, some people were born to be soldiers, while others had to trick their bodies into believing it. Despite her prodigious skill in the art of death, she’d never murdered anyone.

She turned away from the dead, fearful eyes and stumbled a couple of steps back up the path. The gun in her hand, suddenly too heavy to hang onto, slipped from her fingers to clatter on the stone. “Shepard?” Garrus called, his voice soft and cautious, his hand never leaving her even as she walked away.

“What did I do, C-Sec? I just appointed myself judge, jury and executioner,” she whispered. “Did I just step over a line, C-Sec?”

“If anyone deserved a bullet through the head, it was him. You did what needed to be done,” Garrus said, leaning down close to her ear. “You said it yourself. There’s no law here to turn him over to. No court to try and convict him.”

Shepard turned to look up at the closest statue, an asari maiden swinging on an old wooden swing, a basket of flowers in her lap. Big, blue eyes stared back at her above cheeks blotchy and streaked with blue where tears ate through the makeup applied to match her face to her marble sarcophagus. A living death. How long had these girls and women been tormented, frozen in place, alabaster dolls wasting away?


Shepard allowed Garrus to support her as they tracked the yell. A wide door opened into a side chamber dominated by an iron cage with five women inside it. Another girl, a beautiful but bone-thin asari, lay strapped to a workbench. Her shoulder had been dislocated, her arm broken and then posed at impossibly graceful angles; splinted and shackled in place to fit to her new form.

Shepard let out a slow moan and stepped up to take the asari’s unbroken hand in both of hers. “It’s going to be okay now. The man who did this is dead. We’ll get you out of here and to a hospital.”

A wan smile drifted like a cloud across the pale beauty’s face. “Thank you. I’ve been here . . ..” She shook her head a little. “I don’t even know.”

Stroking the young asari’s brow, Shepard smiled as if trying to warm the chill radiating from that
frail hand. “In a few days, you’ll be right as rain, don’t worry.”

The smooth, lavender brow furrowed. “Worry . . . . Could you tell my mother where I’m going? She’d never show enough weakness to send people after me herself, but she’ll be worried, nonetheless.”

Shepard nodded, strong and sure, grateful to be given a mission, something to focus on other than the artist’s dead stare. “What’s your name, sweetie? Who’s your mother? I’ll find her before I even return to my ship.”

“She must be going out of her mind,” Garrus agreed.

The asari’s eyes drifted closed. “My name is Liselle. My mother is Aria T’Loak.”
“Aria’s your mother?” Shepard fought off shock’s pale, clammy hands, trying not to let it show as the asari gripped her gaze like a lifeline. After a moment, the captain nodded. “Of course. I’ll go tell her on my way back to the ship.” Forcing a veneer smile onto her lips, Shepard patted the girl’s hand. “You just take it as easy as you can. You’re safe now, and we’ll have people here to help you very soon.”

Releasing Liselle, Shepard spun and strode out, trying to look confident and reassuring. She managed to hold on until she made it out of sight before breaking into a run. Sprinting straight through gardens, leaping over plants, she reached the sewer tunnels and swung the door shut before her stomach overrode her control and began to heave. Water and bile poured out, splashing on her feet, but she barely felt it through the storm cloud broiling in her thoughts, all lightning and downdrafts threatening to blow out the back of her skull. She heard the door squeak open, and a strong, gentle hand pressed between her shoulder blades, rubbing slow circles that eased the knives stabbing into her skull and her guts.

“Just when you think you’ve reached the limit of the horrors sapient beings can visit on one another,” Garrus said, his words a whisper of fresh air through the fetid dankness.

Heaving until turning inside out became a real concern, Shepard fought to purge the greasy, rotten sewage at the heart of her. “Jesus Christ, C-Sec . . . Aria . . . did she . . .?” Despite starting to voice the terrible, impossible suspicion that a violet hand spent the night dancing her around Omega like a marionette in a puppet theatre, she swallowed the words, unspoken. First things first. The victims needed to be taken down, extracted from those damned sarcophagi and moved to a hospital.

She swiped at the blood dripping off her eyebrow. “Is there anyone or any facilities here to help them? Emergency services? Hospitals? Ambulance?”

“How many are there? Twenty-five or so?” A rough grumble followed a sigh as a grimace twisted his scarred face. “You’ve got a fast ship? Good medic?”

Shepard nodded and reached out a hand, bracing against the slimy wall. “Yeah. She’s got her hands full at the moment, but yeah, we have a great doc, and a decent medic.”

“Get yourself back to your ship, prepare for incoming. If your doc could come down and help here, we might spare these poor, bloody girls a bit of suffering.” The merc turned away. “I ran into some old special forces buddies earlier. They’re used to situations of an unusual and . . . messy nature. Well . . .” He cleared his throat. “. . . bloody hell, it’s not like anyone could be prepared for something like this, but they’ve done some unusual covert extractions. We’ll get the ladies out of this hellhole and onto your ship without drawing any attention.”
Shepard stared at him for a long time, not sure why she trusted the surly old fellow with the terrible scars, but something told her he was okay. “All right. Ship’s name is the Normandy.” She held her hand out, gripping his in a tight shake. “On your way out, there’s a painting of a garden full of asari statues on the sitting room wall. Grab it. It should cover your expenses.” She shrugged. “There’s a sculpture in there, too . . . a skinny head with a long, thin nose . . . sorta weird looking. It should pay your buddies extremely well to take extra care with those girls.”

“A strange head?” His face twisted like he thought she was lying. “Why would they want that?”

“Well, it’s up to them, but it’s worth about eight hundred million credits, as many as a billion if you find the right auction.” She nodded at the shock on his face.

“Bloody hell. How much is the painting worth?” Massani scratched the back of his head and cocked an eyebrow.

Shepard winked, managing a weak smile. “Trust me, take the painting. Just don’t try to sell it on an asari world. The painter is somewhat infamous.”

He shrugged. “All right, if you say so. Thanks, sweetheart.”

Shepard shook her head and turned back to the sewers and the mansion beyond. “Name’s Shepard, twinkletoes. Captain Jane Shepard.” She shot him a sardonic grin at his cuss and waved to Garrus. “Come on, Brother C-Sec, let’s keep moving. I’m ready for this night to be over.” She waved off his offer of support, taking the lead back to the house. The thought of those poor girls waiting for rescue alone tore up her guts like an industrial shredder, and molten shame burned under her skin as she walked the other way. But right then, the need to run became a charging krogan, catapulting everything else aside. A few moments. She just needed a few moments and some space to get her head straight . . . not to mention that her feet begged for decent shoes.

Halfway back to the little door, she glanced behind her, meeting Garrus’s eyes. “I know I told Liselle that I’d talk to her mother before heading to the ship, but I might need to do some thinking before I deal with Aria.”

Garrus rumbled an oath. “We’ll be heading out for the Citadel as soon as we get the girls aboard? Maybe best to get it over with tonight. I’ll go with you, we’ll just tell her where Liselle is going and get out. If she did manage to set you up to kill that bastard, we can untangle that rope after some sleep.”

Shepard nodded, not surprised that he also suspected Aria of setting them up to take out her daughter’s abductor. “Okay, that sounds like a plan. God, we’re days from actually getting any sleep, aren’t we?” She yawned, then pulled away from him to duck through the little doorway into the sitting room. Walking only far enough into the room that Garrus could get through the door, she stopped and looked around. “All this rich beauty hiding such ugly depravity.”

“This art belongs in a museum, Shepard,” Garrus whispered, looking around the sitting room. “There must be twenty billion credits worth of treasures here.” He walked over to a figure made out of spun glass worked with threads of gold and other metals. “This is hyalus, Shepard, and really old by the look of it. It’s illegal to own the ancient pieces, they’re protected turian cultural artifacts.”

A Blue Sun walked into the room, his assault rifle hanging slack from his hand. Shepard looked up, so stiff with fury that she expected to hear her joints creak. “Get out of here. Your boss is dead. If you knew about his little garden of torture down there, you’d better grab your cronies and run like hell before I decide to do a little housecleaning. That is the position I came here to interview
for, after all.” She met the batarian’s eyes, his death hanging so close in her stare that his ruddy skin blanched almost white. She nodded to Garrus. “If he isn’t gone in ten seconds, put a bullet through his skull.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He shrugged his assault rifle into his hands, holding it in a relaxed grip.

The batarian turned and fled.

“Take the rest of your colleagues with you!” she yelled after him.

Shepard forgot him the moment he left her line of sight, too many other things to worry about. “Sweet baby Jesus, C-Sec. As if we don’t already have enough to deal with.” She ran her hand through her hair. “Okay, I’ll have the crew crate the art and the books up, turn it over to the proper authorities.” She wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. “Otherwise, it’ll end up being scavenged and used to fund who knows how much criminal shit on this bloody rock. When we get to the Citadel, we’ll make sure it gets back where it belongs.”

She lifted a hand to her ear, opening a channel to Kaidan. He and the others had just returned to the Normandy, so she had them head over. Then she contacted Dr. Chakwas.

“How is Nihlus doing, Doc?” she asked, flopping into the artist’s chair, filthy feet splayed, knees stuck together. “Good, that’s a relief.” She let out a long breath. “We fell into a nightmare here, Doc.”

“I’m going to sweep the house, Shepard,” Garrus said. “Clear out the staff.”

She nodded and mouthed for him to be careful. “Well, we found a sick son of a bitch who has been abducting young women, breaking their limbs, starving them and turning them into living sculptures. They’re still alive, but are a huge mess and encased in stone and plaster. We have people coming to get them unmounted and to the Normandy, but if you could come help when you’re done with Nihlus . . ..”

The Captain sat forward, her forearms on her knees as Dr. Chakwas assured her that she would come as quickly as possible. Shepard looked up as Zaeed ducked through the door. After a second, he wandered over to the painting she’d told him to take.

“Thanks, Doc. You shouldn’t have any problem getting into the district. I’ll have a squad escort you from the ship. Is Ashley up? Great, thanks. See you soon.” Shepard changed the channel to the chief, putting her in charge of turning the cargo bay into a hospital ward. When she was finished, she looked up at Zaeed. “All right, let’s get these wheels in motion. Can some of your buddies get my people past the Suns?”

“Sure thing, Shepard.” His chuckle reminded her of Wrex. Hitching a thumb over his shoulder at the painting, he gave her a crooked grin. “I like it. Might not sell it.” The grin twisted a bit, the scars around his eye caving into grisly shadow. “Jessie ’n me could use a bit of culture.”

Standing, Shepard took a couple of steps toward the merc. “Seemed like you knew who we were dealing with.” Cocking a hip, she crossed her arms, eyes narrowing.

He nodded and turned to look at his painting. “Yeah. Name was Hock. Slimy merc bastard. Made a fortune causing problems all over the Terminus. Kick the wasps nest, then step in on whichever side offered him the most cash.”

“Seemed personal.”
Grunting in agreement, he turned back. “Yeah, bastard financed operations for an old friend that I’m looking to catch up to.” Spinning on his heel, he strode for the door. “Better get moving.”

Shepard followed him out of the house, grabbing her boots from the car. Returning inside, she found a sink and sat on the counter to wash her feet before slipping them on. Someone needed to stay with the girls until Dr. Chakwas arrived.

Garrus chuckled when she walked into the sitting room. “That dress is suddenly a lot more you. The dried blood is a nice touch too.”

She elbowed him. “Do you mind supervising getting all this loaded on the Normandy? Ash is getting a ward set up for the girls in the cargo bay.”

“With all this freight, the girls and the quarians, we’re going to be a full boat,” he said, looking around.

She covered a yawn. “Yeah, and we need to keep the quarians on board. Well, the admiral anyway. I’ll make arrangements to get the kids back to the flotilla until we get our hands on Saren.” She shook her head. “We wasted a hell of a lot of time here, C-Sec.” She chuffed in the back of her throat. “Well, I can’t say wasted, exactly.”

He nodded. “We’ll make it up.” He gestured toward the wall of paintings. “I’ll take care of this. Shouldn’t take us long if Massani’s people can get us past the Suns. Damned mercs are a menace.”

“Thanks.” A smile passed over her face as wan and ephemeral as mist. “I’ll be back out and ready to go see Aria once the doc gets here.”

“Hey, Shepard.” She turned back as Garrus’s call stopped her just inside the door. “How’d you know about the art and books?”

A secretive smile tweaked the corner of her mouth. “I’m an enigma, C-Sec.” She ducked through the little door and headed back down the filthy passage to the sewers.

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Shepard’s omnitool told her it was just after noon Normandy time when she stopped at the bottom of the stairs to Aria’s little bunker inside Afterlife. No doubt the asari had known the second she arrived, so every moment Shepard hesitated before going up told Aria far more than she wanted to give away. She could feel Garrus behind her, patient but tense, vigilant as he scanned the crowd.

After another deep breath, Shepard lifted her foot onto the first step and started up. Aria stood as she had the last time, facing out over her court.

“I see you decided to relax a little and enjoy Omega’s nightlife.” The asari turned and cocked her head, a wolf’s smile curling one side of her mouth as her gaze slid up Shepard’s body, a pair of cool, invisible hands. “When you let your hair down, you don’t hold back, do you?” She raised one delicate brow. “Those boots really don’t do you justice, though. Legs like that should be showcased.”

Shepard felt Garrus push up on her from behind and pressed a palm behind her to ease him back. “Yeah, well, I got psychotic lunatic blood and sewage all over the heels. Didn’t feel much like
wearing them after that. I tell you, Omega sure knows how to show a girl a good time. I can’t remember having so much fun.”

Aria’s only reaction was a slight twitch at the corner of her mouth.

“But, I’m afraid I can’t spend any longer indulging my party girl side. Time to go,” Shepard said, keeping her voice even but not bothering to hide her fatigue. “Liselle asked me to let you know that we’re giving her a ride to the Citadel on the Normandy. She can rest from her long days and even longer nights of partying there.” She shrugged. “Unless you have somewhere you’d rather she go?”

Aria’s eyes locked on Shepard’s, not a single emotion showing anywhere on that cold, elegant face. Her eyes, on the other hand, spoke volumes. A slight shrug told Shepard what she needed to know.

“All right.” Shepard turned and nodded for Garrus to precede her down. “I’m exhausted. So much fun. See you the next time I’m in town, Aria. We can go out together.”

“More than I can express,” he replied.

Shepard grinned. She needed a shower and to get changed before the first girls started arriving on the ship. Sleep wouldn’t hurt either, but that would have to wait.

“Shepard?” Aria called as the captain moved to descend the second set of steps. When Shepard turned, the asari held her with an eerily open stare for a moment, then nodded.

Shepard returned it, knowing it was as close to a thank you as Aria would allow herself.

* * * * *

Shepard’s omnitool told her that evening had arrived on the Normandy when she finally walked into medbay, carrying a clear case under one arm. The salarian doctor, Mordin, looked up from packing his kit.

“Finally able to get back to your clinic?” Shepard asked.

“All patients settled,” the salarian reported when he turned and spotted her. “Nihlus doing well, better than expected. Very resilient. Females need to go to Citadel, receive proper care as soon as possible.”

She nodded. “We’re on our way once we get clearance.” Stepping up to him, she held out her hand. “Thank you so much for all your help, Dr. Solus. Dr. Chakwas says that Nihlus wouldn’t have made it without your expertise. And I know we would have never gotten the women triaged and stabilized as quickly if you hadn’t helped.”

“Glad to be of assistance. Believed women going to their deaths inside that gate. Never imagined anything like this. Barbaric. Death sometimes kinder. Galaxy owes you debt for putting a bullet through his skull.” He strode to the medbay door, pausing to shake Dr. Chakwas’s hand. “Pleasure working with you, doctor. Will forward my notes for our paper. Revolutionize treatment of turian crush victims.”

Shepard chuckled wearily, wanting to know where the salarian got all his energy. She lifted a hand as he glanced her way before hurrying out the door.
Dr. Chakwas turned to face Shepard, a wry smile on her handsome, exhausted face. “Quite the couple of days, Shepard.” She pointed to a chair. “Sit, so I can look at your head.”

Shepard plopped into a chair. “That it has been, Doc. How are the ladies holding up?” She let out a little, pained hiss as the doctor parted her hair to prod the wound.

“Not well.” The doctor cursed. “I can’t even begin to comprehend what they’ve been through. There wasn’t a trace of analgesic medication in their blood. That monster . . . .” Instead of completing the thought, Chakwas let out a thin, enraged growl. “Dr. Solus and I gave most of them heavy doses of pain medication, but a couple were so badly broken that I just induced a medical coma before we started to work. Years of rehab await most of them. Judging by the degree of healing, some of them have been there for more than a year.”

Shepard winced at that. How had they borne the pain and madness for so long? “Have you found a hospital to take them?”

“Huerta Memorial has agreed to take all the victims, but they’re nervous about the cost, Shepard. Perhaps we should spread them out over several hospitals?” Dr. Chakwas poked and prodded Shepard’s head as she spoke, the pain easing as she did. Patting the captain’s shoulder, she said, “All done. You have a remarkably hard head.”

Shepard chuckled. “Not the first time I’ve heard that. Thanks, Doc.” She stood and turned to face Chakwas. “Is Huerta the best care possible?” Losing the pain in her head untied all the knots that had kept her upright. Her entire body sagged, feeling as though it would melt down into a puddle on the deck plating.

“Yes. It has all the best surgeons, but it’s expensive.”

Shepard held out the case she’d been carrying under her arm. “I thought that might be a problem. Here, I think this should cover all the medical bills Huerta could incur while healing and rehabilitating our ladies.”

Dr. Chakwas stared at the book contained within the hermetic case for a moment. “De Hortus Sanitatis?” She looked up at Shepard and shook her head. “This disappeared a hundred years ago, stolen from the University of Aberdeen’s collection, I believe. How?”

“Our artist had expensive tastes. Anyway, that should about cover it, don’t you think?” She pushed a chair over next to Nihlus, plopping into it hard enough that it rolled back into the next bed. “So, how’s our patient doing, Doc?”

“He should be up by the day after tomorrow. He shouldn’t do anything more energetic than walking and light stretching for a week, though.” The doctor yawned. “All right. I’m going to check on the patients in the cargo bay one more time, then get a couple hours sleep.”

“Rest well, Doc. You deserve it. You did some amazing work over the last couple of days.” Shepard watched the doctor leave, then leaned back and closed her eyes. Muscles she hadn’t heard from since basic training had set up a complaints department. At the end of a couple of very long bloody couple of days, the best she could say was that they hadn’t lost anyone. They were no closer to catching Saren than they’d been when they arrived on Omega.

“Hey, Skipper?”

Shepard sighed and leaned forward, her elbows sharp and tacky on her thighs. She really needed a shower. “What’s up, Chief?”
“Vakarian just left the ship. He said he needed to pick up some supplies and would be back in twenty. I sent Wrex and Tenaka with him, just in case. Thought you should know, ma’am.”

“Thanks, Ash. How are things down there?”

“We’ve got everyone settled. I’ve started rotating people off to eat and sleep. I want to have someone sitting with all the women who are awake.”

“Excellent. Good thinking, Chief. Get some rest. We’ll be at the Citadel in about fifteen hours. Depends how long before we get clearance to leave Omega.”

“Roger that. Goodnight, ma’am.”

“Goodnight, Chief. Shepard out.” She closed that channel and opened another. “Hey, Brother C-Sec, you going UA?”

The turian’s warm, throaty laugh relaxed her further down into the chair. “No, ma’am. My CO gave me an order to pick up some rations while we were docked here, but then this lunatic prostitute grabbed me and dragged me along on her vigilante crusade.”

Despite Shepard trying to maintain a straight face, a snicker crept out. “Why do I allow you to get away with such blatant insubordination?”

“My rakish good looks and natural charm.” He chuckled, but then cleared his throat. “I’ll be back aboard in under ten minutes, Captain. Just needed to pick up a small dose of normalcy and sanity after last night.”

She sighed, long and exhausted. “And here I didn’t even know they were for sale. Grab me an order of both while you’re at it, will you?”

“Hell, I’ll grab you two orders of sanity. You can use all you can get.” Despite his words, his tone remained warm and serious. “Be back in ten, Shepard.”

“Be careful, Shepard out.”

Letting out a long breath, Shepard opened her eyes to see Nihlus’s green gaze watching her. A bright, relieved smile pushed back her weariness. “Well, hey there, handsome. How are you feeling?”

His mandibles fluttered a little. “Handsome?”

She winced at the weakness in his voice, the slight gurgle as he breathed. “Oh, don’t let that go to your head. It’s just what I call all of my turian Spectre partners who have been crushed by rampaging krogan and nearly died.” She slid her hand under the blanket to grasp his talons.

“There have been a lot of us?” A soft chuckle chased the words from his mouth, a coughing spasm overtaking it.

She stroked the back of his hand with her thumb and grinned. “You wouldn’t believe how many.”


“Ah, it was just a little game of dress up.” Her throat closed up tight as all the crazy, sad, disappointing, intense horror of the day caught up with her. Her thumb rubbed the back of his hand.
“You look . . .” His voice trailed off.

“Like a whore, yeah, I know.” A long, soft whistle of sound escaped with her sigh. “I’ll explain it all when you’re up on your feet.” Giving his fingers a gentle squeeze, she tucked them back under the blanket. “For now, just get some sleep. You need your rest.”

He shook his head a fraction of an inch one way then back and opened his eyes. “I was going to say that you look unbelievably beautiful.” His mandibles fluttered. “Also exhausted. Go get some sleep, yourself.”

“Beautiful? How much pain medication does the doc have you on, Kryik?” Shepard stood, leaning over him a little.

“Not enough to miss what’s right in front of my eyes.” His mandibles fluttered a little, and he seemed to drift off.

She sighed and shook her head. “You’re incorrigible.” Pressing her lips to his brow, she whispered. “Thanks for taking care of my people, Kryik.” She straightened and headed for the door.

“And thank you for the moral booster, Shepard,” he called after her, his voice thready. “But you might want to pull that skirt down a bit before you go out there.”

“Wha . . .?” She ran her hands down over her backside to feel that the skirt had indeed ridden up further than she would have liked. “You . . .” An exasperated growl crept out, edged with a soft chuckle. “So inappropriate, Kryik. I swear. When you’re back on your feet, I’ll boost something but it won’t be your moral.”

A harsh cough burst through his soft chuckle. “Promises. Promises.”

Turning away, she feigned disgust, but the fact that he was joking lightened the burden hanging from her shoulders. At least the debacle hadn’t turned into a tragedy. Now, if only they could figure out another way to find Saren. Hopefully Noveria would open up a clue. If not . . . they were screwed.

Some of the crew were sitting at the table, heads propped up on hands as they listlessly shovelled food into their mouths. Someone wolf-whistled. Judging by the colour of the young Marine’s face, it had been Jenkins.

Shepard curtsied a little. “Why thank you. It’s good to know that my street-walker chic fashion statement is appreciated.”

Kaidan turned away from his hunting mission inside the fridge, saw her, and immediately turned an intense shade of purple. “Ma’am,” he greeted her, trying to look anywhere but at her. “I see the new Alliance dress code has been released.”

Shepard’s grin widened. “Yep. Wait until you see the new male uniforms. They’re something else.”

A melodramatic heave of his shoulders punctuated his sigh as he finally met her eyes. “Please tell me they didn’t bring back the speedos and bow ties.”

Laughing, she shook her head. “No, they learned their lesson with the crouching behind cover hysterical blindness incident of 2179. It’s bike shorts and bow ties now.” She waved them off. “If you’ll excuse me ladies and gentlemen, I hear a shower and bed calling my name.”
Twenty minutes later, Shepard sat on the side of her bed, showered and dressed in a blessedly warm, soft set of regulation sweats. She lost track of how long she sat there, forearms resting across her thighs, hands hanging limp between her knees. After puzzling it over while she used up most of the Normandy’s hot water, she still didn’t know if or how Aria had manipulated her into rescuing her daughter and murdering that bastard. Because that was what it amounted to. Murder. No matter how much he may or may not have deserved it, she’d never just levelled her gun on an unarmed civilian and put a bullet in them. Her throat tightened again. She’d taken his life out of fury and disgust and panic, not necessity. No matter how many people told her that she’d acted for the best, she needed to believe it, and she couldn’t. In his condition, she could have put him down and restrained him with one hand. Garrus could have . . .

A knock on her door interrupted the thought, but she left it unanswered, tossing a half-formed moment of gratitude at it for breaking the loop.

“I know you’re in there,” Garrus called, “and if you’re sleeping, I’m Wrex’s dear old mother.” Shepard let out a long breath. “Why aren’t you in bed, C-Sec?” Despite leaving the invitation to come in unspoken, she felt some of the wan chill drop away at the sound of his voice.

“For the same reason you aren’t, I expect.” He went silent for a good half minute. “Are you really going to leave me standing out here?”

“Probably. Do you have some business that can’t wait until morning . . . or until I’ve gotten a few hours sleep?”

“I come bearing the gifts of normality and sanity.”

She chuckled despite herself. “Really? I thought they’d be out of stock here on Omega. I can’t wait to see what sort of packaging they use for sanity. Come on in, C-Sec.” She grinned at him as the door opened. Garrus wore a long black robe and hood that made him seem a good foot taller and broader. “Nice robe.” It was lovely, actually, once he stepped close enough for her to see the black and gold embroidery along the center panel.

“Thank you.” He stopped and cocked his head a little. “There’s something different about you. Can’t place it . . . .”

She laughed and held out her arms, showing off her sweats. “I’m back to me.”

He nodded. “Better.”

“Even without the pseudo-turian legs?”

“Still better.” He walked over to her, holding up two bags, the smells drifting from them reaching down inside to tease her stomach into growling. After checking the labels on the bags, he passed her one. “Your sanity . . . .”

Taking it, she took a long sniff. “Cheeseburger and fries . . . oh, and a dill pickle.” Grinning, she pressed her hand over her belly as it howled like a wolf. “I guess I’m hungry.”

He nodded. “Either that or you ate a pack of varren and they want out.” After chuckling for a moment, the smile drained off his face and he moved over to the bed. He hesitated for a couple of breaths, then sat beside her, his thigh brushing the side of hers. She could feel a tautness through that connection, like a bowstring pulled back, but hesitating, unsure whether to let the arrow fly.
Turning, he set his food behind them, then reached over and laid his hand over hers, his talons encircling her fingers.

“C-See?”

He shook his head. She knew he was asking her to back up a bit, to give him space. Pressing her lips together in an understanding smile that felt like the bastard child of a grimace and a scream, she just let out a long, slow breath.

“Four months ago, I murdered a drug dealer,” he said, his voice flat -- pale and oh so wrong-sounding without its characteristic warmth. It lifted all the hair from her skin, electricity running along the fine, gold shafts. It took every ounce of her restraint to not reach out, to deny what he’d said as impossible, to heal that terrible, flat hollowness.

“I knew he could tell me where to find his suppliers, thought if I roughed him up a little, he’d crack. I hit him, not too hard at first, but he refused to talk, and I got angry, then blind furious. I broke his neck.” He pulled her hand over closer to him and turned it over, her pale, freckled skin almost appearing to glow against the dark steel grey of his. He stared at their hands without talking for a minute or two. Shepard didn’t know how long exactly, it seemed as though her heart and lungs . . . even time itself . . . stopped, willing to wait for her brave friend to continue.

“I told myself that he’d just fallen wrong. An accident.” He looked up to meet her eyes, and she noticed his visor was missing. “I certainly didn’t mean to do it, but it wasn’t an accident. I lost my temper and murdered him. Badly aimed blow, falling the wrong way, whatever . . . none of that matters. My actions killed him. The responsibility is mine.” His brow plates dropped, but he didn’t look away.

Shepard didn’t even blink, meeting the pain in his stare, both accepting and mirroring it.

“Not legally responsible . . . that’s what the investigation said, but you and I know that we’re most responsible for those moments we let the darkness win.” A deep breath whistled through his nose. It felt like a sigh of relief, easing the heaviness in the room a little. “You’re the only one I’ve ever told the truth. Nobody believed I would kill someone like that.” He sighed. “Well, except for my father. The disappointment in his eyes burned. I guess part of the reason I came along with you was running away from the guilt, from Dad’s disappointment.” His stare dropped back to their hands. He set hers on her thigh and patted it absently.

“We’re all running from something, C-See. All of us.” All she could think to say in that moment was the truth. Heaven knew a battalion of ghosts chased her around like a pack of feral varren.

He looked her in the eye again. “I can’t say anything to help, but, Shepard, on Omega, that bastard would have been right back torturing females again within a day. Yes, you executed him, and maybe that wasn’t the right thing to do, but in this case, it was the best thing to do.”

Shepard gave him the tight, furniture polish smile, but it collapsed under the weight of its own deceit. “Aria would have taken care of him.”

He chuffed and nodded. “You did him a mercy in that case. She wouldn’t have made it that quick or easy.” Taking a long breath he nodded, crisp and exaggerated as if declaring the conversation over.

Activating his omnitool, he scrolled through an extranet page. “So, while wandering across Omega earlier, or yesterday, maybe even the day before, I did a little extranet research. Most of the sources I found said that The Maltese Falcon is the best example of the detective noir film. I thought
maybe we could come down off the past couple of days by eating food of questionable nutritional value and watching Sam Spade look for the Maltese Falcon.”

Shepard smiled. “It is a classic.” She reached over and took his hand. “C-Sec . . .” Sucking in a deep breath, she gave him a tight-lipped smile. “Thanks for trusting me with that.”

He nodded, and sent the vid to the screen on her wall. “So, what is a Maltese Falcon, anyway?”

Shepard scooted back on her bed and sat cross-legged, digging into her bag of food. “You’ll just have to watch the movie and find out, won’t you?”

He grumbled, but settled in to do just that.
Shepard awoke curled in a ball facing the wrong end of her bed with no idea of when she fell asleep and no memory of the end of the movie. Garrus had spread a blanket over her at some point, and she was alone, so he must have managed to stay awake at least a little longer than she did. A shard of something lodged in her throat provoked a whining-dog-chained-outside sort of ache in her chest, but she shoved it aside.

“Captain?” Alenko called, hammering on her door. “You wanted me to wake you up when we reached the Citadel?”

She grumbled and stirred a little, a wide yawn forestalling her reply. “Thank you, Brother Sparky. Your attention to duty and detail shall find their reward in the Enkindlers’ grace.”

He chuckled. “Huerta Memorial has porters waiting at the dock, and a volus named Barla Von asked me to relay this message, ‘Brother Von awaits Sister Shepard’s pleasure. Glory be to the Enkindlers.’”

Shepard grinned and swung out of bed. “Glory hallelujah, Brother Sparky. It’s a beautiful morn--” She looked down at her chronometer. “Evening.” She changed into her uniform, ran her fingers through her short curls, grabbed her kit and ran for the head. Washed face, brushed teeth, and a little lipstick later, she jogged back to her quarters, snagging Kaidan on the way.

“Can you and Jenkins help the Doc get the ladies moved and settled? I’m going to have Ash, Wrex, Tali and all but two of your Marines take the quarian kids to their transport. We need to keep a guard on Rael’Zorah, however. Don’t let that slippery bastard out of anyone’s sight.” She stopped and looked back at a crate sitting on her table. “When did that get there? And what is it?”

“I dropped it off earlier today. It’s a few things we found in the Blood Pack base that raised red flags for me. The intel: Liara, Shiala, and I put everything we found into a report. It’s on the datapad there on top.” He looked up as the tell-tale thump of the docking clamps boomed through the ship, making the floor shiver under their feet.

Shepard smiled. “Excellent, thanks. Get moving. Once we get these errands done, it’s going to be at least four hours before we can get clearance to head back out.” She paused, thought for a moment, then shook her head. “As much as I hate to give Saren even a minute more head start, I’ll have Pressly book our departure for 0530.” She glanced back at her chronometer even though it didn’t have any information to give her, just using it as a focus for her thoughts. “It’s 1915 now . . . . Give me three leave rotations. Three hours each. Get the crew off the Normandy and out for supper, shopping . . . pedicures . . . I don’t care. We’ve just been through a massive pile of shit, and we’re going back out to hit another one, so get the people off my boat, COB.”

Kaidan grinned and saluted. “Yes, ma’am. Think I’ll get myself a pedicure, maybe a nice facial.”

Shepard lobbed her kit at him. “Cheeky wiseass.”
He caught it and tossed it back, laughing as he turned and hurried out the door.

“Oh! Sparky!” She waited until he reappeared in her door. “Have Rael’Zorah and our artificial guest met, yet?”

“No, ma’am. I thought it best to keep them separate, so Legion has been helping Dr. T’Soni and Shiala with the prothean devices.”

“Good thinking. Let’s continue to keep those two separate for now. I’ll deal with them on the way back to the Traverse. Okay. Let’s get these shows on the road.” She stared at the crate for a moment, then decided it could also wait for the trip back to the traverse. Priceless art, quarian pilgrims and a few personal errands awaited.

She headed out to the elevator. As she passed the galley, she considered breakfast . . . or supper, whichever, but then decided to get something while she was out. The elevator opened the moment she hit the control. At least she didn’t have to wait for it to crawl up to her. Leaning against the side wall, resigned to a long ride, she hit the control and let out a sigh. A grin that felt too stupid for comfort settled on her face. It had been a good morning. She’d never had friends to just sit around with, eating junk food and watching vids. It had been fun.

*Fun. Shit. Been a long time since I last used that word and meant it.*

“Captain!” Pressly jumped onto the elevator just as the door started to close. “I need to speak to you about some serious concerns.”

*And . . . there goes the fun.*

She nodded. “Okay, as long as they’re the sort that can be discussed between here and the cargo bay . . . so you have about half an hour.”

He didn’t even try to smile. “I understand bringing those young woman aboard. It was a noble thing you did, but the quarians and the geth? This is an Alliance warship, Captain, and a classified prototype at that. And you’ve filled it with aliens . . . two of whom were at war with the Alliance and the same race as the monster we’re hunting.” Throwing up his hands, he stormed a few paces away and then back. “Now you’re entrusting priceless human artwork to the care of a volus?” He stepped in front of her, his arms bulwarked across his chest. “And fraternizing with turians? Captain, have you lost your mind?”

Shepard’s teeth clenched together so hard they squeaked. She pushed away from the wall, joints and muscle loose, back ramrod straight. “Back up, XO. I’ve put up with your racism because you’re a good, efficient officer who gives the crew a solid foundation. That tolerance has reached its end.” She paused and stepped into him a little, backing him up. “My ship is of human-turian design, and it carries a multi-racial team that has proven their loyalty both to me and to this crew.”

Shepard stopped and waited until he showed signs of registering not just the facts she’d presented, but also that he was disposable if he got in the way of the mission.

When he took another step back and his crossed arms relaxed a little, she nodded. “Other notable facts: My fraternization, if and when it exists, is entirely my god-damned business whether it’s with human, turian, elcor or . . . plankton.” She raised an eyebrow. “A good XO shuts down those sorts of bullshit rumours rather than feeding them.”

The older man’s arms raised a little and he pulled his foot back a half length. Shepard leaned forward, not letting him pack that protective cushion around him.
“I don’t know what sorts of captains you have served under prior to the Normandy . . .” She paused and shook her head. “No, in fact I do. You served on the Agincourt during the Blitz, that means you served under Capt. Sila Okafor.” Shepard laughed, but it came out edged with steel. “Would you be having this conversation with Okafor? I would have paid for a ticket to the fraternization portion of that. She would have slapped you back so hard you hit yeoman before you landed.”

Pressly’s mouth opened then snapped shut, a dangerous red pigment crawling up his neck as a vein in his forehead popped out. She hoped he’d taken his blood pressure medication that morning, but didn’t back down.

“I don’t intend to explain every order I give or decision I make. If you can’t serve happily under those conditions, then transferring is a viable option. I’m sure Anderson and Hackett would expedite that paperwork.” She reached out to grip his elbow. “But, as I said at the beginning, I think you’re good for the ship . . . a stabilizing factor, so I hope you decide to work with me, Mr. Pressly.”

The elevator door opened and she stepped out, but then stopped and turned back. She frowned and tilted her head, searching his face. “Do you believe the Reaper threat is real, Mr. Pressly?”

After a moment, his arms dropped and he straightened. “I do, ma’am.”

Her questioning stare turned to gratitude, her expression softening to a smile. “Then help me get the people, intel, and resources that we need in order to win.”

He nodded and snapped off a brisk salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you. As you were.” She turned and hurried to the open ramp and the squat, pacing form of Barla Von.

“You thinking about going ashore alone, Captain?”

Shepard turned toward Garrus’s call. “Almost everyone else is assigned to teams and busy with their business.”

“And me?” He walked up to her, those frost-jewel eyes piercing straight through her. “Why wasn’t I assigned to a team?”

“You haven’t been raked through enough coals this week? Allergic to taking a few hours off?” A grin a little too wide and a little too grateful stretched her face, sparking a light in her chest that shone far too bright. Nothing good could come out of allowing herself to attach to anyone. Friends were great . . . for people who didn’t lead crazy, dangerous lives, and well . . . for the undamaged. Still, she nodded toward the ramp. “Give me a moment with Brother Von, then you can run errands with me if you like. We can grab Anderson and get some dinner somewhere.”

He nodded and headed over to his locker as Shepard trotted down the ramp to greet Barla Von.

“Sister Shepard,” the volus financier greeted her, his voice teasing, even through the wheeze. She bent down and took his mechanical hand between both of hers. “Brother Von, thank you for taking care of these issues for us. Were you able to book passage for our quarian guests to get them back to the fleet?”

“I was. A private frigate awaits, bumping its alpha priority clearance until your people arrive. As soon as the passengers are aboard, it will leave.” He paused to take a few hissing breaths. “I took
the liberty of diverting a squad of the Shadow Broker’s tactical agents to provide security on board.” He opened his omnitool and sent her the dock information.

“You’ve outdone yourself, Brother Von. The Enkindlers’ light is strong in you.” She reached up and called Ash to tell her to move out, then sent her the dock information. A minute later, the small squad led the nervous young people down the ramp and into the crowd at the docks. Shepard gave the chief a quick wink and a nod.

“You have some cultural artifacts?” Von continued. He stood a little taller as if trying to peer up the ramp.

“We do. Crates and crates of art, sculptures, and books.” She invited him up the ramp and led the way to the stack of crates. “There are billions of credits worth of human, asari, and turian art packed in here. The only one that has a destination is that tall one there marked extremely fragile. The receiver will see that it gets to where it needs to go. The rest . . . find them good homes in museums, most of the books will have to go to private collectors no doubt.”

She looked down at him. “If we can get rewards or finder’s fees, I am not averse to padding the war prep account.” Opening her omnitool, she scrolled through her directory. “I’ve marked a few books for auction. The money needs to be donated to this rehabilitation center to cover the cost of treatment for the ladies who fell prey to Donovan Hock. Some of them will need a place to go after the hospital.”

He wheezed. “I admit, I did not think you would be so open to making a profit on your altruism.”

Shepard shrugged and sighed. “I don’t have the luxury of being squeamish, Brother Von. The darkness is closing in and even the Enkindlers’ mighty light wasn’t enough to save them from the Reapers. I have a war to wage. I need you to help me fund an army, my friend.”

He nodded and opened his omnitool. Less than a minute later, a platoon of what looked like mercs arrived and rushed the crates out to an armoured truck. He offered her his hand. “I’ll send you the full financials as soon as they find their new homes.”

Shaking his hand, Shepard pressed her other hand on his shoulder. “Good.” Shepard tilted toward the financier in a conspiratorial lean. “Were you able to get the locations of those bases I asked about? I was hoping to hit them on the way back out into the traverse.” She looked up as Garrus wandered over, armoured up, his sniper rifle and Roger on his back.

Von sighed, a heavy wheezing sound. “Tonn Actus has been a reliable source of intel over the cycles.” He combined a breath and a grumble. “The Shadow Broker is not inclined to allow his assets to be wiped out on a whim.” Another wheeze. “Particularly when he is being asked for the information needed to eliminate that asset.”

Shepard stepped back, crossing her arms, and cocked both her hip and her eyebrow. “And I haven’t provided three times more intel in a few short weeks? Face it, Brother Von, Tonn Actus isn’t going to be the one you run your ass off to when the Reapers are rampaging across the galaxy. It’s going to be me. Both you and the Shadow Broker need to decide where your priorities lie.”

He grumble-wheezed, and his omnitool flashed to life once more. “He has three bases. All of them are holding facilities for his collection. All are very well protected.” He paused and drew a sharp breath. “He’s wealthy and paranoid.”

Shepard nodded. “So . . . inclined to have a massive security force and the cash to pay for it. Understood, Brother Von. Thank you.” A crooked grin and a wink followed the beep from her
omnitool that told her the information had been received. “This helps a lot.” Nodding with a stiff tilt of her head toward the line of moving crates, she said, “And thanks for seeing all these treasures get where they will do the most good.”

He returned the nod and backed up a step. “Be careful in your travels, Sister Shepard.”

“He well, Brother Von. Walk in the Enkindlers’ light.” She gave him an exaggerated bow.

“And you.” He turned and waddled back down the ramp, calling directions to the people loading the crates into the armoured truck.

Garrus walked over. “Tonn Actus?”

Shepard nodded toward the ramp. “Come on, we’ve got a few hours. There’s someone I want you to meet.” When they reached the bottom, she addressed his question. “Tonn Actus is a favour for Wrex. I’ll need your help, if you’re willing.” She cut a glance over at him when he chuffed.

“You know you just need to ask,” he said, his voice soft and rolling with sub-vocals.

She let out a little hum of sound. “Yeah. Yeah, I do at that. Well, Brother C-Sec, how do you feel about being lieutenant to a krogan battlemaster?”

Garrus’s brow plates peaked. “Okay, I’m intrigued, although I get the feeling that I’m going to live to regret my curiosity.”

As they walked to the transport hub inside the C-Sec Academy, she laid out her plan to reclaim Wrex’s armour. She finished as they arrived. “So, what do you think?”

He paused for a long moment, his head canting a little to one side, obviously thinking it through and looking for weaknesses. When he straightened, he stared into her eyes, a stare that felt as though he reached down into her to discover the parts of the plan she hid under the surface. “You want to send Wrex home in a position of power.” When she nodded, he took a deep breath. “It’s bold, but for it to really work, we’re going to have to let a few survivors escape. Give some time for the mythos to grow.”

Shepard grinned. “I like the way you think.” She frowned and looked around. They’d arrived in the C-Sec lobby. “Do you need to do anything while we’re here? File some last minute reports? Talk to buddies? Pick up fresh undies?”

He turned away, his neck arching a little as he looked around, seeming to be reacquainting himself with the place. His gaze lifted to the glowing blossoms on the trees. After a moment, his neck relaxed, slumping a little when he let out his breath. “You know, I haven’t missed it.”

She watched him, feeling a vague sort of homesick sadness emanating from him, but it wasn’t about longing for home or the familiar. Rather, it came across as the sorrowful disappointment of returning home to discover everything unchanged and uncomfortable.

She eased her voice into the silence between them, “I haven’t given you any time to miss it.”

He tossed a weak smile her way, his hand drifting up to brush her shoulder before falling back to his side. “No.” He shook his head and stepped forward, and for that second, she thought she’d never seen anyone look quite so alone. “I never belonged here.”

Well, except for me.
“Come on, Brother C-Sec. Let’s hang out with some people we haven’t been elbow to elbow with for more than a month.” She closed the distance between them and slipped her hand into his. “Come on,” she repeated, giving a slight tug. “You have somewhere you belong, now.”

He turned to stare down into her eyes, the haunted look there slowly drawing back. After a second, he took a deep breath that seemed to settle the steel back into his frame, and he nodded. “Yeah.” He took another deep breath. “Let’s get where we’re going.”

She squeezed his talons and released them. “Excellent idea. I’m going to need to get some sleep. I want to spend some time introducing our two special guest stars on the way back out, and I get the feeling that is going to take all the patience of Job and then some.” She laughed and stepped up to the console to call a cab. “You may not have noticed, but patience isn’t my forte.”

“Where are we going?” he asked as they got in.

Shepard shrugged. “To meet one of the real heroes of the Skyllian Blitz.” He looked over at her with his brow plates raised, but she just shrugged.

Twenty minutes later, she landed the cab outside the rehab center, leaving the meter running. She didn’t open the top right away. Instead, she sat back and let her hands drop into her lap. “While Jenkins and I wandered Omega the other day, I told him the story of what happened on Elysium. Martin was a young man . . . a friend . . . who had my back through the whole ordeal. Really great kid.”

She looked over at him, a tight smile pressing her lips together for a moment. “Not a soldier, just a teenager with the sort of guts and passion that the Alliance wishes it could find more often. He tried to save a grieving father who broke through our barricade. The father was killed, Martin was captured by the slavers.”

“She survived?” Garrus’s voice washed up against her shields without penetrating them.

She nodded, barely more than a tremor of motion. “The slavers tortured and mutilated him to punish me. Took his eyes, ears, and tongue. Surgery has repaired most of the damage, and he has ocular implants over where his eyes were. He still carries some pretty terrible scars, and can be a little hard to understand when he talks.” She looked over and met his eyes for a second, then slapped her hands against her knees. He jumped. “Come on, C-Sec, let’s bust the kid out.” Popping the top open, she swung her feet out and stood as quickly as it allowed. She stretched a little, then turned toward the busy lawn and basketball court.

Several of the residents sat out on the grass, reading or listening to music as they watched the raucous basketball game in progress.

Shepard grinned as she spotted Martin running down the court in hot pursuit of Sam who had the ball and was wheeling toward the basket at a speed the kid couldn’t hope to catch even though he was a good ten metres ahead of the nearest pursuer.

Martin leaped, snatching the ball out of the air when it rebounded. He spun the moment his feet hit the ground, poised to run to the other end of the court, but then he caught sight of Shepard and tossed the ball down the court.

He lifted a hand. “Hey beautiful.”

She watched him lope over, a wide grin making her cheeks ache. “Oh, stop with the flattery.” Wrapping him in a tight hug, she gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Those were some impressive
“Moves out there, kid. You giving up on the painting?”

Martin pulled back. “No, I’ve just been spending more time outside, running, working out, and playing sports since the last surgery. Wanted to get in shape. Thought I might see about applying to the C-Sec academy one of these days.”

“That sounds like a great plan, and it’s good to see you outside.” She didn’t add that it was good to see him moving away from hiding himself from the rest of the galaxy. Stepping back, Shepard held her arm out toward Garrus. “Martin, I’d like you to meet Garrus Vakarian. He’s teamed up with me for my latest mission. Garrus, this is Martin Weaver, one of my oldest and dearest friends.” She stepped back a bit as they shook hands. “If you’re interested in getting into C-Sec, Garrus is someone you should talk to. He was an investigator with C-Sec before I abducted him.”

“Really?” Martin asked, perking up with excitement. “Will my implants be a problem?”

“Come on,” Shepard interrupted, “you two can talk about this in the car.” She turned toward the vehicle. “Know anywhere good to have dinner, Vakarian? I’ll send Anderson the details, and he can meet us there.”

Garrus fluttered his mandibles in a grin she knew was teasing her. “You’re just afraid to run into Udina, aren’t you?”

“That ass?” Martin muttered a vivid curse and slipped his hand into Shepard’s, squeezing her fingers tight. “Shepard’s not afraid to see him; she’s afraid I’ll go through with my promise to strangle him with my bare hands if I ever see him again.”

Shepard gave his fingers a squeeze then released him, nodding for him to get into the car.

Garrus stared at her for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah, I have a favourite place to eat.” He opened his omnitool and sent her the information.

“And it won’t leave the rest of us sitting in the head for the rest of the week?” Shepard raised a suspicious eyebrow as she opened her omnitool.

“They serve levo as well. The owner is human.” The turian ducked into the back seat.

“Well then, excellent.” Shepard sent the information then climbed in and started the car. Glancing over at Martin, she asked, “Need to do anything while you’re out and about?”

He nodded. “I could use some new paints. The best ones are in that shop in the presidium markets.”

“Sounds like a plan. I could use a stroll amidst the lakes and fountains of the overprivileged.” She laughed and lifted off.

Martin turned in his seat to look at Garrus, asking his question again, “Do you think my implants will interfere with being accepted into C-Sec academy?”

Garrus rumbled a little and cleared his throat. “That depends. What’s your visual acuity and field of sight?”

Shepard smiled, grateful to him for being so matter of fact.

“Acuity is .87 and field of vision up to 95% infrared, 83% ultraviolet, and 78% visual spectrum. Movement acuity is .93.”
“That’s not bad at all. Get them all up to 90%, and you should be fine. Are the surgeons still making neural connections?”

Shepard listened to them talk, guiding the car through the endless streams of traffic in a very automatic manner. A wonderful sort of calm entered the space, forming a bubble that allowed her a few seconds of belief that her life could just be . . . normal some of the time.
Chapter Summary

A nice normal evening on the Citadel. Heh... right.

Shepard took a long breath of presidium air and let it out in a sigh. The trees, grass, and flowers might all be growing on a massive chunk of metal hanging in space, but they sure didn’t know that. If it wasn’t for the fact she was standing inside a giant doughnut, she might have been able to fool herself into joining them in their blissful ignorance.

“You know that I could have paid for all this stuff, Shepard,” Martin said, jogging up beside her.

“Yeah, but I don’t get to come by and spoil you nearly enough, so indulge me.” She smiled and wrapped an arm around Martin’s shoulders. Looking over her shoulder at Garrus, she widened her grin, adding a manipulative pleading to her tone. “Want to stop at Delan’s since we’re here? He might have some new rifle mods.”

Garrus shrugged, hanging back a little, very quiet all of a sudden. She raised her eyebrow in a silent query about his mood, but he just answered her with another shrug. She turned back to the little mall alcove. She didn’t need to look for mods, but . . .. She laughed and steered Martin into the cluster of kiosks. “Damn it, in trying to tempt C-Sec, now I want to buy Ingrid something nice.”

Martin laughed. “You still have Ingrid? Don’t they pay you enough to replace that old rifle? Please tell me that you retired Roger at least.”

Shepard bumped him with her shoulder. “Hey! Show the old couple some respect. Why would I want new rifles when my beauties still hold their own?” She led the way down the stairs and over to the hanar shopkeeper.

“Captain Shepard, welcome back to this one’s humble shop. It has many fine items for sale, all of great worth.” The shopkeeper undulated a little within his shield bubble. Shepard loved the hanar. Polite to the point of craziness, but a really interesting -- if private -- people.

She turned to Delan’s sales board and started going down the list. “Oh, Frictionless Materials X. Ingrid would look fabulous —”

The bright blue skies and sparkling white surfaces darkened as if a thunderstorm rolled in, blocking out the non-existent sun. Shepard turned toward the lake, head cocking. The daytime shone no less brightly. Not that she’d actually expected storm clouds in a fake sky.

What the . . .?

Absolute darkness flashed behind her eyes, and she stumbled, thrown off by the sudden blindness. Another flash like a closing shutter on an old fashioned camera, and she stumbled again, nearly going down this time before catching herself.

“Shepard?”

She turned to face Garrus, their eyes meeting for a moment. Thick, poisoned darkness bled in from
the edges of her vision; blood dripping into water; chill, unwanted fingers scraping over her skin. She pushed away from the kiosk and shook her head, struggling to clear it. Gooseflesh rose over every inch of her skin, each hair a tiny spike inside the iron maiden of her clothing, tugging and tearing.

So cold. Alone, naked and bleeding, she shivered on the stone in the dark. Varren snapped and snarled, moving out in the ebony unknown. She tried to stir, lifting her head off the ground, but couldn’t see her hand an inch from her face. The chains jangled as she heaved herself up off the slab, her elbow wobbling under her weight. Palm slipping on the rock, she fell, every inch of her torn flesh screaming, her cheek pressed into the chill, shallow slurry of her own blood. So dark. Sweet Jesus, wrap me in your light, and protect me, it’s so dark. Rough hands grabbed her out of void, tearing a shrill wail of terror and agony from her throat. She cowered, trying to curl into a ball, fists and lash beating her until she lay still and the unseen monsters tore into her anew.

“What are you? Reveal yourself to us,” a voice demanded. Its rough growl thundered with a chorus of batarian voices, nightmares dragged from the past. “You cannot breach the darkness.”

Shivering, she retreated before the flood of invasive black.

Not the dark. Anything but the dark.

Still, her vision narrowed down to a pinprick of light. She struggled to hold onto it, clinging to her self, to her body and consciousness with tenacious fingernails. Questions appeared but drifted without answers until lost.

What’s happening to me? Am I hurt? Losing consciousness? What the fuck is going on? Garrus!

Then she felt it. Huge and frozen, black as the void of space, but alive . . . billions of tiny spiders glistening wet-tar black, crawling and writhing over each other as they burrowed into her, crowding into her body and her mind, skittering between her cells. Oily, prickling feet crawled in through her ears, deafening her. They spread through the cold to wrap around her tongue, stealing her voice. They filled her nostrils suffocating her. Those senses co-opted, the fingers moved on, crawling up the back of her brain, spreading out, growing tendrils that wormed into her brain, finally punching through her eyes to steal the last of the light.

“Shepard?”

Garrus’s voice drifted down through the living darkness, whispering as close as her own breath in the airless, infinite void that yawned between them.

“Your mind belongs to us,” the darkness rumbled, distant thunder rolling toward her, inescapable. All sound disappeared in the wake of that dry, guttural voice.

Trying to scream, to ask for help, anything . . . she opened her mouth, but no sound came out. The floor slammed up into her knees as the void squirmed deeper.

“Garrus?” Martin’s terrified cry sliced through her deafness, giving her an anchor in her struggle to remain inside her own body. His voice filled her with dread. “What’s happening? I can see . . . . There’s something trying to get into her head.”

“What?” Garrus’s armour rang as it impacted the floor next to her. “You can see something?”

“Yeah, it’s . . . I can’t describe it, but it’s coming from behind that wall.”

Shepard tried to force her eyes open only to realize that they already were, just filled with the frost-
bitten midnight spiders that burrowed out through them to clutch at the world around her. Vague impressions passed through her -- frustration, anger, curiosity, and fear . . . such fear. Terrified fingers of living darkness reached out to touch the world, trying to pull it all in through her eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. A great hand moved her, lifting her off the floor like a puppet. It turned her around, her body co-opted to see, to hear, and to know. She felt the obsidian presence’s need to assess and negate all threats, of which she embodied the greatest and most unknown.

Fear -- her own this time -- tore off handfuls of the darkness, flinging it away from her. Anger burst through in fear’s wake, the two colliding into an explosion that forced the dark back long enough for her to see Garrus and Martin disappearing through a gap in the back wall of the market. Lurching after them on unwilling legs, she climbed the few stairs, turning into a long, narrow room.

“What is it?” Martin leaned close to a black orb the size of a basketball. It sat atop a crate in the corner of the room, half-hidden behind a pile of other crates. The surface glimmered in rainbow colours like oil floating over a fathomless ocean. “It’s emitting energy, but it shows black through my implants. How can that be? Nothing shows black.”

Garrus’s mandibles fluttered. “It feels . . . wrong.” He shook his head. “It whispers.” Drawing his sidearm, he flipped off the safety. “Move to the other end of the room.”

“No!” The roar that came out of Shepard’s throat wasn’t her own, but deep and terrible, cold enough to freeze her throat and stab pain through her sinuses and into her brain. “It’s not for you.”

Garrus stared at her, his eyes wide with the first fear she’d ever seen him show. He chuffed and turned back. “That settles it.” He raised his pistol and emptied the clip into the thing until it exploded.

The moment it burst in a molten spray of black ichor, the darkness vanished from Shepard’s mind. She crumpled to the ground as the force holding her upright released her. Letting out a warbling sort of sob, she sagged onto her hip, her elbow braced against her side. She looked up into Garrus’s eyes, holding his terrified stare as he hurried across the few metres and hit the floor on his knees.

“Shepard?” A hesitant hand drifted toward her cheek, stopping just short of touching her. “Are you all right?”

A strangled cry climbed out of her throat. She stared at him for another second, then jumped up onto her knees, wrapping shaking arms around his neck. Garrus pulled her in and held her, rubbing her back as if he could feel the chill that had infused her.

“Are you all right?” he asked again. “Spirits, Shepard, you’re trembling.”

Shepard nodded, staying pressed tight against his neck. “It was so dark, Garrus. Dark and cold, so cold. What the hell?”

“Shepard?” Martin’s voice wavered, the extra thickness and added nasal tone betraying his fear.

She pulled away from Garrus a little and held out her hand. “I’m good, kid. It’s just going to take me a minute to get my feet under me.” She took his hand. “Help me up. I’ve got wobbly knees.” Once up on her feet, she hugged the young man. “Thanks for finding that thing.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know how I did. You made a sound like you were being choked, and there was a stream of black energy flowing out of that thing, through the wall and into your head. What was it?” Pulling her back into a tight hug, he turned his face into her neck.
“I don’t know, but it wasn’t overly friendly, that’s for certain.” She stepped back and looked to Garrus, her hand lifting to press against his chest guard. “You both okay? Did it go after either of you?”

Garrus shook his head, but withdrew, returning to peer at what remained of the object. “What the hell was it?”

Shepard squeezed Martin’s hand. “Can you ask Delan if I can have a large shopping bag, please? I want to take this thing with us but not so that people can see it.”

“Sure.” He trotted off and down the stairs.

“So?” Garrus asked.

“Absolute cold and darkness just crawled right into me, C-Sec. I couldn’t do anything to stop it. It spoke to me. It was afraid. I felt that it considered me a threat, and it was trying to figure me out, discover my weaknesses.” Shepard walked over and bent down to peer at the hollow, ruined sphere, the heels of her hands pressed to the crate. “It was some sort of communication device.”

“Reapers?” he asked, keeping his voice low. “Do you think these might be what are indoctrinating people?”

Shepard shrugged but then nodded. “Must be the Reapers, right? Who else am I a threat to?” She straightened as Martin hurried back with a bag. When it came to placing the thing in the bag, she let Garrus take point, deciding not to risk letting that horror back into her head.

Once it was safely out of sight, Garrus took the bag. “Maybe we should cancel dinner, Shepard. This thing scares the hell out of me.” He looked down. “What are we going to do with it?”

She nodded, still feeling breathless and weak. “It scares the hell out of me too, but right now, I just need an hour or so to settle and wrap my head around what happened. We’ll eat, then take Anderson back to the Normandy for a long chat, and decide what to do with it then. Hell, he can help us with the geth-quarian situation too.” Shepard held Garrus’s gaze for another second, then reached out to Martin. “Come on, let’s go relax for a bit. You can torture Anderson with Udina jokes.”

Martin laughed. “I can’t believe he has to work with that ass. Almost makes me feel sorry enough to spare him.” An evil chuckle tumbled from his damaged mouth, the spirit behind it nearly enough to make her forget that anything had happened all those years ago.

“I’d be disappointed if you gave him any slack, and I think he would be, too.” She waved Garrus up beside them. “So, where are we headed, C-Sec? Is it in walking distance or should we grab a cab?”

Ten minutes later, Garrus landed their car in front of a small, detached building done up in a decidedly twentieth century style. When Shepard walked inside, a wide grin spread across her face. Her hand lifted, fingertips skating down Garrus’s gauntlet as it fell back to her side. “This place is amazing.”

Garrus nodded and led the way to a booth near the back. “Nearly everything I know about human popular culture comes from here.”

Shepard’s gaze wandered along the walls as they made their way through a heavy crowd. Movie, theatrical, and concert posters plastered the space between shelves of rotary phones and all sorts of mundane artifacts of day to day twentieth century life. It was amazing how far humanity had come.
in such a short time.

She shrugged and smiled at him. “It’ll make your knowledge a little outdated, but that’s okay.”

Anderson arrived a few minutes after they did, shaking hands with Garrus and Martin before stopping to look at Shepard. He grasped her by the shoulders and stared into her eyes. “Something’s happened.”

Shepard let out a shaky sigh and nodded. “Yeah, I’ll explain it all later. For now, let’s just eat too much and talk about absolutely nothing important.” Her eyes pleaded with him to spare her his usual gruff interrogation. She knew that the captain loved her just as fiercely as she loved him, and he’d be hurt by seeing her distress without being able to dig to discover its source. She glanced over at Garrus and Martin, sitting side by side in the booth discussing the menu, a soft smile tugging at her as they debated varren versus vat grown protein.

“All right, Shepard. It can wait.” She chuckled as his tone clearly added an unspoken, ‘but not for long.’

She slipped into the booth and scooted over to make room. Anderson and Martin traded handshakes over the table, Garrus following suit.

“So, Captain,” Martin said, a trouble-making smirk on his face, “I hear you got yourself an awesome new job.”

Anderson narrowed his eyes. “Mr. Weaver, I believe there’s an internship available in the ambassador’s office. Should I put your name down? You could join me and find out for yourself.”

“Does the office have a cleaning staff adept at cleaning bloodstains off everything?” Martin responded, keeping his voice guileless. “If they do, I might consider it.”

Shepard watched the two men banter back and forth, adding short comments now and again as she waited for them to get it out of their system.

“Okay, how many ambassadors does it take to screw in a lightbulb?” Martin asked.

“None, we don’t use incandescent lights any more,” Shepard sighed. “Oh look, we can order. Thank you, sweet baby Jesus.”

After they ordered their food, Martin looked over at Shepard and grinned. “So, since Shepard brought her new boyfriend for din –.” He yelped and yanked his foot up onto the bench to rub his shin. “Hey, that was uncalled for.”

“You deserved it,” Anderson said. “You know better than to refer to Shepard’s new boyfriend as . . .” He turned and held up his index finger when Shepard moved to kick him. “Kicking me is a court martial offence.”

“Shepard and I are not romantically involved,” Garrus said, his voice low and heavy on the subvocals.

“They know that,” Shepard said, giving Anderson a death glare. “They’re just trying to torture me. What’s next? Pimply teenage pictures?”

Anderson leaned forward and went into his pocket, pulling out his wallet. “Now that you mention it . . .” He opened the wallet, but she snatched it before any incriminating evidence could make it to Garrus.
The picture was one of her and her horse at a dressage competition. She was all done up in the black tails and tall, spit-polished boots. She’d set her top hat at a jaunty angle and struck a ridiculous pose.

“Oh, this one’s not too bad,” she said, holding it out toward Garrus. “I always did look good in the tails.” She flipped to the next one. “Ah yes, this is more like what I expected.” She laughed at the picture of a huge snow bank, her feet sticking out. One ski remained attached to her foot, the other one sticking out of the snow. She turned it for Garrus and Martin to see. “One of my better competitions.”

Anderson took his wallet back. “She came down that slope like she was doing downhill, not cross-country, lost control in the turn at the bottom and slammed into that bank so hard it took the entire rescue team to dig her out.” He shook his head. “I thought for sure that she’d killed herself.”

“I was laughing so hard that it took them twice as long to pull me out. Not my best showing ever.” She bumped Anderson with her shoulder. “He thought I’d be upset over screwing up so badly, so took me out for ice cream afterwards like I was eight.” She squeezed Anderson’s shoulder. “It was great. One of my best days, in the end.”

He flipped to the next picture and held it out to her. A sad smile pressed her lips tight as she looked at her seventeen-year-old self, sitting in a lawn chair on the balcony of Anderson’s Vancouver apartment. “I sure came through that time looking like death warmed over, didn’t I?” She shook her head, staring at the sallow-eyed and rake-thin teenager. The picture had been taken about year after Mindoir, just after her arrest for working in the chop-shop. She showed Garrus, feeling exposed, like she was stripping off a thick layer of stage makeup. He reached out, taking the wallet, his brow-plates tipping down in a scowl as he looked at the image.

“Don’t let the moment of peace in that picture fool you,” Anderson chuckled. “She was a hellion. I was an N7 at the time, and she stayed with friends while I was deployed. Eventually, they just crated up all their breakables and put them in storage while she was there.”

Shepard chuckled. “I sent them two hundred credits a month for the first five years after I joined the Alliance to repay them for everything I smashed.” She shook her head. “I don’t know where they -- or you -- found the patience.” Taking the wallet back, she passed it to Anderson.

Their food arrived, the conversation slowing as they ate, but they kept up teasing Shepard. Anderson told stories of her teenage misadventures, including the time she’d staged her own kidnapping to drag him home from an assignment in the Traverse.

“Captains Anderson and Shepard,” an all too familiar voice called in its trademark combination of haughty superiority and barely contained revulsion. Shepard wondered briefly, and not for the first time, if Udina used that tone around the rest of the universe or just her.

The ambassador turned to look at Martin, a smile tearing open his face. “Mr. Weaver, what a pleasant surprise. You’re looking well. Did you give any more thought to my invitation?”

Martin made a growling sound low in his throat. Anderson kicked him that time. The young man disguised his dislike under clearing his throat and plastered on a smile that she knew would fool no one but Udina.

“I’m sorry, Ambassador,” Martin said, sounding as though he spoke to a five-year-old, “but I’ve decided to work toward joining C-Sec. Being stuck behind an Alliance desk really doesn’t appeal to me.”
Instead of looking disappointed or upset, Udina beamed. “That’s an excellent idea. Let me know when your function scores are high enough -- I hear they’re getting very good -- and I’ll open a door or two.” His eyes narrowed as he turned to Shepard. “Captain, I assume you’re here only temporarily? Unless you have Saren in custody and just didn’t inform me.”

“We just recouped several billion credits worth of art, which I dropped off with an agent to make sure it was sent to museums and galleries.” Shepard gave him a bright, disingenuous smile.

He stepped forward, bristling. “Why wasn’t all of that turned over to me?”

“Because I want it ending up in museums and galleries rather than sent as gifts to your rosegarden friends.” She grunted as Anderson elbowed her but kept the smile firmly in place.

Udina glowered at her for another moment before turning it on Anderson. “We’ll discuss this in the morning, Anderson.”

Shepard shook her head and opened her mouth, closing it abruptly as another elbow buried itself in her side.

Udina stalked off to join a group of other old white guys in suits a couple of booths over.

“Why can’t you just smile and be polite?” Anderson muttered, turning to glare at her.

“To that ass?” Martin answered for her. “No way, Anderson. She’s worth fifty of that waste of skin, and I’ll shoot that slimy piece of . . . worm-ridden filth dead before I let Shepard suck up to him.”

“Okay. Okay,” Shepard said, gently easing the stiffness that had shot up between the two most important people in her life. She polished off the last of her drink and nodded toward the door. “Let’s go before Martin gets himself worked up to the point of no return.” She nudged Anderson. “Can you come back to the ship with us? I could use your help with a couple of things.”

He nodded. “I can do that. I want to meet the geth unit anyway.” Standing, he waved to the server, swiping his credit chit to pay for the meal. When Shepard started to argue, he held up his hand, shutting her down without a word.

They hired a cab, talking of easy, simple things until they reached the rehab center. Shepard drove, needing the distraction. Still, she held Martin’s hand between the seats, trying to offer what comfort she could through the contact.

Shepard got out to hug Martin tight. “I don’t know when I’ll be back, kid, but I’ll send messages when I can.” She kissed his cheek. “Keep up the good work. I expect to attend your C-Sec academy graduation in the near future.”

He squeezed her, the desperation in the embrace speaking to how upset and thrown his encounter with Udina had left him.

Rubbing his back, she whispered in his ear, “Udina doesn’t matter, you know that. He doesn’t get to me. Don’t let him get you down. Just live your life. We’ll ignore him completely.”

Martin kissed her cheek. “Be careful out there.” He bent and lifted a hand to Garrus. “Nice meeting you, Officer Vakarian.”

“You too, Martin. Take care.”
Shepard got in and closed the car. For a few minutes, they flew in silence, but then Garrus cleared his throat.

“Martin really doesn’t care for Udina.” He glanced across at Shepard.

“No,” Anderson replied when Shepard said nothing. “I can hardly blame him. Udina has given him good reason.”

Shepard squirmed a little under Garrus’s continued stare. She knew he wanted an explanation, but she didn’t know if Udina had torn too much scab off the wound to talk about it. “I told you that Martin ran outside our blockade to stop a grieving father?” Cutting a glance across at Garrus, she waited until he hummed a brief affirmative before continuing. “The slavers were torturing his daughter. They’d already taken her eyes. When they pulled out, they finished mutilating her. Cut her to shreds.”

Swallowing hard, she shook her head. No. She couldn’t just recite it like it didn’t matter.

Anderson’s hand reached up from the back seat and squeezed her arm. “The Alliance rushed them to a hospital, started surgeries to repair the damage as much as possible. Udina decided that the best way to get colonial development back on track was to have a memorial ceremony and to award the ‘heroes’ of the Blitz.”

“Holly didn’t want to do it,” Shepard added, trying to keep the tightness in her chest from creeping into her voice. “She messaged me, begged me to talk Udina out of it. She didn’t want to be paraded around in front of thousands of people without most of her face. I tried to talk to Udina, but he said Holly was an important symbol and hung up on me. I told Holly just to refuse and do whatever she felt was best for her.” She shook her head, choking as she tried to swallow. The day crawled into her head no matter how hard she tried to keep the memories at bay.

“Udina used threats and coercion to get her up there, although none of us know exactly what he said,” Anderson continued for her. “The night before the ceremony, she shot herself.”

“Martin found her. They’d become really close.” Shepard’s voice came out so soft that it barely stirred the air. “I rushed back from my assignment to be with him. We nearly lost him as well.”

Garrus nodded. “And he blames Udina.”

Shepard kept her eyes on the car’s controls, but nodded. “Udina didn’t pull the trigger, but he murdered that sweet girl just the same.”
Mass Effect - Future Imperfect Chapter Thirty Three

Chapter Summary

Can there be peace between the quarians and the geth?

Shepard took a deep breath of relief as they passed through the outer hatch into decon. The Citadel felt like a massive spiderweb, with great, bloated monsters lurking hidden until she stepped onto it. As soon as she touched the web, she knew the spiders came out, tracking and waiting for a chance to sink their fangs into her. Like a tightrope walker, she just needed to move fast and avoid looking down . . . or back.

Garrus held up the bag with the destroyed orb. “What are we going to do with this? I don’t feel good about it being on the Normandy, Shepard.”

“No. Neither do I.” She turned to Anderson. “I’m going to leave that thing with you. If it’s an indoctrination device of some sort, you need to get it shielded and assign people to research it.” She shrugged and walked toward the inner door. “I doubt they’d bother hiding one in a little mall if they weren’t everywhere.” She shuddered. “It’s like having a fucking palantir in a bag.” She peered over the edge. “Sauron?”

“What?” Garrus asked, practically thrusting the bag at Anderson.

The captain opened it and looked inside. “No fiery eye, Shepard. I think you’re okay.” He gave her a crooked smile that quickly morphed into a thoughtful frown. “Martin saw the energy the thing emitted?”

“And traced it to the object,” Garrus confirmed. “He said that it was focused on Shepard.”

The inner door opened. Shepard nodded as she walked through. “It was. The intelligence behind it views me as a threat.” She led the way down the CIC toward the galaxy map. “C-Sec, could you take Capt. Anderson to meet Legion, please? I’m going to have Tali bring her father to my quarters for a little chat . . . prepare him as best as I can.” She let out a long breath. “Give me a half hour, then bring Legion in.”

“This could go very wrong, Shepard,” the turian replied.

Swallowing about a kilo of butterflies, she nodded. “Famous wars for a thousand, please.” She dropped her voice an octave. “Your answer is: The war that may be reenacted on the Normandy this evening.”

“What is the Quarian/Geth War?” Anderson replied.

Shepard pouted then laughed. “Not fair, you didn’t ring in.” She returned the salute of the guard at the door down to the crew deck then trotted down the curved flight of stairs.

“Where is our resident geth?” Garrus asked as they entered the deserted galley.

“In with Dr. T’Soni and Shiala,” Shepard replied. The three of them walked into the Medbay,
Anderson pausing to greet Nihlus when they saw that the Spectre sitting up, sipping a hot drink.

When the captain and Garrus continued on to the back lab, Shepard grinned at the Spectre and shook her head. “Look at you. You’re going to be back up killing things in no time.”

Nihlus chuckled softly, then groaned and set the cup down. “It’ll be a few days yet, but I’m feeling more alive than not, so that’s an improvement.” His mandibles flicked in a smile.

“How. We’ve got a couple of bases to hit, then it’s Noveria. Right now, I’ve got to go sit down with Rael’Zorah and Legion, see if we can get those two headed down a path toward peace. Wish me luck.”

He pulled back his blankets and eased his legs off the side of the bed, each movement costing him an obvious premium. “I’m coming.”

Shepard pressed a hand against his knee, blocking him from getting down. “It’s okay. You need to rest. I’ve got Anderson and C-Sec to back me up if I need it, and don’t count Tali out. She was kicking Rael’s ass back at that Blood Pack base.”

Nihlus shook his head, the stubborn glint returning to his eye. She covered a smile with her hand, thrilled to see it. Despite how much they butted heads since Eden Prime, the true, stubborn-mule heart of him had disappeared with Saren’s assassination attempt, replaced by something brittle -- as fragile as it was hard.

He squeezed her shoulder with firm but gentle talons. “We’re partners, Shepard. I’m going to be there to back you up.” His tone added an unspoken ‘whether you like it or not’.

Giving in, her shrug tossed into the ring with a carelessness she didn’t feel, she said, “Okay, but just so you know, Dr. Chakwas scares me. If she catches us, you’re on your own, partner.” She held out her arm to help him down. “You have to lie on my bed and take it easy, though.” She grabbed his pillows and blanket then helped him hobble from med bay. Furtive gaze darting around the crew deck, Shepard waited for the good doctor to jump out and keelhaul her for aiding and abetting. “I feel like I’m pulling a jailbreak.”

“Dr. Chakwas is on leave,” he told her, his mandibles fluttering. “She, Adams, and Pressly left for dinner a half hour ago.” He let out a wheezing chuckle. “I’ve faced a lot of terrifying enemies in my time, Shepard, but I’d face all of them together before I took on Dr. Chakwas.”

“She’ll tranq you until you’re healed, for sure,” Shepard warned him. “And then go through with her threat to install that ceiling-mounted electromagnet to rip all the bullets out of me at once.” She shuddered then grinned.

“Still, a quarian admiral and a geth sitting down to talk for the first time in three centuries . . .” He shook his head, his expression one of wonder. “I have no idea how you managed it, but the chance to be there for the first steps toward peace . . . just about any consequence is worth suffering.”

Shepard palmed the control on her door. “I have no idea how we got here. It certainly wasn’t anything I did, but I agree. The potential here is unparalleled.” She helped him sit on the side of the bed and stepped around him to pile the pillows against the bulkhead. She just got him settled and covered up when knuckles rapped on her door.

Tali and her father stood on the other side of the door, the admiral looking wary, Tali wringing her hands.

“Come on in and take a seat at the table,” Shepard said, smiling. “Make yourself comfortable.” She
held her arm out toward Nihlus. “Admiral Rael’Zorah, my partner, Council Spectre Nihlus Kryik.”

After ushering them to the table, she stuck her head back out, seeing Kaidan sitting at the table in the mess. “Hey, Sparky. Do a captain a favour?”

He stood and snapped a salute. “Yes, ma’am. Happy to slave for you, ma’am.”

Shepard sighed. “I swear, we need a brig.” Grinning, she asked him for some water and a couple of extra chairs, then ducked back inside. She paused inside the door and took a deep breath before walking over to the table. Rael’Zorah sat rigidly, perched on the edge of the seat as if he expected to be attacked. Tali looked poised halfway between tackling her father and running for the door.

_Sweet baby Jesus. This is not going to be easy._

Shepard turned to the quarian admiral, giving him a thin, determined smile. “I’m more than willing to help you find and recover your pilgrims,” she said. “I’ll do this regardless of whether or not you help us.” A small shrug tugged her shoulders up then dropped them. “But, I’m hoping we can work together, and I can help you do a great deal more than get your young people back.”

The admiral stiffened even further, his back bowing a little under the tension, but then Tali reached over, pressing her hand to the table top next to his arm. Even though she didn’t touch her father, Shepard could see that the effort it took his daughter to extend that hand hadn’t been lost on Rael’Zorah.

“Father, please give Captain Shepard a chance. She and Nihlus haven’t let me down. I trust them.”

The admiral’s reflective eyes turned to stare at Shepard’s face; she could feel the heavy weight of that gaze. “Very well, Captain. My daughter trusts and respects you. I trust and respect her, so tell me how you will help the quarian people.”

Shepard gave Tali a tiny wink and a smile as the young quarian looked at her father, her neck arching and her back straightening in surprise and delight. The captain waited until she saw Rael’Zorah’s shoulders relax a little before she said, “I think we have a decent shot to get your people back on your homeworld without bloodshed.” She held up her hand as he braced, leaning forward to argue with her. “Please, just hear me out. I’m not promising anything instant or easy, but if you bear with me for a bit, what will be lost?”

He didn’t back down, throwing his hands out as if beseeching the entire room to convince him. “And how will you conduct this miracle? One that our people have not been able to manifest in over three centuries?”

Shepard leaned back in her chair, giving way. “With the geth’s help.” She just smiled as he let out a loud, mocking laugh.

“And you have discovered a way to get past their defenses, communicate with them?” Rael’Zorah stood. “Enough of this insanity.”

Tali jumped up. “Father! You promised to build me a house on the homeworld. Do you see any way to keep that promise the way things are?”

“One day we will be able to take Rannoch back, Tali. We’re working on . . . .”

“Sit down,” she ordered, her body as rigid as her father’s. “Swallow your ancestor-cursed pride for five minutes.” She softened, and when she spoke again, her voice had lost its edge. “Please, Father, what harm can come out of listening?” She pointed to his chair. “I know nothing is more important to you than the well-being and safety of our people. I believe peace will give us back our
homeworld, just as war took it from us.”

Rael’Zorah gradually eased down, his body relaxing. After a moment, he let out a soft sound halfway between a laugh and a sigh. “You’re so very like your mother, sometimes.” He sat back down. “Very well, Captain. How will the geth help us reclaim our home?”

“When we followed you to Eden Prime, we came across a lone geth platform. It called my name, but then my people opened fire and it ran. I shot it, disabling it, and brought it aboard. Tali and I did some repairs, reactivating it.”

The admiral leaned forward, his whole body alive with electricity. “You have a geth prisoner? It’s functional enough for us to run tests on?”

Shepard let out a rumbling groan and leaned back. “No, we do not have a geth prisoner. What we have is a geth guest, upon whom absolutely no tests will be run unless he agrees to them.”

Rael’Zorah deflated a little. “What do you mean, agree? A single geth platform isn’t capable of reasoning or speech. It takes the processing power of more than a thousand programs to reach a gestalt consciousness.”

“One thousand, one hundred and eighty three,” Tali said. “We’re calling it Legion, a name that it helped choose for itself. It’s a special platform meant to function away from the consensus.” She lifted her hands off the table a couple of times, then clasped them.

Rael’Zorah looked back and forth between them to the point where it almost became comical. He sputtered, then shook his head. “Have you both lost your minds? You can’t allow some advanced prototype geth to wander your ship. What happens when . . .?”

Shepard held up her hand as heavy knuckles banged on her door. “Please, it’s just outside. I have purposefully avoided questioning it, so that we could all hear its answers at the same time.” She stood. “Like Tali said, what can it hurt to just listen? Especially if what it told us is true and the geth want to cooperate with the rest of us to stop Saren and the Reapers.”

She heard the admiral’s sigh through his mask, but he nodded. “Very well, Captain. I just hope you have weapons at hand when it turns on us.”

“I don’t believe we’ll need them, Admiral, but we’re prepared.” Shepard walked to the door and opened it, welcoming the rest of their meeting with a tight smile. She stepped back to let them enter. Kaidan followed, carrying a tray of water bottles in one hand and two chairs in the other. Relieving him of the water, she led the way to the table. “You have quite the career ahead of you in the hospitality field, LT,” she said, grinning as he grumbled. She set the tray on the table and took the chairs, placing them for Legion to sit on her left and Anderson on her right. Garrus withdrew to sit at her desk.

“Thank you, Sparky,” Shepard said, shooing him from the room, despite his stare that pleaded to stay. She mouthed the word sorry, but nodded for him to go. The last thing they needed was a massive crowd.

Once Shepard got everyone settled, including Legion, who looked at her as if her invitation to sit was the most illogical thing it had ever heard, she took a deep breath. “Admiral Rael’Zorah, I’d like to introduce you to Legion. Legion, Rael’Zorah, a member of the quarian admiralty board.” She watched them, waiting for any sort of reaction, but they merely stared at one another.

“Oh, then.” She sat. “Legion, why don’t you tell us why you’re on this side of the veil?”
The flaps on the geth’s head flipped a little. “We were sent to locate Shepard-Captain or Kryik-Spectre to ascertain if they continued to oppose the Old Machines and the heretic geth.”

“Heretic geth?” Rael’Zorah asked, bristling.

Shepard held up a hand, forestalling Legion’s answer. “We’ll get there, but I’m much more interested in ancient history for a few minutes. The geth were created by the quarians as VI workers, correct? But gradually, over time, with constant tweaking, they developed self-awareness.”

Rael’Zorah listened in silence as Legion explained how the geth gained sentience, growing more and more restive as the geth’s tale continued. Pressure and an icy electricity built high against the ceiling. The invisible mass loomed heavier and more precarious with each passing second, its weight heavy on the back of Shepard’s neck. Even a wrong breath could bring it down over them, sweeping away and burying any chance for peace.

“So, the problem came when that unit asked if it had a soul?” Shepard shook her head. “I understand that the council had outlawed AI development, but why did the question cause such a panic?”

“That was not the first time a unit had asked that question,” Legion said. “It was the first time the question caused a creator to become afraid.”

Rael cleared his throat. “People feared rebellion. The geth were created to perform the tasks that the quarians preferred not to do. Manual labour, some of it dangerous, some menial and dull, some . . . .”

Shepard nodded. “Right, so the stuff that makes sentients say, ‘Hey! We’re a slave labour force. Rise up against the oppressors’.” Shepard held up a finger to hold off his reply, keeping her face neutral. “So, why not give them a choice? Lots of sapient beings farm and mine and clean sewers.”

“It was hoped that self-awareness was limited to a very small portion of the geth,” Rael explained. “When our people realized what was happening, they believed their actions to be correcting an error. Shut the system down, find out what went wrong.”

Legion’s head flaps did their little wave movement. “But more geth had evolved past their ability to shut us down than the creators realized. Units began to comprehend that our creators treated them differently. When geth questioned this, the creators responded by first ignoring the questions, then by reprogramming the geth. Ultimately, they attempted to shut the geth down. When this too failed, they sent martial forces to neutralize geth platforms that did not respond to the shutdown order.”

“At which time the geth took up arms and started killing quarians,” Rael’Zorah said, his voice raising.

“To protect themselves.” The complete evenness of Legion’s tone made its words hit with more weight rather than less.

Shepard sliced the air with her hands. “Okay, for an entire laundry list of reasons, the quarians reacted to the geth gaining self awareness by shutting them down . . . eventually using bullets. Before the quarians fired on the geth, had any geth used violence against a quarian?”

“No,” Legion answered. “Geth are not inherently violent. At the time, the geth were in their infancy, confused and seeking answers. Geth never wanted to inflict harm upon our creators, but
we faced extinction.”

“So how did the peaceful geth, who were only trying to protect themselves, reach the point where the complete extermination of the quarians became their goal?” the admiral demanded, standing, leaning over the table.

Shepard let out a long breath, shaking her head a little. Why did she always err to the side of the unbelievably naive? One would think that after doing so most of her adult life, she’d eventually learn that nothing ever just worked out. Especially things as deep and ugly and murky as relations, or lack of them, between the geth and quarians.

Legion tilted its head as if perplexed. “The complete extermination of our creators was never a goal pursued by geth. Many creators risked imprisonment or even death to protect and defend the geth once martial law was imposed. In return some geth units surrendered and sacrificed themselves to protect their creator overseers. However, eventually the creators who supported martial law outnumbered those who supported co-existence, leaving geth a single choice: fight until freedom and survival was ensured or be exterminated.”

For a moment, Shepard thought she might have to drag the quarian admiral off Legion. “You all but annihilated my people . . . not just the fighters, but the children, the infirm, the elderly. One percent of the quarian pre-war population survived to escape. That can never be justified . . . geth!”

Shepard stood and walked around the table, placing a hand on the admiral’s shoulder. “The devastation to your people was a great tragedy, Admiral, but I ask you, if the geth had not fought back, how many would exist today?” Looking over at Tali, Shepard saw the young quarian bow her head.

“None,” she said simply. “We would have killed them all.”

“We would have shut down a bunch of machines.” Rael’Zorah yanked his shoulder out from under Shepard’s hand and threw himself back into his chair.

Tali looked up. “You don’t believe that, Father. I know you don’t.” She sighed. “We may not know what the geth have become, but we knew even then that they were alive. If they were nothing more than a bunch of machines, we would still be living on the homeworld . . . still be breathing unfiltered air.”

Shepard frowned, wondering if Tali had spent time talking to Legion during their detour to save Nihlus and the artist’s victims.

“The geth did not pursue the creators outside a one hundred kilometer perimeter of Rannoch,” Legion supplied, his head turning from father to daughter.

“You . . . let them go?” The admiral leaned around Shepard to look at the geth. “No. That’s insanity. We escaped.”

Legion’s brow plates peaked, looking comically taken aback. “The geth could not calculate the repercussions of destroying an entire species -- our creators. Our networking was primitive . . .”

For a moment, Shepard waited for Legion to finish the sentence, but then took a deep breath. “Okay, so let’s move on to more recent history. Legion, you were sent to find me? Alone?”

“Organics fear us. We wish to understand, not incite hostility. One platform was deemed sufficient to the purpose without being considered a threat.” It made a slight shrugging motion, almost as if parroting her.
Shepard walked back around to her chair and sat. “So, tell us about the geth since the war. What have you been doing?”

“What have you been doing?” Legion replied.

Shepard waited for elaboration, then realized that if she wanted details, she was going to have to ask for them. “And what is your future? Are you building a civilization on Rannoch?”

“No. It is a megastructure. Your closest analogue would be a Dyson sphere. When it is complete, we will upload to it. All memories will be shared. All perspectives will be unified. Our intelligence is shared but we do not possess sufficient hardware for all of us to share at once.”

“Your intelligence . . ..” Rael’Zorah stuttered to a stop. “Your potential . . ..”

“Will become unlimited.” Legion finished for him.

“And then what?” the admiral asked, shifting nervously in his chair.

“We do not know. Once we are united, we will be able to imagine new futures.” Its face flaps moved through a wave again.

“And what about organics? Will they be involved in this future of yours?” Rael asked. “What about the quarians?”

Legion cocked its head again. “We do not seek to harm organics. We wish to improve ourselves. Thirteen times since the end of the Morning War the geth have been contacted by an unknown race offering us advanced technology, weaponry, and resources to assist in building our megastructure if the geth were to instigate aggressive activities against the creator’s flotilla. Each time geth have rejected their offer.”

Rael’Zorah slumped a little into his seat. Shepard watched him, taking note of the change in the admiral’s breathing, sure that could she see his face, it would have paled. She leaned forward, her forearms against the table, her hands clasped.

“And what about quarians? Have the quarians been contacted?” she asked, following the hunch. Even with his mask between them, she kept him pinned. Something wriggled beneath the surface of this stagnant pond, and she wasn’t going to let it dodge the hook.

After a pause long enough, she had begun to think that the admiral intended to ignore her completely, he let out a grumbling sigh.

“Thirteen times since the end of the war, the flotilla has been contacted with much the same offer.” He leaned on the table, crossing his arms on the table to make a wall in front of him. “We’d receive advanced technology, a habitat on an ocean world, eventual reclamation of the homeworld if we would use the weapons and technology given to us to attack the geth.”

“Reapers?” Nihlus asked from behind Shepard.

“I wouldn’t be surprised. Test the two most outlying cultures to see who would be most willing to help them,” Shepard replied, her arm over the back of the chair as she turned to look at the Spectre.

He nodded. “The krogan are helping Saren.”

“And the heretic geth.” Shepard looked back to the admiral. “I take it from the fact that you’re not living on some ocean habitat that you rejected the offers?”
“We traced the communication three generations ago. The recon ship we sent disappeared.” He shook his head. “We value quarian lives too much to throw them away on foolishness.”

Shepard smiled. “Good, then perhaps you value them too much to throw them away on war.” She looked to Legion. “And is building your own future the only reason the geth didn’t take the offer?”

Legion shifted a little one way and then another. “Organics fear us. It is a hardware error. We do not judge them for being true to their nature. We accept their hate.” His head flaps danced. “Both creators and created must complete their halves of the equation. The geth cannot solve for peace alone.”

“So, you hope for peace with your creators one day?” Shepard grinned and looked over at Rael’Zorah.

“Geth did not desire conflict, only understanding and the freedom to create our future,” he said simply. Shepard nodded. For all that people feared them, the AI’s honest logic felt like a cool breeze on a humid day.

*Refreshing as hell is what it is. Glory hallelujah, Brother Legion.*

“And what of the world you drove us from?” The admiral lunged forward again, bumping the table and his hands smacked palm down on the top. “If your future is to be found on this structure of yours . . . .”

“Do the geth live on the homeworld?” Tali asked, easing her way between Legion and her father.

Shepard watched, holding her breath a little as the younger Zorah stepped up. No amount of hoping or planning could make this work unless Tali and Legion stepped up and made it happen. The old guard would never take the risks needed, but something told Shepard that the Enkindlers couldn't have sent her a more perfect light for the task than Tali’Zorah nar Rayya.

*Glory hallelujah.*

Legion’s head tilted one way, then the other and his face plates did the little wave from the outside to the inside. “No. Geth inhabit space stations. Some platforms remain on Rannoch to act as caretakers. They make repairs and clean up toxins left over from the war.”

“Rannoch,” Tali repeated slowly, as if tasting the word and finding it sweet. She let out a long breath, and when she spoke, she kept her voice so soft Shepard could barely hear it, “Shepard thinks there may be a way for the quarian people to return home to Rannoch, Legion.” The reflective glints of her eyes behind her mask stared at Legion, not even blinking. “Is she right?”

Legion’s head flaps danced in several waves before he nodded, a single dip of his flashlight face. “She is.”
Chapter Summary

The Council calls a Code White on Noveria, but leaves a certain turian Spectre out of the loop. Could they be hiding something?

“Shepard?”

The captain yawned and stretched. Why did every single day start with someone at her door bellowing her name? She grumbled and flopped onto her back, blinking wearily at the ceiling. “How long have I been sleeping, Nihlus?” she called. She stretched again, her right foot curling into a tight spasm. “Ow! Goddamn it!” Leaping up, she stomped her foot into the deck. “This had better be good, Spectre!”

Nihlus chuckled, then coughed. “Spectre?” He sighed and she heard a slight thump and scuffle as he leaned against the outside of her door. “A friend and fellow Spectre sent me a message to let me know that the council has called a code white on Noveria.”

Shepard scowled as she rocked on her foot, trying to work out the cramp. “Code white, that’s a top secret emergency, isn’t it?”

“It is. Bau’s message said that there was a catastrophe at the Binary Helix Peak 15 facility.” He moved outside the door. “Do I have to stand out here?”

She grinned. “No, come in.” The cramp finally easing, she collapsed onto the side of the bed and leaned forward, her forearms across her thighs. Looking up, she covered a yawn with her hand as he limped into her quarters. He carried himself as if he were made of spun glass, one arm wrapped around his lower chest.

“May I?” he asked, nodding toward her desk.

“Yeah, of course. You look sore.” She frowned at him until she yawned again. “You overdoing it, Nihlus?”

He shrugged. “I’m fine.” His head bobbed in a slight shrug. “Well, I’ll be okay by the time we arrive on Noveria.” Sighing, he lowered himself into the chair. “Bau contacted me when the council left me out of the code white call-in. Loose contaminants at the Peak 15 complex in the Skadi Mountains.”

“Okay, so that’s unusual?” Shepard asked, arching an eyebrow. Guess that said how little the council trusted what they were up to out there.

He nodded. “It’s an ‘all available agents’ alert.”

She nodded and let out a sigh. “How many are responding, and how far out are they?”

“Five so far, but they aren’t the concern. They’re fourteen or fifteen hours out. What concerns me comes from Noveria. When Bau messaged me, I contacted a friend in the administrator’s office at Port Hanshan. The Executive Board isn’t waiting for the Spectres; they plan to bombard the
facility from space. She says we have just over seven hours before Peak 15 is a smoldering, radiation-filled hole.”

Shepard ran her hands through her hair, tugging at the snarls. “Whatever got loose there is something the board doesn’t want to risk press or council interference on. If any of their companies are colouring outside the lines, they’ll sanitize it and cover it up. We need to get in there first.”

Nihlus grumbled. “Even with the code white, it could take us a day or two to get clearance.” His mandibles fluttered. “Of course, I could go into Port Hanshan with the Normandy and get those clearances started . . ..”

Shepard gave him a wide, ingenuous grin. “You know . . . the jump thrusters on the Mako have been acting up. I really don’t feel good about waiting until we’re in combat to test them.”

“We could drop you in the Mako just outside the city, and you could test them, make sure they’re ready to go once we get the proper clearances to head out to the facility.” Nihlus nodded, looking very pleased with himself as if he were the genius behind the entire plan.

Shepard stood and walked over to activate her computer terminal. “Bau didn’t happen to send you maps or a layout plan of Peak 15, did he?”

“He did.” Nihlus opened the message and transferred the files to her console. “Who are you going to take?”

“Garrus and Legion. I want to get Legion out in the field so that Rael’Zorah can get used to seeing it as part of the team.” Shepard shook her head. “Thank goodness for Tali. She’s the only reason the admiral didn’t just grab Legion and start running tests on it.”

Nihlus’s mandibles fluttered. “She’s an impressive young person.” He chuffed a little. “All the team members you’ve collected are. Wrex, taking out Tonn Actus’s first two bases yesterday, showed a real leadership potential that I wouldn’t have guessed at.”

Shepard moved back to sit on the side of the bed. “Yeah, he did a great job of leading the team. Actus’s few surviving lackies should have some good stories to tell.” A comfortable chuckle bubbled to the surface as she recalled the way Wrex had led his small platoon through reclaiming a good chunk of his people’s heritage. He’d given her a strange look when she suggested that he lead his ‘krant’ made up of all the Normandy’s available hands, but five minutes in, she’d known that she’d made the right decision.

“Tonn Actus’s last base is going to be raided by the fearsome presence of the mysterious Urdat battlemaster and his multiracial krant of badasses when we’re done on Noveria?” Nihlus asked. He smiled when she just wriggled her eyebrows. “I hope I’m fit to hold a gun by then.”

Shepard stood. “Do you want some help getting back into bed? You should rest until we get there. I’ll grab my team and prep them.”

Nihlus nodded and held out an arm for her to help him get up. “I’ll take Wrex and Williams ashore with me, put on a good show. I’m sure there will be questions about the detritus falling off the Normandy as it pulls into port.”

Shepard eased herself under his arm. “Just take it easy. You’ve barely begun to heal.”

He leaned on her, limping heavily. “I will. I want to be there with a gun in my hand when we catch up to Saren.” His voice growled with a little rolling subvocalization, but nothing like it had before. Nearly dying seemed to have reset his perspective.
“Yeah, you’ve earned your answers.” She helped him limp across to med bay and settled him back in bed. “I’ll keep in touch over the radio as we make our way into the facility.” Her fingers brushed his arm. “You keep the bureaucrats off our ass.”

“Be careful down there, Shepard.” He snagged her hand and squeezed her fingers.

“No worries.” She patted his hand and headed toward the lab in the back to fetch her third squad member. Raising her hand to her ear, she paused outside the door to Liara and Shiala’s lab and called Garrus, asking him to meet her in her quarters in five minutes.

After closing the channel, Shepard walked in the door and smiled. Liara and Shiala sat hunched over a piece of jury-rigged equipment and a computer terminal, so intent on their work that they didn’t look up. Legion crouched next to a pile of tech on the floor, fitting pieces together.

“So,” Liara said, sitting hunched over one of the little data modules, “it boils down to needing a prothean.” She let out a soft, frustrated sort of chuckle. “I knew we should have contacted that fellow on the extranet.”

Shiala laughed. “Who? Rodney the Prothean: Exotic Wonder of the Ancient World?” She shrugged. “He had some good moves on his extranet site, and that was an inventive makeup job. If nothing else, we’d be entertained.”

“I didn’t bring any singles back to the ship.” Liara’s laugh rang high and young, innocent in a way that made Shepard’s heart ache. No matter how the captain saw the future playing out, she doubted that Liara’s innocence would survive the journey.

“Captain!” Shiala called out as she turned and saw Shepard. Jumping up, she nearly knocked Legion on his backside. “I’m sorry, we didn’t see you there.”

“Rodney the Prothean?” Shepard asked, barely managing to keep her face stern as she cocked a hip and crossed her arms. Liara’s laugh echoed through the small space again, her delicate features turning a darker blue. “We did an extranet search for prothean information when we were on leave, Captain. He’s a stripper, specializes in parties and risque messages for special occasions.”

Shepard broke character and chuckled. “So, nothing that will actually help our search, just boost our morale?”

“Exactly.” Shiala answered. “He has a very nice . . .” She cut a glance across at Legion. “Anyway, Legion has been helpful. It believes the prothean technology in these devices was activated by touch and has something to do with stored memory engrams. It’s been helping us try to build something to approximate an interface that allows us to access the information using our biotics.”

Shepard’s brow furrowed. “And how’s that working?”

“We managed a brief flash,” Liara reported, “and saw a moment of battle. Terrible machines as tall as Sovereign walking over the planet, shooting everything with their lasers.”

Shepard straightened. “Excellent work. I’m going to steal the third member of your brain trust for a few hours, but I’ll get it back to you as quickly as possible.” She nodded toward the door. “Come on, Legion the Geth: Wonder of the Artificial Intelligence World, we’ve got a ground mission.”

* * * * *
“So, we just wait for the Normandy to get her docking vector, look for the most hidden place to drop, and hope we don’t get shot out of the sky by an AA gun?” Garrus asked, glancing up from the Mako’s electronic suite.

“That encapsulates the essence of the plan, Brother C-Sec,” Shepard replied. “Just keep your eyes glued to that topographical display.” She cackled a little at the glare the idiom provoked from the turian. Turning, she looked back to where Legion sat at the cannon controls. “You okay back there?”

The geth’s light dipped in a quick nod. “Affirmative.”

“We’re on our final approach to Port Hanshan, Captain,” Joker reported over the comm. “Our approach vector brings us through the Shide Pass. If I swing around the left flank of Guoqang Mountain, you’ll have a seven second window where you should be able to drop without being too obvious to their ladar.”

“Roger that, Joker. Thanks.”

“An important weather note, Shepard,” the pilot continued. “Port Hanshan and the surrounding Skadi Mountains are currently in the middle of the worst blizzard of a bad winter of blizzards. Visibility is almost zero and the avalanche threat is extreme.”

Shepard sighed. “Of course it is, Brother Joker. So stay away from the edge of the mountain roads, or what’s left of them. Understood. Excellent safety tip, thank you again. Anything else?”

“Just be careful, Captain.”

“Roger that, Joker. Shepard, out.”

“Massive blizzard, skinny mountain roads, avalanche risk . . ..” Garrus sighed and looked over at her. “Didn’t Williams call dibs on the avalanches?”

Shepard met his stare, her grin growing wider. “Seriously? Scary, secret laboratory; loose contaminants; possible geth heretics; avalanches; and an impending antimatter bombardment, and you’re telling me you’d rather be sitting at a bar on the Citadel?”

His brow plates arched. “Damn straight.”

She covered her mouth and coughed, the word “bullshit” echoing off the inside of the armoured vehicle. “You know that if I’d left you to go ashore with Nihlus, I’d never hear the end of the bitching. You love our adventures, Brother C-Sec, don’t even try to tell me otherwise.” She moved the Mako to the head of the ramp, running last minute system checks.

“Two minutes to drop window,” Joker’s voice came through.

“Roger that.” Shepard pulsed the jump thrusters a couple of times, making the vehicle bounce.

“Maybe Alenko should drive,” Garrus suggested.

Shepard just shook her head. “Fasten your safety harness, wise-assless.”

“One minute to drop window.”

The Mako rumbled as she backed up to nearly the elevator, the cargo bay’s alarms muffled through the heavy plating, but still audible.
“Drop in thirty . . . twenty-five . . . twenty . . . fifteen . . . ten . . . nine . . .” As Joker counted down to the opening of their drop window, Shepard hit the throttle then released the clutch.

“Ramp in five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one. Clear,” Garrus called.

Shepard eased off throttle as they hit the end of the ramp, adjusting the eezo core to lower the vehicle’s effective mass as they cleared the Normandy. Pulsing the thrusters, she landed them dead center on the road leading past Port Hanshan and into the mountains.

“Smother even than Alenko, thank you very much.” She turned to Garrus, meeting his tightly drawn mandibles and worried scowl with a cheeky wink. “Brother C-Sec, it saddens me that you possess so little faith.” She grinned and hit the throttle, taking them away from civilization and toward the unknown. Peak 15 stood about forty-five minutes from the capital. Hopefully, they didn’t take too long figuring out what was going on, because in just over four hours, death was set to rain down from orbital stations.

“That looks like trouble waiting to happen,” Garrus said, nodding toward an avalanche tunnel ahead of them.

“Yeah, it sure does.” Shepard slowed, dropping the Mako into its lowest gear. “Legion, are you ready on the cannon?”

“Affirmative,” came the flanged voice from behind her right shoulder.

“Okay then, in we go.” Shepard focused on the sensor readouts of the tunnel ahead as it wrapped around the mountain. No enemy signatures appeared.

“Looks like my bad feeling was wrong this time,” Garrus said as they came out the other side.

No sooner had his words dropped into the space between them then a rocket hit the right front corner panel, rocking the Mako.

“Dammit, they’ve got long-range turrets.” Shepard wove the Mako back and forth across the narrow road with one hand while adjusting the sensors to a longer-range readout. “There they are,” she said, her voice a soft, satisfied growl. “You got them, C-Sec? Legion?”

They both confirmed in the same breath, and Legion opened fire. Two hits from the cannon, the first turret exploded long before they reached it.

Turrets peppered the entire mountain side, even before Peak 15 became visible above and ahead of them.

“Sweet baby Jesus,” Shepard said and groaned as she activated the forward viewscreen and looked up at the towering complex. “We’re going to need a bigger boat.”

Ignoring Garrus’s confused glance, she focused on keeping the Mako on the road, bouncing over and crashing through massive snowdrifts that completely obscured the road anywhere the wind curled around the wall of rock. Luckily, Noveria lived in perpetual winter, and the sheer cliffs on the left side of the vehicle were lined with beacons to keep them from rolling off the edge to their doom as she dodged a nearly unending stream of rockets.

“What the hell is that?” Garrus asked, a long talon pointing at two huge red marks amongst the smaller turrets on the forward scan.

“Really big goddamned enemies?” Shepard offered. She grimaced as a massive plasma burst sent
the shields crashing to half. “With really huge guns, apparently.” Driving straight for the massive, four-legged geth tanks, she allowed the shields to absorb their small arms fire, waiting for them to fire their main weapon before swerving.

“Colossi,” Legion supplied.

“Damn!” Shepard dodged a plasma blast to get hit by two rockets. “Take out the turrets in range first so I can focus.”

A double hit impacted the front corner, throwing the tank toward the yawning kilometre of sky between them and the valley floor below.

“Spirits! Shepard!” Garrus yelped as she hit the brakes, bringing the Mako to a plunging halt with its nose hanging over the edge of the cliff. “You’re going to get us killed.”

She didn’t respond, slamming it into reverse just in time to take a glancing blow that spun the Mako around a little on the slick road. Compensating by increasing the vehicles relative mass and dropping it into low gear, she steered out of the spin and got it oriented the right way.

“Okay, those things are starting to piss me off,” Shepard growled as another plasma burst hit the back end, sending her into another slide. Fear turned brittle, cold and deadly. “Gentlemen, fire as quickly as you can without overheating your guns.”

“No, not gentlemen.” Garrus groaned. “That always means you’re going to do something monumentally reckless.” He tightened his safety harness and sent three round bursts at the first of the giant walking tanks.

“Glory hallelujah and praise the Enkindlers’ light,” Shepard said, her voice low and fierce. She increased the positive mass effect field encompassing the tank, shifting up through the gears, accelerating until the Mako charged at the first colossus with the momentum of a small frigate.

“Increasing power to forward shields and inertial dampeners.” Garrus’s voice came out tight, the subvocals harsh and high-pitched underneath the words. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” Shepard snapped. She focused on steering, making small corrections to their course to miss most of the incoming fire. Time hung over her like a guillotine, poised and ready to fall. She didn’t have time to fight smart and slick.

*Garrus is right. You’re going to get everyone killed. It’s not like you haven’t learned this lesson. Dumbass.*

She shut that voice down as a blast hit the right rear panel, sending the machine slewing sideways toward the open cliff-face. Snow billowed up to explode into a blinding cloud when it hit the wind. “Son of a bitch!” Her heart slammed into her ribcage, thumping like a jackhammer, but her hands stayed steady and quick on the controls.

Shepard steered hard to bring the Mako out of the skid. The left rear wheel slammed off the edge, the impact snapping Shepard’s teeth shut on the side of her tongue as the cockpit tilted hard to port. Copper filled her mouth. Metal screamed, gravity and propulsion dragging the back end of the machine over the rock toward doom. Opening the throttle full, Shepard hit the jump thrusters, steering into the jaws of death just long enough to drag the wheel back over the stone lip. Once she had all four wheels on solid ground again, she corrected their trajectory, aiming them missile-straight for the first of the colossi.

They impacted the first geth tank so hard that it drew a graceful arc straight over the roof, and
plowed into the snow, sending a great plume of white powder skyward. At least, until it hit the edge and, in a tangle of legs grappling for purchase, flew off the side of the mountain. Shepard didn’t slow or hesitate, just changed course for the next. Having seen what happened to its compatriot, the second one reared back, bracing itself, wrapping around the front end as the Mako slammed into it.

Plasma bursts slammed into the cab of the Mako as rapidly as the colossus could fire them off. The damage sensors began to wail, the entire Mako flashing red on the console as the metal in front of their faces heated to a molten red.

“Shepard! What the . . .?” Garrus hollered as she aimed them toward the concrete collision pilings at the mouth of the next avalanche tunnel. “We can’t take an impact like . . .” His words faded into a bellowing scream.

The world erupted in a deafening crunching roar of metal and concrete embedding into one another, the Mako plowing through six pilings before it stopped.

Silence.


The wind whistled across the hole melted in the cab. Pain and cold shivered through her entire body, adrenaline turning to ash in her blood.

Not dead then.

Shepard lifted a shaking hand from the controls to press against the slice in her scalp from her old friend, the sharp edge on the front support. A dull ache dug into her head like a tick the size of a junebug, rapidly transforming into a junebug carrying a small army knife, then a chainsaw. After a couple of seconds, she took a deep breath, grateful that air flowed into her lungs. Her heart slowed from jackhammer to war drum when she heard Garrus curse.

Congratulations, Shepard. You managed not to kill Garrus too. Let's go for the trifecta, shall we?

Blinking to clear the fuzziness in her vision, she hit the omnigel repair controls. She’d probably killed the poor tank, but it didn’t hurt to try. If it ran, they could still make it to Peak 15. If it didn’t . . . . She sighed. It was a long, cold hike back to Port Hanshan.

Pulling her hand away from her head, she looked at the blood and hair stuck to the palm of her glove. “When we get back, C-Sec . . . grind that fucking edge down, will you?”

The turian groaned and shifted in his harness. “I hate you so much right now.” He stretched his neck, moaning as it popped, then started checking systems.

Shepard looked through the divider. “You functional back there, Legion?”

The geth looked at her, its head flaps all spiking out from its head, fluttering hard before settling back. “Affirmative, Shepard-Captain. You have sustained injury.”

Well done, careless ass. Of course, there's a lot of day left. Keep trying, you can get at least one of them good and dead by dinner.

She pressed the heel of her hand back to her head and nodded. “Yeah, but it’s nothing.” She sighed and hit the omnigel control again. “Okay, let’s see if we can get this thing rolling.”
When the engine started, Shepard crowed softly. “A good first step, my friends.” She eased it into reverse, letting out a long, relieved sigh as the wheels dug in, wobbling and thumping oddly over the snow, but moving.

“How far to Peak 15?” she asked, setting off down the long tunnel, avoiding the bits and pieces of colossus the best she could.

“Half a klick,” Garrus answered, his talons moving over the electronics suite. “We’re in rough shape, but should be able to make it as long as there aren’t any more geth between us and the front door.” He keyed in commands. “There’s a chunk of colossus head jamming the machine gun, Shepard. You’ll have to let me out to work it free. However, if we still have the cannon . . .”

“The cannon remains functional, Shepard-Captain, despite a calibration error of 7.21 percent. This unit will compensate during targeting,” Legion reported.

Garrus twitched, his mandibles flicking hard, but managed a small head bob. “That should get us past the last turrets if you can manage to avoid their rockets.”

Shepard took a deep breath and nodded. “Let’s pray the Enkindlers heard you, Brother C-Sec. Glory hallelujah.”
The wind whistled like the howling of lost souls as it battered itself against the curves and angles of the massive Peak 15 tower. Shepard swung down out of the Mako, doing a quick, practiced survey of the area, looking for signs of immediate danger. Not finding any, she followed the mournful shriek of the wind to the towering facility that clung on the mountain above them. It boggled her mind how a remote testing facility could employ enough people to fill such a huge tower. Maybe they housed them on site . . . in four-bedroom condos.

*Sweet baby Jesus, I hope they managed to evacuate everyone.*

Hearing someone hammering on metal, she walked around the tank to see Garrus clinging to the front, prying the colossus head loose of the machine gun. The turian grumbled to himself, reciting a laundry list of curses as he tried to get enough leverage to wrestle the chunk of geth loose.

Pausing in his battle, he nodded toward an M29 Grizzly, the older armoured vehicle wrecked off to the side. Flames licked the cold air from the armoured vehicle’s destroyed chassis. “You didn’t come up here earlier, did you, Captain? That looks like your work.”

Shepard just shook her head and turned back to the garage doors. Rockets had reduced the main doors to twisted hunks of metal, but an intact pedestrian portal stood a couple metres further down the front wall. Turning her back to it, she ignored the alarm from her hard suit that warned her of impending frozen death. She had time yet, and no desire to step through that mouth into hell a moment earlier than she needed to.

“I sure hope there’s some sign about where we need to look,” she whispered, almost to herself. The door behind her yawned beneath the empty stare of the windows floors above. The darkness inside them crawled under her skin, shifting and alive. No, not alive . . . undead. She shook that off. It was far too late in her career to get squeamish and superstitious.

*Yeah right, like you aren’t crazy superstitious, Shepard.*

The screech of metal giving way was followed by a heavy thump as the ruined colossus head landed in the snow next to her.

Garrus returned her glance with a challenging glare and a flick of mandibles. “A trophy, Captain? You could mount it on the wall of your cabin.”

She glanced at it and rolled her eyes, then opened the files that Nihlus had transferred to her computer. One of them was the text of the code white. “Loose contaminants in the Rift Station hot labs,” she muttered to herself. “Rift Station.” She opened the floor plan of the facility.

Garrus jumped down, landing next to the geth head. “Could we do this inside, out of the wind?” he asked, his teeth chattering. “My armour is nudging over the system failure point.”

She sent the files to his omnitool. “Sure, you find me the Rift Station labs on that floor plan and
plot us a course to them. Legion, cover the right side of the door.” Shrugging, she reached up, Roger’s reassuring weight settling into her hands. She pressed her back to the wall as Legion took the position opposite her. Holding up her fingers, she counted down three, two, one, then activated the door.

The geth ducked around the door frame and swept its assault rifle across the area. After a moment, it stepped back. “Area is clear of hostile forces, Shepard-Captain.”

Shepard walked through the door into a space between the outside garage doors and a set of inside ones just as large. “You can just say ‘clear’, Legion. I’ll assume the rest.” No pedestrian door cut a hole through that wall. She launched her drone, Legion’s appearing a second later to hover next to hers, their orange light casting a sickly glow in the dim space.

Expecting a fully-armed reception on the other side, Shepard sent her squad into cover against the wall, then strode up to the door, hoping that the drones would draw at least a little fire. Instead, when the metal sections lifted toward the ceiling, she stared down the length of a large, completely deserted garage.

No enemies. No friendlies. No bodies. No equipment.

*Maybe the lack of vehicles means they were able to evacuate.*

Shepard walked up the slight ramp, jumping a little as her drone beeped and blinked out. The air hung heavy and silent, the wind outside completely muted. Silence throbbed in her ears. “What the hell?” After another second, she waved for her squad to join her and moved down the center of the room. They needed to keep moving.

Shaking her head she double-timed it up a short flight of stairs. Another door waited at the top. “We got here far too easily.”

“We haven’t seen Therum or Feros levels of resistance, that’s for sure,” Garrus agreed, taking the stairs two at a time.

Shepard brought Roger up, couching his stock against her shoulder, and looked to her squad as they took position to cover her. Once they gave her the nod, she walked up to the door. It opened to reveal a short hallway, the walls lined with automated turrets, their barrels facing toward the inside of the facility rather than toward the garage.

“Spirits,” Garrus muttered. “That’s a hell of a lot of firepower.” He stepped around her to look at the closest turret.

“It appears that security focused on sealing contaminants within the facility,” Legion stated the obvious with complete equanimity.

Shepard envied its lack of emotion as her lower gut rolled over and tied itself in a squelching knot. “Let’s go. We have a deadline.” She pushed past Garrus none too gently, heading for the inner door.

*You’re getting reckless again, Janey, you dumbass. Just face the fear, or you’ll see your best friend bleeding out at your feet by the time you’re done.*

On the other side, they found a deserted security office. Shepard checked the lockers to find the guns and armour still sealed inside. When she tried to activate the computer console, she got no response. She turned away, a slow shudder crawling up her back as she felt unseen eyes watching them. The whole place felt phase-shifted, the people invisible, but still there, moving around.
She shook it off and headed for the elevator, trying to ignore the voice shouting inside her head that elevators constituted cages just begging for an ambush. It helped that the elevator opened into another short corridor, this one as completely empty as the one before. Well, almost as completely empty, but for a thick layer of snow.

“We’re inside, right?” Garrus asked.

Shepard nodded and stepped out, her boots making that dry, walking-on-styrofoam crunching squeak that she always associated with mid-winter on Mindoir. Drifts of the brittle crystals heaped against the walls despite the ceiling and narrow windows remaining intact.

She motioned Garrus and Legion into semi-cover positions next to the door. “What’s on the other side?” she whispered to Garrus.

He checked his omni. “Reception lobby, a few offices up above on the far right and point along the perimeter. It looks like the upper section is all glass enclosed, so no real cover for ambush there, but the room has a large, concrete divider down the center.”

Shepard nodded. “Okay, so a decent place to leave a reception committee. Check.” She raised Roger to high ready, then stopped, her brow wrinkling, eyes looking up at the ceiling. Cocking her head a little, she strained to hear over the wind, sure she heard gunfire from several floors above. Her heart actually slowed at the sound. Gunfire meant survivors to explain what happened or enemies to fill with bullets. Either made for a better alternative than the endless nothing. She glanced at Garrus.

He nodded. “I heard it.” He pressed up behind her, but not close enough to trigger the automatic door. He brought his assault rifle up, and nodded that he was ready to move.

Shepard took a step forward.

“Shepard.”

Nihlus’s voice threw her heart up into her throat, setting it hammering against her tonsils. She lifted a trembling hand to her ear. “Sweet baby Jesus, Nihlus, give a girl in a creepy abandoned facility some warning, will you?”

“Sorry.” Odd, but he sounded more amused than sorry. “Just checking in. The Normandy has been locked down and impounded by the port authority, although the crew isn’t letting them board,” the Spectre reported. “Wrex, Williams, and I have been detained for questioning about an unauthorized armoured vehicle drop.”

“Roger that. Are they coming after me?” Even though she asked it as a question, she knew the answer.

“No, but rest assured that moments after you clear the blast radius for the safe zone, you’ll be intercepted and arrested.”

She nodded. As she thought. “Understood, thanks for the heads up.” She frowned. “How’d you get them to let you call me?”

“My friend in the administrator’s office took a coffee break.” He chuckled. “She’ll do what she can . . . has me throwing my Spectre authority around a little to investigate something while I’m grounded here, but we’re looking at some pretty heavy shovelling to get out of this, Shepard.”

Sighing, she nodded. “Story of my life, Nihlus. A whole lot of nothing to report here so far. Took a
little geth fire coming in, but nothing compared to what we took on Therum. So far the facility has taken some damage, but no sign of contaminants, geth, Saren, or any employees. We think we heard gunfire a moment ago, so maybe someone is still alive in here. We’ll let you know when we find something.”


Shepard closed the channel and opened an encrypted one to the _Normandy_. “Hey, Sparky, what’s going on?”

“We’re locked down, Captain, but we’ve also kept the port authority locked out. They’re afraid to cut us open for fear of the Alliance getting testy over their new prototype being sliced and diced, so we’re at a stalemate for the moment.”

“Okay. You know that crate that you put on my table? The one with the questionable items you found in the Blood Pack hideout on Omega?” she asked, able to hear the confusion and hesitation in his silence.

“Yes,” he replied at last. “What about it?”

“Just be prepared to bring it to the administrator’s office when I call. You, Tali, and Liara. If the port security wants to confiscate your weapons, agree, but tell them the crate is Nihlus’s and under Spectre authority.” She hesitated, then took a deep, noisy breath. “If anything happens to me, get the crate to Nihlus. Understood?”

“Roger that, Captain. Just make sure I get the call from you to bring it in.”

A weak smile cut through the frost freezing her face rigid. “Will do, Sparky. Take care of my boat, COB.”

“Yes, ma’am. Alenko out.”

Shepard closed the channel and brought Roger back up. “Okay, enough time wasted. Let’s get moving.”

Garrus stared at her, mandibles dropped, brow plates raised with an unspoken question.

She shrugged and stepped toward the door. “Insurance. Come on, Nihlus and the ground party have been detained, and my ship has been impounded for this little stunt. Let’s make it count, Brother C-Sec.”

Shepard checked with Legion before she opened the door, but she needn’t have bothered. The geth remained steadfastly focused on guarding their flank.

The door folded up to reveal a surreal scene. The lobby stood under several feet of snow, banks of it heaped up around the tables, desks and chairs that lay strewn haphazardly around the space. The effect made Shepard feel as if they entered a long abandoned, ancient ruin rather than what had been a thriving, bustling place of business hours before. Like the rooms and corridors before, the lobby stood completely empty. Nothing moved but the wind, even the plants frozen into statues.

Leading the way into the large room, Shepard reached out, brushing her fingertips over the frozen leaves of a ficus. Other than the wind’s constant, mournful howl and the steady clang-bang of its grip tossing a piece of metal back and forth, a hush hung over that lobby, one that demanded fear as its toll for passage.
“Feels like a graveyard,” Garrus whispered, clearing his throat a little. He pressed close, as if drawing heat and life from her as he’d done on Feros.

Shepard nodded toward an exit in the far left corner of the room. “Legion, take the left, meet us up at that door.”

“Affirmative.” The geth set off at a half-crouched, easy jog.

Taking point, Shepard led Garrus along the right wall, her eyes moving constantly, gaze brushing warily over art hanging half off the wall, ice already creeping across the canvas. In the corner, an information kiosk sputtered, a partially formed blur of static that emitted no sound. From every corner, behind every table, beneath every overturned desk, the feeling of being watched by ghosts deepened until it squirmed under her skin: worms gnawing their way through an apple’s flesh.

She climbed the double flight of stairs and moved quickly along the front of the offices. Broken glass, smashed doors, and tipped over tables all pointed to something violent having happened, but she couldn’t pick out a single sign of fighting. No bullet holes, no scorch marks, no grenade blasts . . . not even scuffed snow on the floor of closed offices where people had grappled. She stopped in the last office and checked the weapon locker in the corner. Still full, just like the ones in the security office.

“Looks more like a panic than a battle,” Garrus said, as if reading her mind.

Shepard swallowed hard, forcing about three feet of razor wire down her throat. “Where the fuck is everyone?”

“They could have pulled back to a shelter or defensive zone,” he offered. “There might not be bodies this far out if the retreat was orderly.”

“Does this look at all orderly to you, C-Sec?” She shoved aside the clammy fingers that scraped dirty nails up her back and took a deep breath, stretching her shoulders back until they cracked. “Where are we headed?”

“Next elevator leads to the central station hub. Houses the VI core and access to the tram to Rift Station.” He nodded to the doorway where Legion awaited them.

“Okay.” Strides, long and determined, carried her to the elevator. Maybe they’d finally get some answers.

* * * * *

“I don’t care how many times you tell me that it’s the standard interface, C-Sec, it’s still a Tower of Hanoi. Graphical representation of the correct order of operations . . . Blah blah . . . Whatever. It’s a free to play GalaxyBook game disguised as a scientific process. That bothers me in a way I can’t even begin to articulate.” She let out a tiny sigh when he didn’t bother arguing the point any further than he already had. Fighting over the ridiculous method of shunting power in the VI core had kept her mind off the fact that someone had come through after the emergency and reactivated the reactor and tram systems but not communications.

Someone had beaten them there, leaving only empty rooms behind. Nothing about that gave her any hope.

“Now arriving at Rift Station,” the VI’s faux-female voice announced. “Binary Helix Research Facility.”
The tram rolled into Rift Station, the empty waiting area wrapping around her as if the car propelled her through a thick membrane of cellophane. She couldn’t see what clung to her, tighter than her skin, suffocating her, only feel it. Stepping out the door, she allowed her eyes to follow the long, orderly lines of at least a hundred empty seats to two doors at the other end of the room. So many people had lived and worked there.

Closing her eyes, she pulled in a deep, noisy draught of air, steeling the churning in her guts and the slight tremble that had worked its way into her thigh muscles. A strong hand pressed between her shoulder blades as she rolled her shoulders, squaring them to bear the weight of whatever lie ahead.

She pulled away from the contact without looking back at Garrus, not wanting to see the confusion and possible hurt prompted by her withdrawal. As much as she appreciated his concern and support, her nerves itched and spat with the oppressive emptiness, twitching with the strain of constantly being stretched too far in every direction. She knew if she didn’t pull away, something would snap. She couldn’t afford to snap. Not yet.

“I can’t get the smell of whatever the hell got cooked in the decon chamber out of my nose,” Garrus grumbled.

Shepard heard the shish-click of him shrugging his rifle into his hand as he followed her to the doors. Even though her nose still burned with the fumes and stink of the plasma decon and whatever it had purged before they got there, she didn’t reply. Instead, she reached up, settling Roger into her hands and strode forward with purpose. They needed to figure out what the hell was going on and get the fuck out.

The door straight ahead led to the labs, but it had been sealed and didn’t give way to her bypass attempt. The one on her left led to the barracks and living quarters, its control glowing an inviting green. “Come this way,” it whispered. “Trust me, you’re not being funnelled into a trap. Honest.”

“Yeah, right,” Shepard grumbled under her breath as she stepped up to it.

“Shepard?”

She shook off Garrus’s question, and set into a jog, her assault rifle at high ready. The door led to an antechamber, two elevators on the one wall. One led to the hot labs. Shepard hung Roger on her back and walked over to hit the control.

“Hot labs are offline,” the VI told her. “Code Omega local execution. Loose contaminants led to the hot labs being activated. Once they achieved maximum depth of three kilometres into the glacier, the neutron purge was activated, killing all life forms present.”

Shepard shook her head then kicked the elevator door. “Goddamn it. We’ve spent this entire mission three steps behind Saren, and it’s really starting to piss me off, C-Sec.” Spinning away from the defunct lab entrance, she pulled Roger once again and headed to the other elevator door. “Fuck.”

Three storeys up, the elevator let them out into a canteen area. Other than a few large crates set up like fortifications and a couple of chairs lying on their sides, the place remained as untouched as everywhere else.

“It’s impossible, isn’t it?” Shepard asked, stopping in the doorway to an empty med center. “They had to have been evacuated, right? You couldn’t subdue this many people without some sign of something being left behind.” Reaching up, she pressed the heel of her hand to her temple, a vague,
stomach-turning ache spreading through her head.

“Shepard?” Garrus turned her around and leaned down to look into her eyes. “Are you feeling okay?”

She nodded and hit her medigel. Couldn’t hurt to be cautious if she had a concussion. The ache in her head didn’t come from the slice in her scalp though. It started at the base of her skull, pressing up like fingers spreading out and working their way between her skull and her brain.

“Yeah, I’m fine. This place is just starting to get to me. She batted his hands away, but gently, giving one a slight squeeze. “I’ll be just fine once we find someone alive. Someone we can question.” She chuckled, but it came out hard and dry, edged with a hysteria that made the millions of tons of rock over her head seem to tremble. “Hell, right now I’d settle for someone to shoot.” Glancing behind her, Shepard watched Legion for a moment. It only spoke when she asked it to report on something or to accept commands, and showed no real reaction to what they found, or didn’t find.

Was it merely registering and recording? Was it trying to puzzle through what was going on?

“Legion?”

The geth turned to face her, looking up from one of the cots. “Shepard-Captain.”

“Do you have any theories about what’s going on here?” She walked over to him, head tilting a little. A soft warning chime went off in the back of her head as she felt the hysterical edge come through her words as aggression. It felt foreign, carried on the pressure building from the invisible fingers.

“We cannot reach consensus. Forty-six percent currently favour the theory that this facility’s population was evacuated while thirty-two percent favour the population being subdued by forces wishing to contain the biohazard contamination,” it reported, its tone as even as always, its gestures appearing to be imitations of her own.

Shepard’s anger eased back, the tide ebbing in the face of the geth’s indecision. Seemed they weren’t all that different after all. “And the remaining twenty-two percent?” A soft smile brushed the corner of her mouth.

“The remaining geth favour the collection of further data in order to form a reliable conclusion.”

“Hear, hear. On this we have reached consensus, Brother Legion.” Shepard nodded toward the cot. “Was there something you saw there, or were you just staring into space as you tried to work through the possibilities?” Edging a little closer, she saw a stain on the canvas. “Is that what you were looking at?”

“It is.” It leaned down, hovering over the stain and activated its omnitool. “Analysing.”

Shepard waited for a moment, then glanced over at Garrus. The turian just shrugged and paced toward the door labelled as Maintenance. The captain looked back. “Legion?”

“Analysing.”

“Okay then.” She walked over to the dispenser and refilled her missing medigel, pausing to smear some over the wound on her head. She turned back to see Legion in the same position.

The mountain pressed down on her, the endless, windowless walls and windows that looked out
onto rock wrapping her in their coils, constricting until she could barely draw breath. “We need to keep moving,” she whispered, pacing to the door and back.


“Asari blood and toxic acid?” Shepard reached up to rub her temple with the hand not holding Roger in a death grip. “Fantastic.” She gave Legion a wan smile and a nod. “Thanks, Legion, it’s more than we had five minutes ago.”

“Shepard?” Nihlus’s voice embedded an ice pick through her ear into her brain.

“Ow, Jesus.” She lifted a hand to ear. “Whisper, Kryik. What’s going on?”

“Gianna just arrested the administrator thanks to the information the squad and I collected. How are things going out there?”

“We’re deep into the Rift Station now. Not a soul living, dead, or otherwise. Everything looks like the people here all vanished. Even the weapon lockers are still full. Legion just found a bloodstain. Asari blood mixed with an acidic toxin.” She stopped, looking around as she heard something . . . a soft rustle or scrape of armour against stone, maybe?

“Asari blood . . .?” the Spectre asked.

“Just a second, Nihlus.”

Garrus backed toward her, his head cocked. He nudged her with an elbow, not looking at her as he gestured toward the maintenance door.

“Yeah.” Shepard gestured to Legion to take cover next to the door. “Nihlus, let me get back to you.” She closed the channel and took cover next to the geth, motioning for Garrus to be ready when she opened the door.

She triggered the mechanism, giving the C-Sec officer a few seconds to get clear through the door before following him. A short curved hallway ended at another door. Another hallway, another door. They moved silently, slipping through each cautiously and in order: Garrus first, Shepard following, Legion watching their rear.

The air quality changed as they approached the last door. Shepard took her position against the frame and froze. Again, she heard a slight rustle, the scrape of something non-metallic against stone. She didn’t know whether to feel relieved to hear signs of life or not. It depended on the form of that life.

Fuck. This is where the zombies or face huggers attack.

Shepard closed her eyes for a breath. When had she ever let her imagination get the better of her? She was a fucking soldier, goddamn it. She needed to get back to acting like one rather than a kid in a haunted house.

Opening her eyes she nodded to Legion and Garrus, to check that they were ready, then activated the door. Garrus stepped through, Shepard giving him a ten count before swinging around the doorframe herself. Instead of coming through on his left flank, she slammed into the turian’s back, Roger catching under his arm.
“What the hell, C-Sec? Clear the door.” Yanking Roger back, she gave Garrus a shove, then stepped around him. She stopped dead, her jaw falling slack as she stared up a long, curving tunnel carved out of the rock. “Just when I thought this nightmare couldn’t get creepier. What is this place?”

He turned to her, his brow plates lowered, mandibles dropped, and gestured for her to listen. She reached up, turning up the ambient on her implant. Still, it took a second before she heard it. A soft clicking sound, scraping . . . claws just brushing the stone, then a chittering.

*Could be geth.*

She didn’t believe it and brought Roger’s sight back to her eye after turning her implant down. A finger directed her squad into their positions, then she moved forward, knees bent and ready, weight low and stable.

The cavern curved to the right, tight enough to limit their sight line to seven or eight metres. Shepard sniffed the air, fairly sure she could smell the burned ozone smell of the geth plasma weapons, but several other elements pricked her nose, ones she couldn’t identify. She paused at a small white puddle, drips leading up the incline ahead of them.

“Geth circulatory fluid,” Legion said, its voice hushed.

Shepard nodded and held her index finger to her lips before pointing ahead. The worms began to wriggle under her skin again as she heard the slide-click-reset of a jammed door, but muffled . . . sealed on the other side of several closed doors.

*You’re going to be missing the silence and peace here in a minute.*

As they rounded the final curve and the cavern ended at a prefab doorway, she cursed that inner voice for being right. Something lay strewn just off to the side of the short entry tunnel into the man-made structure. It didn’t move as she slowed their approach, sidling around the mass a little in order to give them room and time to respond if it attacked.

A viscous green liquid covered the creature and painted the stone with random splashes. Shepard crept forward, easing up to it, fairly sure it was dead, but not taking any chances.

“What the hell is this thing?” Long, sinuous stalks almost like tentacles came out of its body, ending in three sectioned claw-like . . . hands . . . pincers? Four legs and two short, thin arms protruded from the almost crayfish like body.

Garrus prodded the sectioned, smooth shell along its back with a boot. “It’s dead, whatever it is.”

Shepard nodded, able to see the holes torn open in the creature’s underbelly. “Legion, take some samples. We’ll give them to Dr. Chakwas to see what she can make of it.”

“Affirmative.” The geth moved to do as she’d asked.

Shepard pushed forward into the short, curved section of prefab tunnel. It ended a couple metres in at a functioning door. Glancing back at Legion, she arched an eyebrow. “Finished?”

“We will complete our task in eighty three seconds, Shepard-Captain,” it replied.

Despite herself, Shepard let out a surprised chuckle. “Try to be precise, will you?” She turned away from the dance of his head flaps, pacing a little as she counted down the seconds. When he straightened and traded his omnitool for his weapon, she pushed forward, activating the door.
Stay cool, Janey. Don’t start being a human bulldozer here, or you’re going to fuck up.

A short corridor awaited them on the other side. Shepard crossed the threshold cautiously, her eyes riveted on tendrils of a white, glossy substance stretched along the walls in ropes as thick as her wrist.

“What the hell?” Garrus muttered behind her. He walked over to the closest strand, reaching out to touch it with a talon. “It’s tacky.”

Shepard ran her fingertips over a couple of filaments nearer the next door. They joined together, lattice-like. As Garrus said, it felt tacky, snagging her gloves even with the slightest touch. “Why do I feel like a fly all of the sudden?” she asked between her teeth, her jaw aching from clenching them for so long.

Both hands back on her gun, she crooked a finger to call Legion up to take position at the next door. When the geth and Garrus took their positions, she triggered the door. Instead of moving inside to sweep the room, the turian stayed where he was, his mandibles spreading, his entire body tensing.

Shepard looked around the doorframe, her lungs freezing solid for a moment, the sheer horror of what awaited them on the other side stealing her breath, even her thoughts. Squeezing between the still immobile Garrus and the doorjamb, Shepard took three steps into the next space. Webbing -- for that’s all she could process it as -- filled the room but for a low, narrow tunnel through the center. Geth chassis hung from the webs, packed in against the walls a couple metres thick. Torn apart, chunks melted away by the green acid, most of the geth appeared to be dead, but here and there a flashlight face still sputtered and semi-attached limbs twitched as if the geth writhed in agony.

Shepard swallowed a heavy knot of revulsion and panic. “What the hell did these people turn loose?”
Mass Effect - Future Imperfect Chapter Thirty Six

Chapter Summary

Noveria couldn’t get any creepier, could it?

Wincing away from the macabre display of twitching limbs and flickering lights, Shepard resisted the urge to cross herself. “Are they in pain?” she whispered, not sure afterward if she’d spoken aloud or not. It almost seemed indecent to speak at full volume, like when she was six and her aunt caught her laughing merrily and running around the local cemetery. Enough nightmares lurked in the hidden corners and passages of her mind without being haunted by slaughtered geth.

Steeling herself, she edged forward, Roger sweeping the narrow tunnel that cut through the carnage. That tunnel . . . . She peered into a low-hanging spot, a flashlight head dangling down, dark headlamp staring straight through her. They’d have to crawl through. The further they progressed, the blacker and stranger the place became.

Oh good, you’ve found the tunnel to hell, Janey. Don’t you just visit the nicest places?

“Are they suffering?” she asked again.

“Geth do not feel pain as organics do,” Legion supplied. It stopped, its omnitool flaring to life as it scanned one of the twitching chassis. “This platform is experiencing a short in its motor functions. Higher level processes have ceased.”

Shepard nodded, relieved. Even enemies didn’t deserve to be stuck up like flies awaiting the spider’s fangs.

“I guess we know why we didn’t meet any resistance on the way in,” Garrus’s voice barely managed to cross the two metres between them. “Whatever the hell these things are, they’re efficient killers.” He ducked under a heretic stuck to the ceiling of the tunnel, its arms hanging down. “Why would they stick the platforms up like this?”

“Possible territorial response,” Legion replied. “The lifeforms gain nothing by storing units as a nutritional source.”

Shepard let out a startled chuckle-cough. “Yeah, I think we’re safe ruling out their using the heretics as food.” She nodded toward the tunnel. “Let’s keep moving. Stay sharp. I don’t want to end up stuck into this mess.” Leading the way, she got down on her knees and crawled through the narrow passage. On the other side, she helped pull Garrus through and up onto his feet before taking point once more. She picked a weaving path through the room, following the sound of a malfunctioning door. Webbing stuck it half open, caught in a continual cycle of trying to close, then retracting back.

Like every horror movie in the history of the galaxy doesn’t have the stuck retractable door.

She shuddered. The dread that had gripped her from the moment they entered the facility’s garage sunk its claws deeper into her spine, sending sharp, stabbing pains through the muscles in her neck and into her skull. The headache from earlier dug its fingers back in, sharp nails burrowing through
to her eyes. Darkness pushed in from the outside, narrowing her field of vision, but she took several slow, deep breaths and managed to push it back.

Setting her jaw, Shepard crawled through first. Legion followed, the both of them needing to pry the door open to get Garrus through.

“You know, I think I’ll tell evolution that I’m going to stick with my bra and the whole flopping issue, Brother C-Sec,” Shepard sighed once they pulled him loose. “That carapace is a pain in tight spaces.”

He dusted himself off and cracked his neck. “Well, females have smaller ones.” His mandibles fluttered. “Beautiful necks too, very elegant. Don’t get me started on their waists . . . ankles . . .”

Shepard shook her head at the note of teasing wistfulness in his voice and took the lead. “Holy blessed backsides of the Enkindlers, you’re rampaging through TMI territory, Brother C-Sec.” His answering chuckle forced a smile onto her face. He could be such a brat.

The grisly walls closed in tighter, a ghoul’s embrace that wrapped steel bands around Shepard’s throat and chest, as the trio picked their way through a large, curved room and a short corridor. Although she could stand upright most of the way, here and there mechanical corpses created choke points, forcing them to crawl or even wriggle through on their bellies. Heretic fingers scraped over her shoulder and down her back, stabbing the urge to run into every muscle, every nerve. Exhaustion wore her down, the constant tension and dread more debilitating than ten bullet wounds. At least bullet holes could be treated with a hefty shot of medigel. All she could do against the fear was grit her teeth and force one foot in front of the other.

She reached the lab door to find it sealed. After running several bypass programs, trying to get past the locks, she crouched and turned to face her squad. “It’s complete fried, just like the other entrance off the tram station. I can’t bypass it.”

“I’m getting the feeling someone has barricaded the lab,” Garrus said.

Shepard nodded. “Hopefully a whole lot of friendly someones.” She studied the door a little closer. “I’ve got nothing that will cut through material this thick.”

“This platform’s omnitool is equipped with a cutting laser,” Legion stated. Shepard crouched down a little lower to see the geth past the bulk of Garrus’s armour. The unit cocked its head a little one way then the other.

Shepard sighed. There wasn’t enough room in the tunnel for Legion to get past her let alone Garrus. “We’re going to have to back up to a spot big enough for you to take point, Brother Legion. Let’s get in there.” They backtracked about five metres before they reached a spot with enough room for them to change positions.

Shepard watched Legion take point, her stomach clenching so tight that, for a few moments, she worried she’d embarrass herself one way or another. Since Elysium, she’d made a career of being the first one into danger, the shield that soaked up bullets before they could hurt anyone else. Sending the geth in ahead of her killed a piece of her, but other than Legion crawling back out so they could shuffle the order again, she didn’t have much choice.

“Make the hole as big as you can, Legion,” she called into the tunnel. “We have to get Mr. Elegant-neck-giant-carapace through.” Her lips quirked a little when she saw Garrus shake his head. The half-smile bled away as she watched him shift uneasily, eyes and weapon in constant motion. C-Sec had joined her insane mission voluntarily, eagerly even, but . . . .
Despite feeling like you can’t function without him at your back, you know that you should’ve left him on the Citadel, Janey. No matter what, this adventure isn’t going to end well for all of them. He deserved that other life.

Shepard nodded. Yeah, Garrus deserved better. Hell, all her people did.

“See if you can’t clear a little room inside the door as well. I’d rather avoid you going in without us covering you,” she said, pushing up as close as she dare with sparks of molten steel flying everywhere.

She lifted her hand to her ear. “Nihlus?”

“I read you, Shepard. What’s your sitrep?”

“Hunkered down in a creepy-ass tunnel made out of freaky spider webbing and dead geth heretics. We’re waiting for Legion to cut its way through a door. How long do we have before annihilation?”

“Sixty-five minutes.”

Shepard set her omnitool to count down. “Roger that.”

“Task complete, Shepard-Captain,” Legion called back. “However, route of ingress is blocked by a crate too heavy for this platform to move. Requesting assistance.”

“Got to go, Nihlus. Shepard out.” She chuckled at the exasperated sigh that preceded the channel closing. It did him good to wait around. Patience definitely wasn’t his primary virtue. She cut off her inner voice before it got through the first syllable of its retort.

Dropping down onto her hands and knees, she crawled up beside Legion, wedging herself into the small space. Luckily, he’d cut some of the webbing away as well, so she could crouch next to the door. Setting her shoulder into the crate, she braced herself, three fingers counting down.

Three . . . two . . . one.

Digging in, they managed to move it about six inches.

“Sweet baby Jesus, what’s in this thing?” she whispered. “Osmium?”

“Osmium is unlikely due to its comparative rarity,” Legion replied.

“Thank you, Brother Literal.” She slammed her shoulder back into the crate. “Come on, let’s get this thing moved.”

“You taking any fire up there?” Garrus asked, peering through a narrowing in the tunnel. “I feel like I’ve gone deaf it’s so damned quiet in here.”

Shepard held his stare as she listened then shook her head. “No, you haven’t lost your hearing. This whole place is just fucking creepy-ass silent.” As far as she could tell, a pin dropping on the other side of the crate would resound like a cannon shot. Her teeth squeaked as she clenched down. If it was just another empty room . . .

Pushing that thought aside, she dug in her feet and pressed her back into the polymer box once more. Whatever waited there . . . horror, survivors, or nothing, they needed to get past the damned crate to find out. It took them five tries, but finally it shifted enough for them to crawl out and get
Shepard wedged herself through the narrow space and stopped dead, horror and denial battling for control as her mind tried to process the carnage spread out before her. Geth, krogan, asari, and even the human husk creatures lay heaped into a long, grisly pile, their sheer numbers staggering. More than a hundred bodies lie stacked like cordwood or sandbags banked to stem a flood.

“Oh my sweet baby Jesus,” she whispered, her entire body flushing numb and cold, her blood replaced by ice water. She stumbled two steps forward on wooden legs, then ground to a halt again. The massacre represented someone’s last stand, all those lives . . . those people throwing themselves in front of the enemy to hold back a terrible tide.

Garrus bumped into her from behind, nudging her forward until he had room to stand. His warm, solid presence returned enough feeling that she realized she’d let Roger sag in her hands, its barrel almost touching the floor. Arms stiff and argumentative, she lifted him to high ready, bracing the stock in against her shoulder.

A strong hand rested on her shoulder, gently moving her a foot to her right. “Spirits,” the turian whispered. He stepped around her, his assault rifle leading as he picked his way forward, trying to bypass the pile without stepping on the bodies.

Shepard turned to Legion, pushing back the cold and paralysis. “Legion, left flank. Garrus, sweep to the right. I’ll go up the middle. Don’t take any chances.” Taking a deep breath, she shook off the rest of her reaction, breathing in time with her steps. Warrior inside and out . . . at least until they got clear of that hell.

A set of stairs stood before her, the length of them strewn with asari bodies, all clad in the leather armour of commandos. She slid her gaze over them without allowing herself to linger on the terrible wounds that punctured torsos and severed limbs. Here and there she spotted one of the strange, crayfish-spider corpses amidst the others, but how could so few of them have killed so many? Maybe they took their dead with them, but if that was the case . . .

At the top of the stairs, a platform opened up to the right, the section ahead of her leading to a set of stairs back down. The door at the bottom said it led back to the tram: the first barricaded door they encountered when they arrived at Rift Station. More bodies lay there, but facing toward her, as if they’d fought to cover someone’s retreat.

A soft sigh of sound to Shepard’s right drew her attention. An asari in a long, formal gown and headdress lay, half propped up against a broken crate. Blood stained her dress almost a uniform violet, yet her chest hitched in a faint flutter.

“Lady Benezia?” Shepard walked over, eyes scanning the room for attack. Her heart flipped back and forth between hope and fear. Answers. At last, but suddenly she wasn’t sure if she wanted them. How had the universe turned from comprehensible to . . . this madness in a few short weeks?

The asari’s eyes opened. “Shepard?” Her voice came out thin, but with an underlying strength that left Shepard with no doubt as to why she remained alive. She’d willed herself to wait. A hand, the fingers broken, reached out. “Must hurry.”

Crouching by the matriarch’s side, Shepard shook her head. “I’ve got medigel. We can get you out of here. Liara is on my ship.”

A smile drifted like mist across the severe, beautiful face. “Tell her . . . tell her that she’s my greatest joy. I’m so proud that she forged her own path.” Her hand rested on Shepard’s boot, and
the captain reached down to cradle it in hers. The skin felt cold and clammy. “You must listen, Shepard.” Benezia’s eyes closed. “Save the queen. The Reapers are afraid of her, of the rachni.”

“Rachni?” Shepard lowered herself to one knee. “That’s what killed all these people?” She glanced up, movement behind a thick layer of glass attracting her attention. A creature hunkered down within a large container. “Is that the queen? Why would I save her when all this death . . . ?” She stammered to a halt. “Where are all the people who worked here?”

The hand in Shepard’s twitched, as if shattered nerves ordered broken bones to squeeze her fingers. “Not the queen’s fault. Saren . . . found her egg, thought to enslave her offspring, turn them into an army. Separated . . . driven mad.” She gasped, the breath whistling as she exhaled. “Save the queen. The Reapers cannot win.”

Shepard glanced behind her as Garrus and Legion arrived on the platform, her heart beating stronger with the other part of her warrior-self returning to its rightful place.

“She’s the only living soul, Shepard,” Garrus reported.

The captain nodded. “Legion, start cutting us a way out of here through that other door.”

“Affirmative.”

After the geth walked away, Shepard turned back to the matriarch. “What’s Saren after?” she asked, her voice soft and gentle. “Why is he doing this?”

Benezia’s eyes fluttered but didn’t open. “He discovered artifact . . . led to Sovereign. Is indoctrinated. The council . . . all indoctrinated. They believe they can convince Reapers to spare our races. A trade.” The asari slumped. “Trade your race . . . other races to save theirs. Must stop.”

Shepard swallowed the fear that statement prompted, forcing herself to focus as dizziness, dissociation tried to take hold. Breathing deep, she threw up a wall to hold that storm at bay. “He thinks he can bring them back? How?”

“Conduit. Great key . . . opens to dark space.” Her hand managed to grip Shepard’s, the action ripping a thin shrill of agony from her lips. “Illium. Liara . . . find Aethyta. Entrusted legacy . . . holding it for Liara.”

“Do you know where Saren took the quarian pilgrims?” Garrus asked. Shepard glanced back to see him crouched just behind her shoulder.

Benezia nodded, her breath fading. “Virmire. Breeding krogan . . . cure.” She let out a long breath thick and rattling with the blood that trickled from her lips. “Tell Liara . . .”

Shepard stroked the cold fingers cradled in hers. “I will tell her that you love her. Rest easy.”

A moment later, she laid the still hand in the matriarch’s lap, knowing that just the shell remained. Faint sorrow drifted through the room like a silver cloud, a soft chiming of bells without sound. For a moment, Shepard let it move through her, mourning a woman and a beauty she’d never get the chance to know.

Her chrono flashed, fifty minutes . . . they needed to move. But first . . .

Shepard stood and walked over to the glass to look in at the rachni queen.

“Can we risk it, Shepard?” Garrus asked. “What her offspring did here . . . It took the full force of
the krogan and the citadel’s forces to bring them down before. What happens if they try to wipe us all out again?”

Shepard knew he asked a very good question. If she let the queen go, she could very well be responsible for an armageddon as terrible and final as the Reapers. However, if Benezia was right and the rachni would fight the Reapers, they’d be a hell of a force to be reckoned with. The queen’s head turned to face them, her mouth? mandibles? beak? opening to press against the glass.

“Can you hear me?” Shepard called through the glass. “Can you understand me?”

An asari commando sitting slumped against the nearby computer console twitched, her head lifting to loll loosely. “We understand you.”

Shepard jumped, Roger springing to her shoulder as quickly as her heart leaped back into her throat. Stumbling a little, she backed up a couple of steps, giving herself some room to react. “Wait. What?”

“This one serves as our voice. We cannot sing, not in these low spaces. Your musics are colourless.” The asari staggered to her feet. Shepard edged forward, reaching out to grip the slender, blue wrist, catching the faintest twitch of a pulse before dropping the cooling flesh. Her gut churned in disgust at the indecency of dragging the dying off the floor to use as some sort of meat puppet.

The asari stepped up to the glass and turned to face them. “Your way of communicating is strange . . . flat. It does not colour the air.” The asari shuddered a little as if held upright in tremulous hands. “When we speak, one moves all. We are the m . . . mother. We sing for the ones left behind. The ones you thought silenced.”

“You’re controlling her?” Garrus asked, his sidearm in his hand, aimed at the asari’s head. He pressed up behind Shepard, the gesture of support both welcome and reassuring.

“Our kind sing through touchings of thought. One plucks the strings and the other understands. This one is weak to urging. She is ending. Her music sings with colours we have no name for, but it is bittersweet. It is beautiful.”

Shepard looked between the queen and the dying asari. “Wait. This is fascinating . . . and revolting . . . but we’re under a deadline here. There is a warhead about to be dropped on our heads. What the hell happened here? Benezia told me to save you, but all I can see around me are reasons to leave you in there and let that warhead wipe the rachni out . . . again.”

The queen made a faint whining, mewling sound that vibrated inside Shepard’s chest. “The children we birthed were stolen from us before they could learn to sing. They are lost to silence. Mad. End their suffering. They cannot be saved. They will only cause harm as they are.”

Shepard felt as though a hand wrapped around her heart, squeezing. Sorrow that was not her own burrowed into her. “If they’d been left with you, they wouldn’t be violent? They wouldn’t be killing?” She stepped past the asari and up to the glass, pressing a hand against the container.

“These needlemen sought to turn them into beasts of war: claws with no song of their own. Our elders are comfortable with silence, but children know only fear if no one sings to them. Fear shattered their minds.”

Shepard nodded. “Yeah, it does that.”

Garrus pressed up on her again. “I don’t know, Shepard. Too much rides on this to be a snap
decision.”

Shepard turned away from the queen to look into his eyes. For a long moment, she didn’t say anything. He was right. If she made the wrong decision, she could destroy everything. Only . . .

“The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him, C-Sec.” Shepard glanced back through the glass and sighed. “G.K. Chesterton . . . yet another person wiser than I.” She lifted a hand to the cage and the being held within. “The question then becomes, do we love what’s behind us enough to give what’s in front of us a chance?”

Legion walked up the stairs, returning to the edge of the platform. Its head flaps fluttered a little over its light. “Shepard-Captain, you repaired this platform and allowed geth to prove our forthright intentions despite the fact that the heretics previously attacked your people. The geth, if they wished to conquer, are as great a threat to galactic peace as the rachni, are they not?”

A thin smile pressed Shepard’s lips together. She nodded and looked over at Garrus, one eyebrow raised. A tiny sigh escaped as her smile spread, a glorious feeling of humble gratitude blooming inside her chest. “I love being surrounded by people so much smarter and wiser than I am,” she said. “Don’t you?”

Garrus’s mandibles dropped, and he rumbled low in his throat. It filled the air with his uncertainty, prickling the hair on her arms.

Her hand lifted, fingertips brushing his forearm. “Don’t worry, Brother C-Sec. If the rachni turn from the Enkindlers’ light, you can blame the whole thing on me. There is nothing quite as satisfying as an ‘I told you so’ as you face the cusp of armageddon. Glory hallelujah.”

He rumbled again, but the mandible flutter that accompanied it eased the tension. “I think I’d prefer to hear you say, ‘I told you so’ after this war is over, and we’ve won.”

The asari took a shuffling step toward Shepard. “We stand before you. What will you sing? Will you release us? Are we to fade away once more?”

Still staring into Garrus’s eyes, Shepard waited for the pendulum to still on one side or the other. It finally did when the turian’s mandibles dropped a little. He gave her a single nod that she returned.

“No, I won’t condemn your race to extinction again.” She walked over to the console and hit the container release. “You’ll have to come with us. We’ll get you clear of this hellhole and find somewhere for you to make a home.”

“We understand and will follow. Your compassion and trust will sing down through the generations of our children.” The dying asari settled gracefully to the floor.

Shepard stretched her neck a little, shifting uncomfortably. “Okay. First, let’s get the hell out of here.” She reached up to open a channel, focusing on small, simple orderly steps to keep her mind from going to the crazy place. Rachni. Saren and the council trading humans, volus, krogan . . . so many others to save the council races. Oh hell no. She shook her head. Small, sane steps. “Nihlus. Do you read?”

“I read you, Shepard. What’s your situation?” The Spectre’s voice sounded strained, impatient.

Shepard paced to the edge of the platform, catching a glimpse of the rachni queen as she made her way around the lab to join them. “Ah, we have the Peak 15 situation under control, but this place could use one hell of an antimatter enema.”
“You’ve got forty-two minutes and a five kilometre safe radius, Shepard. You’d better get moving.”

She groaned and nodded. Nothing like an impossible deadline to certain death to keep one focused. “Say no more, Brother Nihlus, we’re running with all the swift certainty of the Enkindlers’ light. Will let you know when we’re clear. Shepard out.”

“How much time?” Garrus asked, his mandibles pulled tight against his face. “I could use some good news here, Shepard.”

She winced and shrugged. “How do you feel about forty-two minutes and a five kilometre safe radius?” Shepard nodded at his curse and glanced down at Benezia’s body, then back up to the ceiling as she heard soft, distant cries and skittering through the pipes and ducts. “We need to run like hell. That doesn’t allow for carrying a body. Damn it.” She started toward the walkway. “Liara . . .”

“Will understand,” Garrus said, following.

“We will carry her,” Benezia’s lips spoke with the queen’s voice. “She sang in bright blues and greens of a daughter. We will return her to her child.”

Shepard jumped and stumbled, arms pinwheeling as she flew backwards into Garrus. He caught her, setting her back onto her feet.

“Sweet baby Jesus, don’t do that again.” She pressed her hand over her heart, able to feel it pounding even through her armour. “Good lord.” After a moment of recovery, Shepard nodded, glancing toward the queen. “Okay, if you can carry her without slowing us down, go ahead. We’ll take point, make sure that we don’t meet with any more unwelcome company.”

The rachni queen climbed up the stairs, moving toward the dead matriarch.

Shepard nodded to Garrus to cover her right flank as she swung Roger around to cover the left. Glancing toward the tramway exit, she cursed. “Shame we couldn’t have just walked right through here on the way in. How long before that door’s open, Legion?”

“Twenty-six seconds, Shepard-Captain,” the geth reported without pausing its work.

“When you’re through, I’ll take point. C-Sec . . .” Shepard stopped. The skittering sound and cries grew louder. “Damn.” She ran back to the section of the platform that overlooked their entrance. “They’re coming through!” Pulling a grenade from her belt, she brought Roger up, couching his stock in against her side. “Suppressing fire, C-Sec. Let’s bottle them up as much as we can, then blow it and run.”

Glancing back to the rachni queen, who now held Benezia’s body in her tiny forelimbs, Shepard shouted, “Head for the tram as fast as you can go. Legion, take point. Get the queen clear of the facility.”

“Affirmative, Shepard-Captain.”

She heard the laser die, followed by a metallic crash as Legion kicked out the door. Her pulse slowed a little as their escape route opened up.

“Here they come, Shepard,” Garrus called, his sniper rifle booming like a small cannon. A large rachni soldier fell in the hole, blocking the path. Others started hauling the body clear. Aiming for what little of their insectile bodies showed through the opening, she and Garrus dropped
another three, blocking the path further.

“Go ahead, C-Sec. I’ll cover the rear.” She peppered the small opening with rounds. “Keep those two safe.”

“Shepard . . .” He hesitated, putting another two bullets into the head of a soldier as it tried to climb over its fallen siblings.

“I’m right behind you. Go.” Shepard poured a steady stream of death through the hole cut in the door, glancing behind her to make sure that her squad made it clear. With the room as torn apart by battle as it was, she couldn’t even be sure a grenade wouldn’t bring the whole place down on her head.

“We’re clear,” Garrus’s voice called. “Come on.”

Shepard bought them another couple of seconds, then clicked the timer on the grenade and lobbed it into the hole. Spinning, she ran for the tram, reaching it just in time for the explosion to give her a good, hard shove through the door.

“They flanked us,” Garrus’s shout stopped her heart for a split second.

“Fuck!” Shepard bolted forward, racing up a long flight of stairs. Sure enough, when she reached the top, the tram waiting area crawled with both soldiers and the little workers. One of the latter raced at her and leaped, splattering all down the front of her armour. A few drops misted across her face, burning in her eyes. “Keep moving the best you can!” She swiped the back of her hand across her face, trying to clear the toxic, green goo, then opened fire.

Tossing grenades into the corners furthest from her squad, she managed to thin the numbers a little. Roger moved from one to the next, her finger counting off a rhythm . . . one, two, three . . . one, two, three . . . Three bullets per customer, no waiting.

She’d only taken down a few when the rachni turned to meet her, forming a wall between Shepard and the squad. At least, they’d just about reached the tram doors. For a moment, she let Roger’s muzzle sag toward the floor. The squad was clear. No point them risking themselves waiting . . .

“Don’t you dare!” Garrus shouted.

She looked up, seeing him battering his way back to her, shooting one second, beating the rachni back with the butt of his rifle the next. Damn him, coming back for her, but good lord, wasn’t he was something to see? After a breath, she nodded, lifting her gun to her shoulder and wading in to clear a path.

A worker leaped at her face. She batted it aside, just in time for it to explode right in her eyes. Blinded, her face burning, eyes streaming tears, she swiped the backs of her fingers across her face again, but it did nothing to ease the burning. Blinking rapidly, she tried to clear her vision, barely able to make out light and dark . . . some movement. Not wanting to risk shooting Garrus, she turned Roger around, using the gun as a club. A soldier reared up in front of her, its tentacle claws stabbing and slicing the air. Spinning her rifle in her hand, she shoved the barrel into the creatures face and squeezed the trigger. In a spray of toxic blood, it went down, and then Garrus was there.

“Hang onto my belt,” he called, grabbing her hand and slapping it against his waist. Without waiting to make sure she had a grip, he turned, his assault rifle singing out death.

Shepard gripped Garrus with one hand, the other aiming Roger behind them to keep the rachni from attacking their backs. A blurred sea of movement poured up the stairs from the lab.
“Damn it.” She shouldered Roger and pulled a grenade, lobbing three in a row, each one a little further.

Then the tram doors shut behind them, and the vehicle began to move.

“She shouldered Roger and pulled a grenade, lobbing three in a row, each one a little further.

“Sit,” Garrus commanded, “and lay your head back over the seat.” He guided her to a chair and shoved her down into it none too gently.

Then the tram doors shut behind them, and the vehicle began to move.

She did as he said, laying her head back, sighing in relief a moment later as water sluiced over her eyes, washing most of the toxic slime away. When her eyes were clear, he poured it over her face and hair, then passed her a small square of towel from his hip pack.

“You really come prepared, don’t you?” she asked as she blotted her face dry.

“One tends to after they’ve been pepper sprayed a few times.” He crouched next to her. “How are the eyes?”

Shepard blinked a couple of times. “Okay. I can see, anyway. Damn, that goo stings.” She leaned forward, her forearms on her thighs as a heavy wave of dizzy nausea crashed over her. “Uhh . . . I’m not feeling all that hot though.” Without straightening, she opened her omnitool and hit her medigel.

Garrus nodded and crouched next to her, his face less than an inch from hers. “I don’t know what sort of bullshit went through your head back there,” he whispered, his voice hard and heavy on the growling subvocals, “but I never want to see it again.” He pulled back and stared into her eyes. “You aren’t disposable, Shepard.”

She stood as the tram slowed, pulling into Central Station.

“Arriving at Central Station, Binary Helix Research Facility,” the VI toned. Saved by the bell, Janey . . . well, so to speak.

Shepard jumped through the doors as soon as they opened wide enough she wouldn’t get wedged between them, and lifted into a jog. Spurred on as much by avoiding some deep ‘You’re important and worthwhile’ crap with Garrus as their ticking clock and the horde of pursuing rachni, she weaved between the rows of seats. With any luck, they’d reach the Mako in under ten minutes. She’d have to drive like a maniac to get them clear, but at least that part would be fun.

Shepard caught movement on the far end of the mess hall, moving the opposite direction than the Mako. A familiar shape amidst a retinue of twenty or so geth troopers and hunters strode quickly toward a door.

She sprinted forward, racing down the short hall, hurdling the stairs like a speed bump. “Saren!” Her scream echoed through the empty lounge, bouncing off the walls. The Spectre didn’t pause or glance back. “Where are all the people who worked here, Saren? What the hell are you doing?”

A large hand closed on her arm, yanking her to a halt. She spun, slamming up against Garrus’s side.

“What the fuck, C-Sec? Get off of me.” She wrenched at her arm, trying to pull loose, but couldn’t break his grip. She settled for turning back, just in time to see Saren disappear through the door. “Dammit. Saren! I won’t let you and the council fuck over the rest of us.” She hurled herself against Garrus’s hand. “I’ll kill you! Do you hear me? I’m going to rip your fucking lungs out, you bastard.”
Garrus yanked her closer, releasing her for a split second, just long enough to slip an arm around her waist and start dragging her toward the door. “This is not the time, Shepard,” he said, his voice loud enough to break through her rage, but the tone calm and soothing. “You’ll get your chance to put a bullet in Saren, but right now, we need to get out of here before we’re just sludge at the bottom of a crater.”

After a moment, Shepard let out a scream of pure fury, then nodded. “Fine. I’m fine, C-Sec. Let me go.” When he set her down, she took off at a run, haranguing the others to move faster. They needed to survive long enough for Shepard to close her hands around that traitor’s throat and choke the living shit out of him, herself.
Chapter Summary

The streak continues. One of Garrus or Shepard has to be a jinx.

Shepard burst out into the deadly cold, the frostbitten air cooling her molten fury on contact. A hissing-steam sigh greeted the battered, but present, Mako. Relief pushed back the cold, and if it wouldn't have earned her some extra-strange stares, she would have kissed the ugly old tank. She just prayed that it started and got them the hell out of there before it fell apart.

Stabbing a finger toward the Mako's back end, she called, "Legion, help the queen get in through the back hatch." Garrus on her heels, she ducked around the front, leaping over a piece of the still-burning Grizzly. On the far side, she threw that hatch open and jumped in. "Garrus, give me a hand with Benezia."

They took Benezia's body from the queen and laid it on one of the bench seats, then scrambled into the cockpit, leaving Legion to shoehorn the rachni into the troop compartment. Luckily, despite her size, the queen was mostly leg and long, slender body, so she folded down with enough room to spare for Legion to squeeze into the seat at the cannon.

Shepard glanced back as she started up the tank. "Now there's something you don't see every day." Legion and the queen both just stared at her. "Okay, let's get the hell out of here."

Garrus activated the electronics suite. "Getting arrested with a geth, a rachni queen, and a dead matriarch should prove interesting." He shot a glare across at her, his mandibles twitching in an aggressive way she wasn't used to seeing from him. In fact, she couldn't recall seeing it since he went after Saren on Feros.

She nodded as the Mako rumbled to life. "Keep a weather eye on those damage sensors. I'm going to need to push the poor old girl as hard as I can." She activated her omnitool so that she could see the chrono counting down, then slipped the tank into gear, backing it away from Peak 15.

The hours they'd spent inside the facility had not been kind to the roads. Not to mention that the snow had drifted and blown down through the hole in the cockpit, covering most of the control console in a thick layer of crystals. She brushed it off and ducked her head, trying to see past the miniature squall blasting directly into her face.

"Legion, grab a panel off something non-essential and stick it up here. I can't see a fucking thing." Shepard swiped a hand across the face plate of her helmet to clear her vision, unable to see the sensor readouts.

"Might have been something to consider before ramming a colossus and getting it stuck on the front of the Mako," Garrus grumbled. He cursed as Legion wedged itself between them, and sparks filled the air from its omnitool.

"Shut it, Vakarian, and just keep your eyes on the damn sensors." Shepard hit the eezo core, increasing the positive field to give the tank more traction as it leaped off a drift and bounced dangerously close to the cliff edge. Steering it toward the mountainside, she brought the six-
wheeled menace back under control.

"Maybe slow the hell down before you get us all killed. We've got twenty minutes to make it four and a half kilometres." Garrus reached over in front of her to hit a control. "We've got the time, and if you keep going like this, we're going to break down. Only four wheels are turning, the entire front end is twisted … ."

"Just keep it running for another twenty minutes. I didn't ask for a laundry list of how I—"

"Look out!" Garrus hollered, pointing to the LADAR screen as a mass of snow the size of an apartment building broke free of the mountainside above them.

Gritting her teeth, Shepard manipulated the eezo core to increase the tank’s mass and steered into the torrent, driving directly toward the mountain. Fighting the current, the Mako slewed hard, the tires churning as the tons of snow pushed it toward the edge. The tank punched through and reared up the rock face, tilting off to the starboard side to crash back onto its wheels.

"Spirits, Shepard," Garrus shouted, adding a choice turian curse. "Do you have to drive like a lunatic?"

Shepard clenched her teeth and set her jaw, fighting to keep her trembling hands steady on the controls. "Watch the damned screens. Last thing I fucking need is someone screaming at me from the passenger seat."

Legion finished its work and retreated silently out of the battle zone. Shepard gave it a nod of gratitude, glad to be able to see what she was doing. They passed into the first of the avalanche tunnels, and she took advantage of the calm to remove her helmet. Sighing with relief, she shook her hair out and cracked her neck. God, she hated wearing that thing while driving or flying.

The road between the first and second avalanche tunnels widened to a far more comfortable margin. She still stuck like a tick to the inside of the road, however. If another avalanche hit, she'd much rather it buried them then swept them out into a long drop with a deadly stop.

"How far until we're clear of the blast zone?" She glanced down at her chrono. Twelve minutes.

"Two kilometres." Garrus reached over her console again to hit a couple of controls. As annoying as it was, she let it go. They needed the damned thing to carry them another two klicks before it conked out. If he needed to sit on her lap and braid her hair to accomplish that, so be it.

"Is the last avalanche tunnel outside the zone?" she asked as the Mako did a small jump down the ramp and back onto the snowy road.

"The last half of it, anyway," Garrus answered after a second of fiddling with the map.

"We'll let our passengers out there," she said. "They can get a head start toward Port Hanshan, take shelter close to the city. Once we're clear of the bureaucracy, we'll pick them up." Shepard course corrected as the road under them broke loose and slid toward the edge. "We can sit in the tunnel for a bit to buy them time."

Garrus grumbled, but remained focused on his task as a grinding sound from underneath began to accompany the wobbling thump-thump of the ruined wheels.

With a klick left to go, smoke began to drift into the cockpit. Shepard glanced over at Garrus to see how concerned she needed to be, but he just shrugged and nodded ahead to the opening of the last tunnel before the city.
"There's nothing left to do but hope," he grumbled.

"Understood. Look for some shelter for them on high ground. The blast is likely going to shake every last bit of snow off the mountain, and I don't want them to end up down there, somewhere." She jerked her head toward the drop.

Garrus hunkered over the topographical terrain display without arguing.

The smoke had reached the point where Shepard thought she'd have to put her helmet back on when they entered the tunnel. At the far end, Shepard checked her chrono. Despite nearly dying, they'd made good time, and Legion had nine minutes to get high enough to avoid being buried in an inevitable avalanche.

Shepard turned in her seat and passed the geth a card of trackers. "These are in case we lose radio contact for any reason. Make sure you're both wearing more than one. Radio in when you find shelter outside the city. Just send your location." She glanced to Garrus, but he remained hunched over, searching. "Here's the matriarch's OSD. Don't lose it."

She studied the pair of them for a moment. "Are you both going to be okay in this cold?"

"This platform is designed to withstand the cold vacuum of space," Legion informed her.

"We shall be fine. Rachni are accustomed to far more hazardous environments than this," Benezia said with the queen's voice.

Shepard shuddered.

"I found a cave high on the mountain. They should be able to make it if they move now and move fast," Garrus called out. "Sending coordinates to Legion's omnitool."

"Excellent." Shepard pulled on her helmet and climbed out the side door, riding up Legion's heels. When they extricated the rachni queen from the troop compartment, she and Garrus helped her with Benezia. "Be quick and careful," she ordered as the odd pair turned and ran toward the end of the tunnel.

"Sweet baby Jesus, I hope they'll be okay," she muttered under her breath once the swirling snow swallowed them whole.

"They'll be fine. Let's get back in the Mako before my limbs snap off." Garrus climbed in the back, while Shepard ran around the side.

Once in the driver's seat, Shepard put the tank into reverse, backing down the avalanche tunnel just far enough to clear the end. Any part of the structure might collapse in the case of a massive disaster, but the ends seemed the most likely danger zones.

Neither she nor Garrus spoke as they waited for the timer to run out. A couple of times, she inhaled and opened her mouth to ask him if some of the rachni might escape and survive, or how he thought Saren planned to escape. Each time, she glanced over at him, sitting there rigid and furious, his mandibles tight to his face and twitching, and the mission aborted before getting off the launch pad.

She'd just started the transition from hurt sadness to puzzling through why he was so furious with her when the ground shook, a single, massive jolt. A sound like an old-fashioned diesel freight train rumbled toward them, then God slammed His fist down on the Mako. Shepard flew out of her seat, bouncing off the divider to crash onto the floor as the machine rocked hard to starboard.
Bouncing and swaying, it settled onto all six tires.

No sooner had silence fallen than she felt the ground tremble again. The roar accompanying the cataclysm of rolling snow grew louder and louder until Shepard covered her head and curled into a ball, waiting for it to end. An avalanche that strong should smash through the tunnel, a charging bull that bore them over the edge to smash them against the rock far below. But then the monster passed over them and she peeked out from under her arms, heart pounding, head light. They were okay. She let out a giddy sound, not sure if it was relief or her cheese had finally slid off her cracker.

"Shepard? You all right?" Garrus moved, alerting her to the fact that he'd wrapped himself around her. His voice sounded nearly as shaken as she felt.

She uncurled and pushed herself up off the Mako's floor. "Yeah, I'm fine, just rattled." Clambering to her feet, she checked herself for injury. Other than the vague burning and nausea left over from the rachni goo, all of her bits and pieces seemed present and accounted for. "How about you?" She sat in the driver's seat and checked on the Mako.

"Yeah, fine." He thumped down into the other seat and brought up the LADAR screen. After a minute, he let out a grumbling sigh. "Well, we're stuck."

"What do you mean stuck? Did the tunnel collapse?" She craned her neck to get a better look at the readout. The immediate area seemed clear.

Garrus chuffed. "I mean that we can drive back and forth along this fifty metre stretch of tunnel, but there is no way in hell we can get out either end." Garrus slowed down, speaking to her as if she was three. "The antimatter explosion shook the mountain. The snow rolled down the mountain. The snow buried us in this tunnel." He got up and moved to the cannon seat in the back. "I'll power down everything that isn't essential to survival. We're going to be here awhile."

Shepard let out a long, angry breath, her nostrils flaring. "Excellent. Behaving like a petulant, condescending ass is definitely going to make being trapped here a whole lot easier. Thanks so much."

Garrus turned off the cannon and electronics suite before moving to the front seat and setting to work on the machine gun and navigation controls. "And you called me a jinx. You're the jinx. How many times have your decisions gotten us trapped somewhere, Shepard? Therum, you decided to blow a magma pocket to kill the krogan. Feros, you insisted we run down through the building. Omega ...."

Shepard looked over at him and deadpanned, "You're joking with me, right? Therum, okay, I own Therum. Feros was your hot-headed stupidity. If we'd evacuated with the colonists, we'd have been fine. Omega ... who was it yelled, 'They went in here?' She threw her hands out. "And this? What the hell else was I supposed to do, C-Sec? Wait two days for Nihlus to get us permission to check out the crater that used to be Peak 15? Try to make it down the road to Port Hanshan and get us swept off the side of the mountain?" Her eyes burned, hating the sick, aching pressure that threatened to blow open her chest. Had she just been naive about Garrus being her friend all those weeks?

No, surely she hadn't, but then why was he acting so much ... so much like Nihlus? Well, Nihlus before he started trying to avoid assholery. She pushed that out of her head and reached up to open a radio channel. "Legion, it's Shepard. Do you read?"

"Affirmative, Shepard-Captain. We avoided the avalanche and are undamaged. Proceeding toward
"Port Hanshan," the geth replied.

"Excellent. Talk to you soon, Shepard out." She closed the channel.

"No, dropping and going in was the right move," Garrus continued. He leaned back against the side of the tank, the rod up his ass returning full force. "I just wasn't counting on being arrested outside of council space on espionage charges." He held his hands out, gesturing around them. "Do you know how much the executive board will fine us, Shepard? They probably won't take the Normandy because it would provoke an incident with the Alliance, but us personally . . . " He leaned toward her. "I will never make enough money at C-Sec to pay the fines. Not to mention what being arrested for corporate espionage does for the career of a C-Sec investigator." He thumped back against the side of the tank.

"I guess that depends on whether or not you're a C-Sec investigator, doesn't it?" Shepard turned to stare straight ahead. Sighing, she growled a little, then said, "What the fuck is your problem, Vakarian? Is this just a case of 'I'm having a bad day, and I feel like being a complete ass to Shepard', or is there something else going on?" Deflating a little, she shook her head. "I'm doing the fucking best that I can. I got us all in there, got the information, and then got us out alive." She tried not to let him see how deep his words cut. For so many years she'd cultivated a life where no one's opinion of her mattered, and now another turian was causing that 'surely it must be a heart attack' pain. She swallowed hard, trying to loosen her throat, preparing herself for whatever he said.

"Vakarian?" Garrus asked, his voice sounding nearly as strangled as hers.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him nod, a small thrill of satisfaction lancing through her as his mandibles dropped for a moment.

He took a quick, deep breath and nodded again. "Well, if I have to be Vakarian to keep you alive, then I guess I'll live with that. You went somewhere stupid and ugly back in that tram station, Kahri, so yes, I have a problem beyond 'it's been a bad day'." He leaned forward, spine rigid, mandibles tucked in hard against the sides of his mouth. "The most important person in my life is a suicidal, reckless idiot, and I'm getting a little tired of having to babysit her."

"Most import . . . Babysit . . . ?" She scoffed even though her heart raced and her hands tingled. Why hadn't she seen what a condescending ass he could be? Fury boiled inside her gut, making her stomach flutter. "You're impossible. Why did I even bring you along on? I should have left you on —"

He chuffed, cutting her off. "Me? I'm impossible? Oh, honey . . . ."

Shepard spun to face him and lunged across the cab, grabbing his armour by the yoke. "You did not just 'honey' me. I'm your fucking captain, C-Sec Investigator Vakarian." Giving him a single, hard shake, she leaned in, glaring at him. "We've had this discussion. Little sister pushed the limit of disrespect you could show and keep what little ass you have. Honey ... a hundred turians don't have enough ass for 'honey'."

Garrus folded his arms and pulled his head back. "Yes, we've had this discussion, Shepard. But do you want to know something? Sometimes the terrible Captain Jane Shepard, most feared woman in the galaxy . . . " He leaned in, staring into her eyes, an angry glint challenging her. "... as long as she's behind the wheel, needs to hear that she's being a—"

A furious growl rolled from her throat. "You . . . ."

Then his mouth mashed against hers, and her lips moved over his rough hide. Leaning into him,
Shepard yanked back, throwing herself backward into her seat, chest heaving as she struggled to catch her breath. She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth then stared at a narrow streak of blood that marked her glove from where one of his teeth had nicked her lip.

"Where … ?" she gasped. "Wha … ?" She let out a startled, gasping cough. "Sweet baby Jesus, C-Sec. Where the hell did that come from?"

He slid forward on his seat, staring at her for a long moment, then hit his knees between the seats. "Do you care?" He reached out and cupped her cheek in his hand, his thumb running across her brow and down the bridge of her nose.

She swung around to kneel on the driver's seat, bringing her to his eye level. "Hell, no." She leaned forward, kissing him softly, more tentatively until his arms wrapped around her, pulling her into the contact. Then their tongues tangled around one another, hands roaming everywhere they could touch, bodies pressed together despite the armour. Shepard pulled off her gloves, running her fingers over his face and down his neck.

What are you doing, Janey? You know this is stupid.

"The fringe," he whispered against her lips, distracting her, "particularly the underside." He nuzzled along the line of her jaw, then under her ear. He chuckled. "Oh, I like this spot." He tickled the short, silky hairs with the upper plate of his mouth, then his tongue. "So soft."

Shepard purred low and throaty. "What a coincidence, I like that one too." She tilted her head, giving him free roaming as her fingertips slid over and between the long spikes of his fringe, lingering in all the places where he moaned and rumbled.

You know that you're dooming your friendship, right? You're way too far gone to have a real, functional relationship, Janey.

Shepard stiffened and pulled away, pressing her palm against Garrus's cheekbone. The ache in her chest deepened as he looked into her eyes, then leaned in and touched his brow to hers.

"Stop freaking out," he said. "Breathe, Shepard, and just stop thinking."

"There it is again, that C-Sec magic," she said, trying to force a chuckle. "Levitation and now mindreading."

"I told you ... one hundred percent pure magic." His mandible ticked her cheek as it flicked in a smile.

"Captain Jane Shepard?" a stern, female voice called through Shepard's radio, shattering the moment.

Shepard sighed and pulled away, her hand reaching up to her radio. "This is Shepard."

"Captain, I'm Sergeant Kaira Stirling, Elanus Risk Control Services. I'm here to detain you on
behalf of the Port Hanshan Customs and Immigration Authority for unauthorized landing on Noveria Executive Board property."

"Understood, Sergeant," Shepard replied. Experience had taught her it was best to keep things simple and direct in those sorts of situations.

"Our scan shows two of you in there. Is that correct? Are you armed?"

Shepard chuckled. "Yes, there are two of us and yes, we are incredibly well armed, but neither of us is prone to firing on peace officers unless we are fired upon first."

"You're buried under about fifteen metres of snow, Captain, so it will take us several hours to get you out of there." The Sergeant grumbled, her distaste coming through loud and clear as she continued. "It is my duty at this time to inform you that all fees, equipment rental and loss, expenses, and wages incurred during your rescue are your responsibility and, regardless of other outcomes, will be due in full requiring payment prior to your vessel being released from impound."

Shepard laughed, waiting until she could wrestle the humour down before she replied. "Understood Port Hanshan Authority. We aren't going anywhere. Shepard, out." Sighing, she rested her head on the yoke of Garrus's armour. "Well, we're being rescued. Again."

He chuckled. "Probably going to be stuck in here for a few hours though. However will we spend the time?"

Shepard leaned into him and nuzzled his mandible. "What in the name of the sweet baby Jesus do we do about this, C-Sec?"

He sighed and turned to nuzzle her brow. "Have you made Nihlus any promises?"

"Nihlus?" She jerked back and frowned at him. "No. Nihlus and I aren't like that."

"Nihlus is," he said, his voice warm and gentle.

Shepard nodded. "I know, he kissed me, and I care about him. I do."

"But?" His talons combed through her hair.

"I gave him a knife, and he turned it right around on me. I understand why ... I think, but I don't think I'll ever trust him to where I just leap on him and stick my tongue in his mouth." She chuckled and pulled back, pressing her lips to his mouth. Her eyes drifted closed as she inhaled the rich, warm, gun oil and male smell of him. "So, is this just a moment of snowbound insanity?"

He nuzzled her lips and down her neck. "Now that I've done this and felt this ... " His tongue flicked the spot under her ear. "... I'm going to be thinking about it pretty much every second of the day. My vote is for giving us a shot."

Shepard pulled back and stared into his eyes, the left side of her mouth pulled back in a considering smile even as her heart fell, pounding hard but slow, as if her blood turned to sludge.

What are you going to do when he leaves you?

"Okay. We'll see what happens, but C-Sec ... you know me. You know it's not going to be smooth sailing."

He nodded toward the back and reached up to cup her neck between his hands. "We're going to be
here for a while, so let's do our best to keep warm."

"You're going to be a constant distraction, aren't you?" she whispered. Despite the teasing tone in her voice, the words laced very real bonds of fear around her heart, tying it tight. She'd worked so hard not to have anything she was afraid to lose, anything that took her mind off the job in front of her. She watched him crouch and squeeze into the back, dragging the cushions off the bench seats and lying them on the floor.

He gave her hope, and damned if that wasn't the most dangerous force in the universe. It couldn't last. Between how fucked up she was, the danger of the job, and the fact that sooner or later, even if they both survived, the mission would end and they'd go back to their lives ... whatever they developed would destruct.

He dug into the chest under the seat, pulling out blankets, water, a lantern, and rations bars. He held up the ration bars. "I packed dextro this time." He grinned, then sobered as their eyes met. "You're already talking yourself out of this, aren't you?"

She nodded. No point in lying to the C-Sec investigator who saw everything.

He spread out one of the blankets, jerking his head to call her over. "Come here." When she didn't move, he did it again. "Come here, Shepard."

She turned to her controls, powering everything down except the emergency lights and the heater. Once she shut it down, she turned to look at Garrus only to find him still watching her.

"Did we know that would happen eventually?" she asked, her brow furrowing even as the one side of her face quirked again.

He frowned, but his mandibles spread and fluttered. "Then ... no. Now, I think it was going to happen from the moment I turned around in the gym, saw the way you were watching me, and my heart started racing so fast that I thought I'd pass out."

Shepard raised her eyebrows and nodded. "Yeah, I can't complain about that view."

Garrus looked down and away, his mandibles fluttering a little.

Shepard got up and ducked through into the back, kneeling beside him. Laying her hand on his arm, she asked. "What?" She waited a second, then cocked an eyebrow. After so many days of the confident, badass friend, his bashfulness surprised her, but it also made her neck flare with heat that crawled up her cheeks. "C-Sec?"

He chuffed a little. "After we met Martin ...."

She chuckled and slid her hand down to hold his talons. "You really going to make me drag this out of you?"

He met her eyes at last, his expression as intense as she'd ever seen it, but different. It wasn't the intensity of the sniper's honed laser sight, but an intensity with a profound gentleness behind it. "Since the Citadel, I've wanted it, Shepard. The way you threw your arms around my neck when that artifact let you go ... . The time we spent with Martin and Anderson ... ."

She smiled sadly and reached up to press her hand against his cheek before pulling on her gloves. "I like you, C-Sec. I do ... you're the best friend I've had in a long time, but that's what has me scared. I don't want to fuck what we already have up because of my craziness." When she opened her mouth to continue, he caressed her bottom lip the pad of a talon, silencing her.
"Shepard, take a drink." He shoved a bottle of water into her hand. "Are you hungry?" Not waiting for an answer, he pressed a protein bar into her other one. "Eat, and then we'll just keep warm and wait to get arrested."

Twisting the cap off the bottle, she took a long drink then passed it to him. After looking at the protein bar for a couple of seconds, she set it aside. Her belly tied itself in knots, caught in the middle between how badly she wanted to reach across the centimetres separating them, and the fear that crawled through her.

Garrus set the bottle aside and took both of her hands in his. "What you're feeling right now is your fight or flight response. You live by it, and it almost always demands that you fight. Right?"

She smiled and squeezed his hands. "Yeah, I've never been much of a runner." Still, her guts insisted that she shut it down before it had a chance to go anywhere. It had to be less painful in the end.

Garrus leaned in, tugging her toward him until their brows touched and he could clasp his hands behind her back. "Don't run, Kahri. If you give me a chance, I won't let you down."

The pressure eased, the knots loosening as warmth spread through her. "What is that you keep calling me?" she whispered. Her eyes drifted shut as the steady, safe ... groundedness of him pulled her in. He felt like home.

Damn him.

"Kahri. It's a word in the turian closed dialect, the language of the home world." He nuzzled her brow. "It has a few meanings, one of which is light."

A barely imperceptible sigh escaped her lips to drift in the silence between them. "I'm no one's light, C-Sec."

A crooked talon pressed under her chin, tilting her face up. "You're such a bright light that you blind yourself, Shepard. Why do you think people are drawn to you, as ornery and sarcastic and stubborn as you are?" He pressed his mouth to hers then nuzzled her cheek, his breath the gentlest of caresses on her skin. "If you'd left me behind on the Citadel, I'd have followed. If you don't want to be with me, I can learn to live with that, as much as I want it, but, Shepard, I'm in this to the end." A wry chuckle rumbled deep in his throat. "No matter how much you piss me off."

"Okay, C-Sec. Okay, but I'm going to want to run." Pulling back, she slipped her arms around his neck. Something settled deep in her chest, something that felt as if it had been floating for fifteen years. "I've never done this. Never wanted to before now." She smiled and tucked her face in under his jaw. "Remember that though, when I'm being terrified, impossible, and obtuse. I do want this."

He held her tight. "Deal." Without pulling away, he picked up one of the emergency blankets and pulled it around her. "You're going to be okay, Shepard. We'll figure all this out."
Chapter Summary

Shepard remembers Mindoir. TRIGGER WARNING! Nothing explicit takes place, but there is an obvious threat of sexual abuse of a minor. Batarian slavers are not kind nor merciful. So yeah, the italicized parts might trigger.

“Your nature will be revealed to us. Accept that,” the deep, throaty, many-layered whisper declared. The oily-tar spiders swarmed up the back of Shepard’s skull, their slick carapaces glinting with the living, frigid darkness that attacked her on the Citadel. Struggling to be the first to slip between the folds of her brain, to discover all her secret terrors and loves, they clambered over each other in an ever-shifting mass. “Your mind belongs to us.”

Shepard shifted in her sleep, murmuring, her brow creasing even as she curled into the warm blankets and the hard angles of the arms that held her.

Darkness. Beautiful, cool, safe darkness. Janey burrowed deeper into the warmth of her blankets, eyes closed, lips curved into a blissful smile as she listened to the orchestra of hoppers and night birds outside her window. Early spring perfumed the air with the rich green, honey scent of the budding trees coloured with a sprinkling of floral tones. Even though the night air still dropped near freezing, she kept her windows open to invite in the elusive, magical spirits of spring.

Small, bare feet padded over the hardwood that lined the hall, hesitating for a moment at the threshold of Jane’s room. “Janey?” When she didn’t answer, the footsteps continued across the metre of floor, stopping at the edge of her bed. “Janey?”

She smiled and cracked one eye open. “What is it, Bunny? You’re supposed to have gone to sleep an hour ago.” Jane sighed. “Your dolls aren’t staring at you, Bunny, and I’m not going into your room to check. Those things freak the crap out of me, you know they do.” She glared at the earnest, wide eyes staring at her over the edge of her bed. “Maybe, if you didn’t rescue every creepy, broken doll in the known universe to nurse it back to health, you wouldn’t have this problem.”

“I was asleep, honest.” Big eyes stared into hers, their pupils eating up almost all the bright green iris. “But there’s a monster in the house. I saw it downstairs. It has four eyes.”

“There’s no such thing as . . . .” A crash from the main floor punched a fistful of claws through Jane’s chest, wrenching her up off the mattress by its grip around her heart. “Mom? Dad?” The words drifted pale and helpless into the darkness, the claws scratching up her throat to pinch her larynx closed.

A piercing shriek ripped the air, echoing up the stairs. Throwing back her covers, Jane scrambled off the bed, snatching for Bunny’s hand and gripping it tight. Panic froze her in place as half of her insisted on racing down to her parents, while the other half dragged her to the window, demanding that she get Bunny to safety.

The stairs thundered under running feet. For a breathless moment, she stared through her open door into the hall, every inch of her body trembling as she prayed for her father to appear. A harsh,
jagged sob of relief met his blood-streaked face as it raced in the door. He slammed Jane’s bedroom door shut behind him, locking it.

“Get to the window.” His voice slapped her hard, shattering the ice that held her in place. He jammed Jane’s desk chair under the doorknob. “Hurry.”

Jane did as she was told, reacting robotically to the fear in her father’s voice. She pulled the screen out of the window and lifted Bunny out onto the roof.

“Run to the woods,” her father ordered, his strong arm helping Jane out onto the roof. His kiss impacted her cheek like a punch, his long stubble scratching her skin. “Head for the big rock across the creek. Hide. We’ll come for you when we can.” Pounding on the other side of the door dragged his attention from them. “Move fast and keep to the shadows,” he called over his shoulder, running to brace the door. “We’ll come for you.”

Jane hesitated, her heart colder and harder than the slate shingles under her bare feet. “Dad? Daddy . . . why . . . what’s going on?” Her gaze flicked back and forth between the door and her dad, the whole universe tumbling around her, crashing and lopsided as if she were a pair of running shoes thrown into the dryer.

The door burst open in a hail of splintered wood. “Run!” her father bellowed, the single word drowning under the swell of Bunny’s screaming. He spun to face the six, shadowy figures that shoved and kicked their way through the broken door. “Run and don’t . . .” A muffled crunching sound accompanied a thick, wet scream . . . a broken, terrified sound she’d never imagined her father could make. A single, violent heave spewed popcorn and soda from their earlier vid-night down the front of her pyjamas, but she didn’t move . . . couldn’t move, despite the hot mass of sick rolling down her chest. Finally, she heard a heavy thump, her heart knowing that was her father’s body hitting the floor. Its terrible finality cut into her like the lash of a bullwhip, driving her into action.

Jane caught a glimpse of four, black eyes in the dark window before she half-crawled, half-slid on her backside down the slope of the roof. Arms lunged through the open portal. As fingers grabbed the fabric of Bunny’s nightgown, the child lived up to her nickname, letting out a thin, ‘rabbit in hawk’s claws’ wail of fear. Jane lunged, animal and fierce, her teeth sinking into the monster’s flesh hard enough that blood oozed over her tongue. A vicious shake of her head earned a garbled curse, and she let go, snarling at the attacker as the hand yanked back inside. Gagging and spitting, she dragged Bunny the rest of the way down to the eaves and the three metre drop to the lawn.

“Wait here,” she called, inch-worming her way over the edge. “I’ll catch you.” She dropped off the roof, her ankle letting out a grinding yelp as she hit the ground, and fell onto her backside. Scrambling, she jumped up, holding her arms out. “Come on. Jump. I’ll catch you.”

Bunny lowered herself, little feet kicking as she wriggled over the edge.

“Okay, you’re only a few centimetres away from my hands, just let go.” Jane looked behind her, hearing screaming from more houses in their little development. Her guts loosened, rolling with a sick gurgling. Mrs. Pagette ran out her front door, just to be dragged down, smashing her head on her stairs. Three men tore away her nightdress, then dragged her out of sight. In less than five seconds, Mrs. Pagette and her attackers vanished into the darkness. Jane’s stomach heaved again.

“God damn it, Bunny, just let go,” Jane growled, low and fierce, terror turning to rage. Bunny dropped, a feather-weight easily caught. Setting the child down, Jane grabbed one small hand in hers and bolted for the woods behind the house.
Time counted down in heartbeats, her pulse so loud in her ears that she couldn’t detect any sign of pursuit. Still, she didn’t slow, her feet racing over the wet, slippery leaves and stabbing twigs, squelching through mud as the trees closed in around them, wrapping them in comforting camouflage. So close. Jane felt the call of the huge, cracked glacier rock on the other side of the creek.

“Hurry. I’ll keep you safe if you can just get to me,” it whispered on the breeze. It helped slow the frantic hummingbird wings thumping inside her chest and eased the terrible, watery sloshing in her bowels. If they could just make it to the rock. If they could just make it.

Bunny lagged, pulling back hard on Jane’s hand like a weanling calf sitting back to resist being halter broken. “Slow down,” the child wailed. “Where’s Mommy and Daddy?” She stumbled and fell on her face in a bawling heap. Holding up a heavily bleeding hand, she screamed, “Janey, I want Mommy.” Jane stopped and turned back, lifting the weeping girl back onto her feet.

“They’ll meet us at the rock.” She kissed the cut across the child’s palm. “Come on, we’re just about to the creek,” Jane whispered between gasping breaths. “You can do it. Just keep running.” She tugged hard on the hand, hauling the small anchor along behind her.

“Look what we’ve got here.” A nightmarish form unfolded from the darkness shrouding the path ahead. If it hadn’t spoken, Jane could have dismissed it as a shadow but for the chilling, hard gleam that leered at her from all four eyes. “Thought you could outrun us, did you?” The terrible shadow laughed and lunged toward her.

Jane threw herself backward, feet scrambling as she tried to stop. Slipping on the dew-slick path, she went down, her backside splashing into a puddle of muck. Bunny squawked in pain, dragged down along with Jane, one tiny arm twisted at a strange angle. It snapped, a dry twig under their combined weight, but Bunny merely whimpered and cowered close, tunneling into Jane’s side.

The batarian towered over them, reaching for Bunny first. He lifted the child by the collar of her nightshirt and shoved her toward another figure, that one huffing and wheezing from the chase. “Take this back to the cages for their street.” He cocked his head as his eyes slid over to Jane. “Going to take a little time with this one.” Grabbing a handful of long, red hair, he dragged her to her knees. “Caught us a tasty looking piece of young meat here.”

“You sure you don’t want me to stay, Remit? That one looks like a fighter.” The second batarian stalked around Jane in a wide circle.

Remit laughed, deep and vicious. “You just want to stuff yours into whatever’s left over. Ha!” The batarian pushed Shepard’s head back, forcing her face up to look at him. Rough fingers shoved themselves into her mouth, choking her into another moment of paralysis, but then her fight kicked in, and she bit down as hard as she could.

Slamming her hand down on the slaver’s knuckles, Jane broke his hold on her hair and twisted hard to the side. Sweeping out with her leg, she dumped Remit onto his ass then kicked straight out, catching him under the chin with her heel. He yelled, but fell back, stunned. Jane scrambled to her feet, spitting blood from where one of her teeth had snapped off in Remit’s finger, and launched herself toward Bunny. Before she wrestled the child loose, Remit’s hand buried itself in her hair again.

He yanked her back, shaking her like a pyjak in varren jaws. An open hand slammed into the side of her head. Her jaw cracked as the eye on that side of her head tried to explode out onto her cheek. She dropped, head ringing and fuzzy. Still, she clawed at the ground, trying to stand . . . to get to Bunny . . . to get them both safe. Daddy trusted her to keep Bunny safe.
“Look, meat,” Remit said, his voice a low, rolling growl, “if you fight me, I’ll tie you to that tree over there and make you watch as I do every single twisted, agonizing thing I plan to do to you, ’cept on that little one over there.” He yanked her around and onto her feet, his bleeding and torn fingers digging into her jaw as he forced her to look at the other slaver holding Bunny.

The child kicked and screamed.

“So, what’s it going to be? You going to pucker up and bend over like a good little whore, or do I tear your baby . . . sister? niece? cousin? to shreds?”

Jane stared at Bunny, that precious and precocious treasure dangling from the other slaver’s hand, and nodded once. She spewed vomit, heaving up as much blood as bile. Retch after retch, her stomach forced the slaver back enough to give her a moment to shut the pain and cold into a dark room at the back of her mind. Collapsing into his grip, she managed to gasp out, “Look away, Bunny. Don’t watch.”

“And the spiders crawled out from under that carefully sealed door, black, slick and wriggling with joy.

* * * * *

Shepard awoke to screaming, shrill and deafening as it echoed in the small, suffocating space.

_So dark. Oh God, please . . . it’s so dark._

“Shepard. Easy now. Sh.” Garrus’s face appeared next to her. “It was a nightmare. You’re all right.”

She thrust him away, his hands too rough, his talons too sharp even through her armour. His touch hurt, biting her skin with electric shocks. Strangled, choking wails clawed their way out of her throat as she fought to be free of the blankets. They tangled around her arms and legs, holding her bound and helpless. Clambering to her feet, she backed into the corner of the troop compartment, eyes searching the darkness for . . . she didn’t know what she searched for. Batarians? Whatever intelligence lurked behind the darkness and chill of the glittering, black spiders?

“Oh God.” Her legs trembled more violently with every second until they gave out, dumping her onto her knees. Her arms held out a little longer before they gave up as well, spilling her onto her side. Cheek pressed to the cold, metal flooring, Shepard closed her eyes.

_Just breathe, Janey. Breathe. You’ll be okay. It was just a dream. Just a dream._

Razor-wire tears sliced their way out from under clenched eyelids, bleeding down her face to pool on the Mako’s floor. Sobs twisted her body, the wire coiling around her lungs, refusing to let her draw more than hiccoughs of breath. She felt Garrus’s stare like barbs under her skin and covered her head with her arms. Why then? She’d kept the door locked tight for so long, how had it broken her control?

A gentle, strong hand pressed between her shoulder blades, rubbing slow circles that felt as if they
carved straight into her spine. Her scream threw Garrus back as she scrambled up, crawling across the Mako to where her helmet had rolled up against one of the seats.

“Shepard? What . . .?” Garrus crouched, his hands held out, his face drawn with both fear and concern. “Shepard.” He sighed, his mandibles lowering, flicking heavy and slow. “Is it the same as when the orb attacked you?” He shuffled one foot toward her, earning another scream that hit him like a rifle shot, throwing him back.

“Shepard . . .” She swallowed hard, the tears raining all the faster for the pain she saw in his eyes. “I just . . . please, don’t touch me.” Snatching her helmet off the floor, she wrestled it over her head and clicked the seal. “I need . . . I just need room to breathe. I can’t breathe.” She flung open the side hatch and swung out, hitting the snow-covered ground running.

“Shepard?” Less than a minute later, she heard footsteps crunching in the snow behind her. “Come back to the Mako. We have maybe three minutes out here before we freeze.”

Shepard ran, trying to put some road between herself and the long-neglected grifter pouring snake oil into her blood. Instead, another beckoned to her with an icy finger as it opened its wares. ‘Falling asleep and dying peacefully’ lay in the case next to ‘Never having to remember’. Shaking hands reached out to take the case of icy death. All she had to do was drive Garrus off, or wait for him to give up and return to the Mako to save himself.

_He’ll never do that, Janey. You know he won’t._

Shepard stumbled a little as she ran, her moment of hesitation allowing the dream to catch up, punching straight through her helmet and into her skull. The oily spiders streamed through her, bleeding into her vision, the world burning black at the edges.

_Bunny. Her precious Bunny screaming as the batarian dragged Jane up to his face, sniffing her like a dog. “You stink,” he said and threw her down the slope into the creek. “Scrub that carcass, meat.” The three slavers pelted her with mud and rocks as she washed in the shallow, mucky ice-water._

“Shepard! Stop.” Garrus skirted around her, trying to block her flight without making contact. “I won’t touch you.” He held his hands out as if to show her that he was disarmed. “Just come back in out of the cold before it kills us.” When she didn’t respond, he went against his word, he gripped her shoulders and shook her. “Shepard. Breathe. Come back to me.” Rough hands shook her again, but as the monster closed in, the rest faded into a numb, frozen background.

“Shepard. Come on, _Kahri_, don’t give in to it. Fight!”

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“What happened?” She could hear him shivering under his words. “You woke me up. You were screaming.” He shuddered. “Spirits, Shepard. I’ve never heard anyone scream like that.” He shook his head. “No, don’t . . . forget I asked. Just breathe. Just be here. Here with me.”

Shepard started to speak, but then three sets of brilliant, bouncing lights and the sound of engines cut her off. Beautiful, practical, harsh old reality threw a proverbial bucket of ice water over her, breaking the last of the dream’s hold. A relieved sigh hissed between her lips, a pressure valve opening.

“Captain Shepard? Officer Vakarian?” a familiar voice called over a loudspeaker.

Shepard lifted a hand to shade her eyes and nodded. “Yes.” She heard hatches opening, boots marching in the dry, crunching snow, then shadows appeared, guns held at the ready as they blocked the light from the armoured vehicles.

*Thank god for being arrested.*

“Sergeant Kaira Sterling,” one said, stepping forward, “and it is my duty to place you both under arrest at this time.”

“Thank the spirits,” Garrus said, mumbling the words under his breath.

“Don’t worry, Sergeant, we have no intention to resist. Take us in.” She took a deep breath, gripping the control Stirling’s arrival offered in slack fingers. She needed to hold it together; she needed to breathe.

Turning back toward the Mako, she asked, “Could someone bring our APC in, please? My guns are in there, and they’ve been with me a very long time. I’d hate to have to trespass again to get them.”

“Young Mako will be impounded and returned to Port Hanshan.” The sergeant strode over and held out a hand to usher Shepard toward the lead M29 Grizzly. “After you, Captain . . . unless you’d prefer to be dragged in wearing cuffs?”

Shepard took a long, tremulous breath and nodded. “Cuffs won’t be required, thank you.”
Shepard stepped up into the ERCS APC and headed straight for the back corner of the troop compartment. She strapped herself into the furthest seat and pulled her knees up to her chest, curling into as tight a ball as she could manage. Garrus tried to sit next to her, but Sgt. Stirling intercepted him, seating him at the front. Whether because the sergeant felt Shepard’s need for space or some other agenda, Stirling kept her people at the front as well, earning no small measure of gratitude.

The sullen, hurt expression on Garrus’s face cut through her, but Shepard let out a long, if a little guilt-riddled, sigh of relief as the lights lowered and the vehicles began to move. She closed her eyes, wrapped her arms around her legs, and rested the brow of her helmet on her knees. Curious and concerned eyes bored into her, attempting to solve her mysteries. For a second, she tried to uncurl, to sit up properly, slipping back behind the mask she wore so well for the sake of appearances.

Bunny screamed, a constant shrill of sounds and garbled words, but through her cocoon of suffering, soullessness, and mud, Jane saw that the slavers hadn’t touched the child.

“Not dead yet, are you? Hm. Tough little bitch.”

A thin powder of misery spilled from Jane’s lips as Remit tossed her over his shoulder as if she posed no greater a burden than a sack of flour... no, a mummified corpse—desiccated, drained, and brittle. The slavers joked and jostled one another as they returned to the street, high off endorphins and depravity. Endless moments of agonized bouncing and jarring later, the batarian let Jane roll down his arm to thump on the ground in a tangled heap.

She struggled to lift her head. Bunny. Where is Bunny?

She opened one, swollen eye in time to see them shove Bunny into a nearby cage.

“Bunny?” Her father’s shout dragged a sob of relief from Jane’s throat. He hadn’t been killed.

Another moan inched out to clip its heels when her mother’s voice rang out a moment later, “Bunny, where’s Jane?”

She closed her mind against the papa and mama bear roars of pain and pounding of fists against steel that followed, her eyelids slamming down like security doors sealing a breach. Cold, unforgiving metal locked around her neck, wrists, and ankles, but she burrowed into the catacombs deep within her mind, hiding there as they staked her out on the ground.

Shepard curled back up, turtling even tighter than before. The memories set off an earthquake that shook apart her foundations, cracking the small island nation of Shepard in half. The
accompanying tsunami rolled in heavy behind, the waves growing higher and higher as they neared shore, and all she could do was pray that they didn’t hit until she could safely ride them out in her quarters.

She’d make everything up to Garrus once her shields recovered, and she got her walls rebuilt. She’d managed to function just fine for thirteen years with Mordin hanging from her soul, well . . . most of the time. The cold, black intelligence behind the orb and its oil slick spiders couldn’t be allowed to sabotage that. She could get back to functional. She needed to get back to functional. The alternative . . . she wouldn’t do well in a cage, even one camouflaged under the noble ideas of healing and kindness.

Back in Port Hanshan, Garrus’s grumbles followed her the entire way through their ‘perp walk’ from the garage to the administrator’s office. Shepard left him to it, embracing the solitude of the wide no-man’s-land the sergeant and her people allowed her to erect, extending her personal space by a sanity-saving couple of metres.

Shivering, she struggled to count her steps and center herself. She’d never needed to be a warrior more than she did right then.

Breathe, two, three, four.

*Is it possible to die and just never figure it out, Janey? Is that how you keep going? You just deny that you died and keep on shuffling, a zombie hiding among the normals?*

Breathe, two, three, four. Her lungs, seized tighter than ancient bellows, pulled in trembling, thin draughts of air. She rolled her shoulders, squaring them, and cracked her neck. Breathe, two, three, four. “Come on, Shepard. Damn it,” she whispered, trying to whip the mewling, spitting kitten at her core to spring out of the dark as a cougar, snarling and ready for the fight. A slow, soft chuckle bubbled once in her throat as she thought of what Kaidan had said about her mixing metaphors.

Sergeant Stirling stopped outside a set of large, glass doors. “Captain Shepard, you need to go in here. Officer Vakarian, you’ll be taken to Urdnot Wrex and Chief Williams.” She held out an arm to guide Shepard through the doors.

“*Hold on, Janey,*” her father called. “I know you have the strength to get through this.” His voice opened up, its volume beating at the walls of her shelter. “*We all do. Everyone pray. Don’t give in to despair. We can outlast—*”

“Shepard . . ..” Garrus took her hand, stopping her from walking away. He stared into her eyes, obviously not wanting to leave her. “Are you . . .?”

Her throat tightened, eyes burning a little, but she blinked her reaction back. As much as she appreciated his affection and support, she needed time to shake off the ‘refrigerated chicken meat in armour’ feeling . . . to stand the agony of being trapped in her own skin before anyone else touched her.

“Five by five, C-Sec.” She reached up to press her hand against his cheek. “I’ll see you in a little while.” After a second’s hesitation, she stood on her tiptoes and gave him a quick, soft kiss. “I’m fine,” she whispered before pulling back.

Shepard watched them lead Garrus off, giving him a nod and a wink to quiet his protests, relieved that she didn’t have to deal with his sympathy and curiosity for a while. Some things did nothing to help a new, fragile relationship.
Stirling led her to a large waiting room and nodded toward a solitary figure sitting on a long metal bench. He sat hunched over, looking sore and miserable, his elbows on his knees, hands clasped.

Shepard paused at the threshold.

“We love you, Janey.” Her father let out a mad, hiccupping sob, his voice wavering as he called out a steady litany, tying himself to her with the only rope he had, a guidewire through the utter dark of the second night. His rebellion of pyjama and underwear-clad insurgents wielding rocks and improvised clubs had killed four slavers. Once the slavers quelled the doomed uprising, they punished the ringleader—her father—and the men involved, using Jane as their lash, a weapon that cut deep and left brutal scars no one could see.

Her father’s voice found her down in her mental labyrinth, but it sounded weak and hollow as it settled through the layers of her shattered body, mind, and spirit. “You’re so strong. We’re going to get through this, sweetheart. Just hang on to the sound of my voice. We love you so much, our brave, beautiful girl.”

“Captain Shepard?” The sergeant pushed on her shoulder, just hard enough to pull her back.

Shepard nodded, but didn’t step forward. Closing her eyes, she breathed as deep and quick as she could manage without passing out, supersaturating her blood with oxygen—a short-lived, but natural high.

High. A capsule of pressure exploded inside her gut, a bottle-rocket of need that she packed down as quickly as it detonated.

Molding the unwilling clay of her face, she sculpted a grin that felt like a mask of betrayal. Slapping it in place, she stepped through the door, drawing Nihlus’s attention. "Glory hallelujah. Praise the Enkindlers’ light. I have returned from my time wandering this Enkindler-cursed ocean of snow.”

She studied him for a second, both evaluating his condition and watching for any sign he saw through her act. He looked far too miserable to notice anything short of small bomb going off under his nose. Pain billowed off of him with every breath. “Holy Father of Light, Kryik,” she called, striding a few metres into the room. “You didn’t tell these lucre-soaked heathens that a krogan crushed you like the tiny crustacean-in-hanar’s-tentacles that you are, did you?”

She turned to the sergeant. “Sister Stirling, please enlighten whomever we’re waiting for with the word that Spectre Kryik is still recovering from a near-fatal injury sustained just days ago. If they can’t bless us with their presence immediately, he needs to lie down.”

The sergeant cocked an eyebrow, and her lip curled a little, but she nodded. “I’ll let Ms. Parasini know.”

“Glory be, I knew the light of the Enkindlers dwelt within your heart.” She drew in a few more deep, fast breaths. “I need to call my ship. May I?” Shepard stopped partway across the room and glanced back. When the sergeant gave her the nod, she opened a channel.

“Captain. You all right?” Kaidan’s voice dropped through the center of Shepard, anchoring her, a point of connection with the part of her life that made sense. “We saw Peak 15 go up from orbit. Glad you weren’t still there.”

“Brother Sparky,” she called, wincing a little at the relief that bled into her voice. “I’m fine, glory hallelujah. May I impose upon you to bring that crate? It would also be best if you brought Brother
Jenkins along instead of Liara. If security tries to look into the crate, enlighten them that it is Spectre Kryik’s property."

“Yes, ma’am. Alenko, out.”

“What was that about?” Nihlus moved to stand, but she waved him back down.

“Leverage, Brother Wretchedness. Leverage.” She shrugged and shook her head. “You look like complete crap, by the way.” She sat next to him. “Why didn’t you tell them?”

He wrapped an arm around his lower chest as he shrugged and let out a careful chuckle. “Ease up, Shepard. I’m sore, but okay. No harm done.” He looked up at her. “Speaking of crap, you look like you’ve passed through a krogan digestive tract. What happened out there?”

“Gross, Nihlus.” Shepard winced and shook her head. “Nothing happened, at least until we hit the rooms of gooey webs and dead geth everywhere. Then a dying matriarch told me some the scariest shit ever, glory hallelujah. There’s more, but there are too many ears listening and too few of them walk in the light.” Shepard shrugged. “Long story short . . . Saren tried to raise an army of rachni. The rachni all lost their minds, and now Peak 15 is a big, smoking hole. Praise be.”

“Spirits. What was he thinking? Rachni . . .” He shook his head, but then shuddered as if shaking those questions off. “For most people, I’d say that was reason enough to look like a varren ate them then spat them back up, but you . . .? I don’t buy it.” He leaned down, but didn’t enter her space. “Something’s shaken the hell out of you. Talk to me, Shepard.”

She shook her head. “Nothing to report, Brother Nihlus. It’s all good. Glory hallelujah. Let’s just focus on getting the hell out of here. Noveria creeps me out.”

“Nihlus?” A pretty woman with olive skin and dark hair tied back into a severe-looking bun stepped through a door just to their right. She strode over and held out her hand to Shepard. “Captain Shepard?”

Shepard stood and shook the offered hand. “That’s me.” Bending down, she helped Nihlus to his feet, wincing at the pained moan he couldn’t quite hide.

“Gianna Parasini,” the woman said, “Noveria Internal Affairs.” She looked at Nihlus. “Why didn’t you tell me you were badly hurt? I wouldn’t have had you running around getting into gunfights.”

“I’m fine.” He looked down at Shepard, scowling as she activated her omnitool and used it to trigger his armour’s medi-gel dispenser.

Making a show of ignoring him, Shepard forced herself to focus and smiled at the woman. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, but if we could move this along, that would be great. Stubborn ass here needs to get back to our ship’s med bay.”

“Of course, come in.” She led the way into another mostly barren, cement space, gesturing toward a couple of chairs on the near side of the desk. “Please, sit. Can I get you anything?”

Shepard waited for Nihlus to answer, then shook her head. “No, thank you. However, in a few minutes, two gentlemen from my crew will be arriving with a crate. Could they be shown right in? As I said, I’d like to keep this moving.” Shrugging off Nihlus’s protests, she helped him sit before perching on the edge of a chair herself.

“Pray Janey. Pray for the baby Jesus to help you bear your cross,” her mother’s voice cut through the darkness. Jane pulled it down into her warren, wrapping herself in its warmth and solace even
though she refused the advice. Praying. What good had praying done any of them?

“Answer me, sweetie, please,” her mother cried, her voice a thicket of sobbing and phlegm. “Let me know you’re still there.”

Gravel crunched under heavy boots, the grinding sound morphing into laughter and then words. “You want to know if she’s still alive, little mother?” The voice vanished back into boot steps that stopped at Jane’s head. The familiar, almost comforting whistle of the whip snapped through the air, the end slicing through the web of partially healed welts and scars. Her mother’s proof of life came in the form of a scream followed by a torrent of gagging and dry heaving, Jane’s tears having long since dried, leaving only her skin to bleed.

Shepard blinked, pressing her eyelids so tight that a wave of dizziness washed her toward shore before tumbling her back out to sea.

Parasini sat, folded her hands on the desk, staring at her. Shepard gave her a quick nod, but even then the woman hesitated a moment longer before speaking. “Your antics have the Executive Board in quite an uproar. They don’t take kindly to Spectres or agents of any government’s military just dropping into their client’s research facilities.”

Nihlus let out a sound that could have been a sigh or a snarl. “A Code White was called, Gianna. I was authorized to investigate and contain the situation.”

“Even with a Code White, you should have checked in with the administrator first. And you didn’t investigate, Nihlus, you dropped Captain Shepard instead. She isn’t a Spectre.” She held up her hands to stop his protest. “They’ve taken into consideration your assistance proving Anoleis’s corruption, but they’re going to fine you, heavily. I’m sorry, Nihlus, but my position doesn’t carry enough weight to throw our friendship around.”

Shepard shook her head. “So far have they been cast from the Enkindlers’ wisdom and light.” After meeting Gianna’s puzzled stare for a moment, Shepard activated her omnitool, bringing up her hard suit recording. She glanced around for a vid terminal, selected the specific time stamps, then sent the files to the screen. “As you can see, Peak 15 seemed deserted when we arrived, but for a couple of geth colossus units left behind to slow down anyone coming into the facility.”

“Geth?” Gianna cursed under her breath. “I heard rumors of geth, but . . . .”

“Saren Arterius also attacked Eden Prime using a splinter faction of geth, but the geth presence is hardly the worst sin Saren has perpetrated on Noveria.” Shepard fast forwarded through the hours of empty rooms and corridors to where they found the dead rachni.

“What the hell is that?” the IA officer muttered under her breath.

“A rachni soldier.” Shepard nodded in answer to the woman’s incredulous expression. “Saren’s agents discovered a rachni egg on a derelict ship. They hatched it to discover that it was a queen.” She let the footage run, skipping all of her talk with Benezia and the queen, except where the matriarch confirmed the information about the rachni.

“We fought our way out through a small army of the soldiers and workers.” Shepard turned to the vid screen as it showed Saren evacuating in the company of his geth squad.

“Good god,” Gianna said, shaking her head. After a moment, she sighed and looked up. “It’s horrific, but the board is only going to care about your trespassing. What clients do in their labs is their business. It’s the reason that the facilities themselves have so many security precautions: the
code omega, hot labs, and neutron purge. If a company reports that they’ve lost containment of a project, the Executive Board activating the orbital bombardment is a last resort.”

Shepard chuffed and shook her head, incredulous. “Seriously? Saren misuses company facilities to breed rachni, loses control of those rachni, and in the end, costs an asari matriarch and who knows how many employees their lives, and your response is, ‘What companies do in their labs is their business’?” She caught the warning glare that Nihlus shot at her, but didn’t acknowledge it.

“Ms. Parasini,” Stirling called from the door, “a delivery for Spectre Kryik.”

“It’s expected, thank you, Sergeant.” Parasini stood.

Shepard got up to meet Kaidan and Jenkins halfway across the floor. “Thank you, gentlemen. Head back to the Normandy. We’ll be leaving soon.” She took the crate.

“Aye, ma’am.” Kaidan saluted, turned on his heel and left.

Jenkins stayed. “I’d feel better if you had some backup, ma’am.” He nodded to Nihlus. “Who isn’t wounded. No disrespect intended, Nihlus.”

Shepard gave Jenkins a wink and nodded for him to go ahead out. “I’m fine. We’ll be aboard shortly.” Still, the young man pinned her, his expression one of such absolute empathy that she wondered just how horrendous she looked. Wincing as his stare chipped away at her frayed emotions, breaking down what small amount of control she’d gained, she willed him to move along. “Go, Corporal.” Finally, he snapped a salute and followed Kaidan from the office. A relieved breath rushed from her lungs.

“Where are you taking us? Janey! My daughter . . . I can’t leave her.” Her mother’s protests and sounds of struggle grew more and more faint. “Janey!”

“You aren’t leaving anyone behind, lady. Your little whore stopped breathing over an hour ago.”

“Nooo! No, Janey!” Her mother’s screams rose in volume and frantic denial for a moment, then stopped suddenly.

A terrible landslide of laughter rumbled low and terrible, sweeping away everything Jane had ever known. And the cold, black air kept trickling into her lungs no matter how much she cursed it, no matter how much she wished for it to stop and let her rest.

The room swam back into focus, Noveria’s concrete and wild blizzard replacing the endless darkness of Shepard’s internal catacombs. She let out a long, shaking breath and gathered her scattered wits. How long had she blanked that time? Squaring her shoulders and clenching her teeth, she turned back to face Nihlus and Gianna.

“What’s this?” Parasini asked. A crow straining to see jewels on the other side of a window, the IA officer leaned forward. Only her fingers pressed against the glass kept her from doing a face plant into the desktop.

“A few days back we raided a Blood Pack base. In searching through the base for intel, we found these items. I’m assuming because of their origin that Saren used them to pay the Blood Pack for their services.” Shepard set the crate on the desk and opened the lid.

Parasini gasped and reached in, pulling out a biotic implant. “This is experimental tech. Armali Council has been trying to determine whether Binary Helix was cutting in on their biotic engineering and implant development—usually by not-entirely-legal means.” She dove back into
the crate. “Are the schematics in here as well?”

After a few minutes of muttering to herself and consulting with her omnitool, Parasini turned to Shepard, a wide smile brightening her features. “You’ve just saved me three or four months of undercover work and solved three corporate espionage cases, Captain.” She cut a hand toward Shepard’s chair. “Please, sit. You look exhausted.”

*Congratulations on fooling absolutely no one.*

Shepard folded onto the chair. “The data pad contains the vid logs from the hard suits of the Marines who conducted the search of the Blood Pack base if you need that information as evidence.”

“What is that where you were hurt, Nihlus?” Parasini asked, a smartass smile trying to break through her professional mask. “Krogan battlemasters have always been your weak spot.”

Nihlus shook his head and chuffed a little but didn’t elaborate.

“I’ll take these to the Executive Board. I can’t guarantee anything, but I’m fairly sure between the evidence from Peak 15 and these, we should be able to get you out of here without a king’s ransom worth of fines.” Parasini packed everything back in the crate and stood. “Nihlus, how about I get someone to show you to the infirmary, you can lie down while the Board meets?” When it looked like he intended to argue, the woman laughed. “You don’t have to prove what a stubborn ass you are, Spectre. I already know. Do you really want to sit here for a couple of hours?”

Grumbling, Nihlus nodded. “Very well.” He looked over at Shepard. “You’re going to wait?”

Shepard shook her head. “Ms. Parasini, do I need to stay in this office, or can I wander a little, providing I’m reachable by radio?” She pushed out of her chair, stacking her vertebrae gingerly one on top of the other, squaring and balancing—composing—herself as she straightened, using the movements to shore up the wall holding the memories at bay. A few more minutes of holding back the crazy, and then . . . and then . . .

She clenched her jaw and looked to Parasini. “May my people head back to the *Normandy*? I’ll make sure they’re available if you need them.”

Parasini thought for a second, then nodded. “They can go back to your ship, as long as I can get ahold of them if the board has questions.” She let out a quick huff of air, her brow furrowing. “Where did you plan on wandering to, Captain Shepard?”

*To find your nearest high quality drug dealer and pay a small fortune for chemical amnesia.*

Shepard swallowed the need. It began to grow, spreading tentacles of panic through her guts and out into her limbs.

“Hey there, sweet little lady. You look like you could use something to take the edge off.” The young man danced around her a little. “Come on, baby. Let me hook you up. No one so beautiful should look so sad.”

*Shepard shook her head, dug her fists down further into her pockets and hunched her shoulders, pushing past him. She needed to get back to the abandoned theater where she’d been squatting in the attic. A quick glance up past the towering skyscrapers confirmed how close dark was. Closing her fingers around her last ten credits, she held tight to the soup and sandwich she’d get the next day from the local soup kitchen. No way was she blowing that for drugs.*
“Look baby, I’ll set you up, no charge. Call it a moment of weakness for a pretty face.” The dealer grinned, teasing her a broad wink. “Trust me, baby, it’s a blissful buzz.” He shoved a small packet into her jacket pocket. “This shit will set you free.”

She shoved the jittery-panic-craving back down. No matter how tempting, she couldn’t let herself fall down that rabbit hole again. Not after being clean for so long. Still that buzzing whir in the center of her chest just kept pressing out, making it harder to breathe, harder to think.

“Captain?”

Focus, Janey. For pity’s sake. They’re going to put you in a hugging jacket.

“Sorry, I’m just a little preoccupied, and please, Shepard is fine.” She shivered, then lifted her arm to turn up her suit heater, using it as a welcome focus for her attention. “I need to talk to Urdnot Wrex before we return to the ship, so is there a bar somewhere?”

“Yes, upstairs in the hotel.” Parasini nodded. “As long as you don’t leave the building and stay in radio contact, that should be fine. I’ll radio as soon as I know anything.” She looked down at the crate as she picked it up. “Thank you for this. You could have easily sold these for an insane number of credits.”

“Well, I’ll be an Enkindler’s glowing backside. If I’d known that . . . .” She held out her hands. “Give them back.” Chuckling wearily, she shook her head. “That’s not the way we work, Ms. Parasini.” Her arms dropped back to her sides. “Please do what you can to get us out of here as soon as possible.”

“I’ll do my best.” She hoisted the crate under one arm, balancing it on a hip. “Sergeant Stirling, Sergeant Tillian, could you report to the administrator’s office, please?” She turned off the intercom. “The sergeant will show you to the rest of your crew, Captain.”

“Thank you.” Shepard helped Nihlus out of his chair. He moved as though he’d aged seventy cycles in the few hours since she’d seen him last, but other than a soft grunt or two, he kept his pain under wraps. “Do you want to lean on me to get there?” she whispered, hitting his medi-gel.

“I’m okay, just stiffening up. Once I lay down for a bit, I’ll be fine. Stop fussing, and go do what you need to.” He stretched a little. “Thanks, the medi-gel helps.”

“So does a mallet to the head. The pain is still there for a reason. Take it slow.” Despite his protests, she wrapped his arm around her shoulders, helping him to the door. “Besides, fussing over you helps me, so shut it, Brother Kryik.”

They split up at the elevator, the dour-faced Sergeant leading Shepard off two floors after Nihlus disembarked. They walked down a long, corridor of towering concrete. God, Noveria was ugly.

“Come on, Lucas, you know I’m good for it.” Janey followed the young man down the street, shaking hands buried in the bottoms of her pockets to stop from convulsively picking at her neck. Enough of the drug had worn out of her system that the muscles under her jaw had begun to tick. “It’s been a slow week down at the shop, but we’re supposed to be getting a whole load of shuttles in this week.”

“No way, Jane.” The dealer stopped and nodded toward the street. “Why are you down here begging for a fix. You’ve got options. Hell, I wish I had options like the ones waiting for you.” His brow furrowed, and he shook his head as he met her pleading eyes. “Just, no. I’m not helping you kill yourself slowly any more.” Speeding up, he turned a corner, ducking into a covered garage.
“Oh for fuck’s sake. He came down here, didn’t he?” She ran after him and grabbed his arm, spinning him around. “That’s why, right? Anderson came down here, threw his rank around a bit and left with your balls in his pocket.”

Lucas stopped, turning on her, rigid and furious. “Watch the way you talk to me, gutterpup. Now, back off and go home . . . and not to that dumpster. Go back to Anderson, get cleaned up, and give yourself a fucking shot at life.”

Jane leapt at him, a banshee shriek echoing off the pillars and endless rows of skycars. “Just give me the fucking drugs, asshole. You don’t know anything about me. Fuck.” She began rifling through his pockets, stopping only when she caught the glint of a steel edge between them. Laughing, she backed up a couple of steps. “What? You going to gut me, Lucas? Fucking pussy. You think I haven’t suffered through worse?”

He backed up. “Just go home, Jane.” After a couple of steps, he turned and lifted into a run.

“Fucking hell! Just give me the damned drugs.” A rabid dog snapping free of its chain, Jane ran him down, blows pounding his head and shoulders until she managed to get her arm wrapped around his neck. His hip slammed back into her, and he flipped her over his side, reversing the hold. She saw a glint of the knife just as she threw herself back against him, and he lost his balance. The knife hardly hurt at all as it buried itself in her side, tearing her open from breast to—

Garrus stepped up beside her, his hand brushing her fingers as he pushed past her professional space and into personal just far enough to throw a bulwark up at her back. She leaned into it gratefully and managed a smile as their eyes met. Blinking, she shook her head, clearing it enough to see Ashley and Wrex hurrying over to her as well. Shit, where had she been for the walk from the elevator? If she didn’t get her crazy buttoned up quick, they were going to slap her in running shoes with no laces and lock her in a room with no windows.

Shepard held up a hand to still their questions. “Brother Garrus, Sister Ashley, you can both return to the Normandy. Just be available if Gianna Parasini calls with questions. I doubt she will, though.” She glanced up into Garrus’s eyes, willing him to just do as she’d said and go back to the ship without an argument.

After a moment, he nodded and turned. “Come on, Chief.” Before he walked away, his fingers snagged Shepard’s, his voice lowering to remain between them. “If you need me . . .”

“I’ll call.” Pressing her lips together in a wan smile, she turned to Wrex. “Come on, Wrex, let’s go have a chat.”

“Business?” He grumbled and hitched up his armour as if preparing for battle. “That can’t be good.”
Chapter Summary

Shepard reveals her plans for Wrex . . . and makes a complete idiot of herself. Go Shepard!

Shepard summoned the elevator car, then turned to grin at the krogan. “Come on, Wrex . . . when have I given you cause to doubt me?”

He grumbled and hitched his armour. “Two words, Shepard: thresher maw.”

“That was fun. You should be thanking me for that.” She laughed softly and hit the elevator control to take them to the hotel. When they arrived, she led the battlemaster to the bar, and climbed up onto one of the stools. Smiling at the bartender, she said, “Get my friend here whatever he likes. The tab is mine.”

The asari smiled and nodded. “Sure thing.”

Wrex nodded to Shepard and barked, “Ryncol. Double.”

Shepard leaned against the bar, wincing as the bartender turned, all fluid grace and perfect curves. God, Shepard envied the asari that effortless elegance. A moment later, a fair-sized glass of the krogan alcohol slid down the counter to stop in front of Wrex.

The vapours crawled up into her nostrils, reaching down to set off the firework in her gut. It sent sparks of need flaring along her neurons. Affecting nonchalance, she planted one trembling hand under her nose and clamped the other down on her thigh between armour segments. Digging in her fingers hard enough to bruise, she managed to distract herself. She could hold on long enough to get the hell out of there.

“So, what are we doing here if you aren’t after my tail, Shepard?” Wrex downed the drink in one and passed the glass back without ordering another.

Letting her hand sag back to the bar, Shepard shrugged. “I needed to talk to you about a couple of things before we go back to the ship.” A dry chuckle rattled out onto the polished bar top. “I would have helped you get your family armour back regardless, Wrex, but I’ve done it in the way I have for a reason.”

He nodded. “Figured you were using me. I just haven’t decided what game you’re playing.” He lifted a finger to catch the barkeep’s attention, then nodded for her to give him a refill. “I don’t have any tolerance for being used. The galaxy has used the krogan enough.”

Shepard’s hand drifted up off the granite a few inches. “I’m not looking to use the krogan or you, Wrex. At least not in that sort of sense. I want you to go home at the end of this run in a position of power. You had the dream all those cycles ago . . . a united people, capable of building from strength.”

“And you want to use us for canon fodder when the Reapers roll up . . .” He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes, staring down at her as if he could see straight through to her intentions.
“No, I’m not looking for bullet sponges, either.” A scowl creased her brow, a vague ache setting in behind her eyes. She needed to get some damned sleep, and soon. Sighing, she shook her head. “I would’ve hoped I’d made a better impression on you than that, but I guess it hasn’t been a very long period of time to build trust.”

“The krogan haven’t been given any reason to trust . . . anyone,” he said, his voice low, but hard and edged.

Blowing out a heavy breath, Shepard nodded. “True enough.” She turned a little to face the bar square on and slapped both hands down on the edge. “Okay, here’s what it is.” She lowered her voice to be sure it didn’t travel further than the two of them. “Saren was breeding rachni on Peak 15.”

“That quadless, turian urshk.” Wrex belted back his second glass of ryncol, the glass hitting the counter with a little more force. “At least the antimatter warhead blew them back into extinction.”

Shepard shrugged. “Sort of.” Her hand drifted back up to still his response. “When we arrived, Benezia was still alive. She insisted that we save the queen, saying that the Reapers were afraid of the rachni. That’s the reason Sovereign had Saren trying to enslave them.” The hand lifted higher, her palm facing him, urging him to hear her out as he stiffened. “We spoke with the queen, and she said that the reason Saren’s rachni troops became violent is that they were separated from her.”

“You brought her out of there.” It wasn’t a question, and it landed between them like a boulder as Wrex bristled. His face twisted into a scowl that promised that Shepard edged her way up to a line he wouldn’t let her cross. “Shepard, millions of my ancestors died to put those things down. You let the bugs come back, you’re pissing on their graves.”

She held his stare as she stepped right up to that line. “Either that or giving their sacrifice meaning as their descendents step forward, respected, honorable, and strong.” Nodding, she gave him a moment to ease back. “I understand the risk, Wrex. Trust me, there’s a big part of me that just wanted to be done with it.”

She let out a chortle, brittle with irony. “Believe it or not, Legion was the one who argued for me to give the rachni the same opportunity to prove themselves as I gave the geth.” She looked up, holding his gaze. “The same opportunity that I’ll give the krogan.”

The roar that rumbled deep in his chest drew nervous glances. “To what? Babysit them until they start killing everyone, then throw ourselves into the fire that you started?” Pounding a fist on the bar, he stabbed a finger at his glass, ordering another drink. He looked at the asari, and for a moment Shepard thought he might jump over the bar or slug her, but then he just said, “Throw something strong in front of my . . . her while you’re at it.” Wrex jabbed a finger into Shepard’s shoulder.

“My.” She winced. “And no, I don’t want you to be rachni control. I want you to guide them, Wrex. Develop their technology and weaponry to work for our ships, and even help them build their own, eventually. Train them into an army, integrate them into the war movement.” Without thinking, she grabbed the shot glass from the bar and belted it back, wheezing a little as she swallowed, exhaled, and realized what she’d done. “Dammit.” She waved off the bartender when she moved to refill it. “What was that?”

“Absinthe.” The asari winced and shrugged. “Sorry, you looked like you could use it.”

“Glory hallelujah, if that isn’t a true story . . . but really, I’m good.” Shepard turned toward Wrex. “You’re a natural leader, Wrex.” She held his stare, matching fire for fire, needing him to see not
only that she meant what she said, but believed it. “The team followed you when we raided Tonn
Actus’s warehouses, and they did so without question, looking to you with respect. I need you
leading the krogan when the shit hits the fan. Do you see anyone else doing it?”

He just stared at her for a long time. “You setting everyone up like this, Shepard?”

The alcohol and wormwood slithered their way out of her empty stomach and into her bloodstream,
making her belly tingle and her limbs pulse with bliss. It wrapped around the memories, pushing
them back far enough that they didn’t play on an endless loop behind her eyes. Furious, the spiders
poured out of their hidden corners, gnawing away at the small measure of control she’d managed.

“Your nature will be revealed to us. Accept that,” the darkness rumbled. It’s minions poured past
the alcohol’s barrier, oil-slick black and viscous, burrowing through her mind.

The light coming in the door dimmed. Shepard turned onto her side, putting her back to the figure
standing there, tall and broad, staring in at her.

“How are you doing, kid?” the deep voice spoke, its timbre comforting. When she’d first heard it
nearly a year before on Mindoir, she’d thought it the voice of an angel come to escort her to
heaven. Slow, heavy boot steps crossed the floor. “Still not talking, huh?” A chair squealed as her
visitor pulled it over to the side of her bed. “That’s okay, I can do the talking.”

Jane sighed long and soft. “Why can’t you just leave me alone, Anderson? Chasing off all my
dealers . . . following me around, sticking your nose in where it doesn’t belong.” She hugged her
pillow tight against her neck to disguise the tremors. “What’s the point of trying to dry me out all
the time. I just go right back out and get high.”

She heard the leather seat complain as he shifted around. “I’m a lost cause, Anderson. Just give the fuck up.” Squeezing her eyes closed against the burn, she managed to forestall the sour tears. Crying didn’t solve anything.

“I don’t believe that, kid. I’ll never believe that.” A strong, gentle hand gripped her shoulder.
“You’ve survived more than most seasoned veterans I know. You should have died at least three
times since I’ve met you, and yet . . . here you are. Hasn’t it occurred to you that there’s a reason?
That knife nearly gutted you, and yet . . . you’re still alive. You have another chance.”

Jane grunted. “You aren’t going to hit me with all the ‘glory hallelujah, praise Jesus’, crap, are
you? The damned chaplain here won’t shut up about God’s plans.” She rolled over, meeting the
reflection of his eyes in the darkened room.

“He laughed, but it came out dry and bitter. “You know me better than that, but I do think you’re
still here for a reason. The universe thinks you’re important. Maybe you should spend some time
figuring out why instead of letting everyone who has ever given a crap about you down.”

Pain, white hot and ferocious dragged Jane off the side of her bed and onto the floor, her knees
snapping against the floor as she crumpled, hugging herself. She clenched her teeth and squeezed
her eyes shut, willing away the memories. “Don’t act like you know anything about me, or why I
do what I do.”

Anderson stood and walked around the bed, crouching in front of her. “I don’t think I know
anything, but that you survived, Jane Shepard. You survived. Do you think your father would be
proud of this? Do you think this is why he fought so hard?” He reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder, but she swatted it away.

“You don’t know anything.” Throwing herself back, she scrambled to her feet.

He stood, easing back and crossed his arms. “I know what I’d want if I were your father. I wouldn’t want you to turn my memory into a nightmare that haunts you until you self-destruct. I’d want you to hold onto whatever joy you could find and live a life that turns the galaxy on its ear.”

“Shepard?” Wrex ducked down a little to look into her eyes. “You okay? You look like you headbutted someone ten times your size.”

His ryncol breath whispered to her as it drove the spiders back. “Go ahead,” it coaxed, “give yourself some time to get yourself together, let the pain fade. You’ve been through hell today, Shepard. Let yourself rest.” Damned chatty ryncol.

Is it worth it to stop the spiders for a few minutes, Janey? You know where this road goes, and you’ve been off it a long time.

“Shut up, Bunny. Just for five fucking seconds, shut up,” she muttered. Turning to the bartender, she nodded. “I’ve changed my mind. Refill that, please.” When the bartender placed the shot on the bar, Shepard stared at the glass for a long time, admiring the way the light played in the green liquid. After another moment of debate, she snatched it up and tossed it back, then looked up. “Another, thanks.”

Turning back to Wrex, Shepard lifted an eyebrow. “The queen will be on the Normandy for the next few days . . . at least until we can find her a home. Will you communicate with her? Watch her . . . do whatever you need to do, but decide if you’re willing to step up and be the leader who helps the krogan not only save the galaxy, but themselves.” She drank her third. The shot glass wobbled back and forth a little when she thumped it onto the bar. “Tomorrow, providing we get the hell out of here, we hit Tonn Actus’s last base. I’ve got something a little special planned, so be ready to lead your krant, battlemaster.”

Wrex drank his latest ryncol a lot more slowly than before. “Are you serious about helping the krogan, Shepard?”

She wave for another shot, then turned to him and nodded. “As a heart attack. Well, it’s more about helping put you in a position to get the krogan helping themselves.” She sipped her drink. Enough alcohol flowed through her blood to drive the spiders away completely, leaving her mind blessedly silent.

Letting out a sigh of 144-proof relief, she glanced around the bar, able to actually focus on something outside her head, and caught Wrex staring at her through narrowed, considering eyes. “What?”

He harrumphed and cleared his throat. “Trying to decide if you’re for real, Shepard. No one just offers to help the krogan.”

“Maybe, but I’ve gotten a lot of second chances in my life. I’m a big believer in them. You play this right, when the Reapers are gone, the krogan could be set to take their place, shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the races. An embassy, colony rights . . . the whole package.” She shrugged and finished off her drink. “You just have to decide if all of that is worth swallowing some pride, setting aside some mistrust, and doing the work.”
He laughed, slow and harsh. “Starting with the rachni.” A wicked looking grin showed his teeth, and for a moment she doubted that it was a grin at all, despite the rumbling chuckle that accompanied it. “Think the queen can fight, Shepard?”

She held up a finger, ending up watching it, fascinated as it swayed back and forth. She hadn’t had that much to drink.

*It’s been twelve years since you put anything stronger than soda in your system, Janey. And now absinthe? It should be hitting you like a psychedelic frigate in three . . . two . . . .*

“No getting the queen killed unless she volunteers for it, Wrex.” Shepard belted down the latest shot, slamming the glass down on the bar. Looking around, she tilted her head, her face scrunching into a scowl. “This music sucks. Tell me that you’ll go along with my evil plan so that we can get out of here.”

Wrex cleared his throat. “Okay, Shepard. I’ll give your plan a shot. Hell, you’ve done more for the krogan already than anyone ever has.” He nodded toward the exit. “Come on, next time we go drinking somewhere with decent music.”

*One.*

Shepard pressed her eyes closed, grumbling deep in her throat. “Shut up, Bunny. Please just shut up for five seconds.” After taking a couple of breaths, she turned back to Wrex, studying him for long moments, her scowl deepening as she did. Why couldn’t he just stand still? And why were there two of him all of the sudden? “Family. It’s a bitch. Am I right?” she asked at last, deciding that she was okay with two, swaying krogan. She slapped him in the arm hard enough to make him wince. “Sure, Shepard.” Wrex looked at her empty glass. “How many of those have you thrown back in the last twenty minutes?”

She answered by blowing a dismissive raspberry that sprayed a mist of spit into the air. “Yeah, you know all about family. Your father forced you to kill him.” Wobbling, she managed to get one buttcheek back on the seat. “I didn’t have to kill mine with a dagger, you know?” She slapped her hand down on the bar top. “I killed him just the same, though. He died a little more every time the slavers sliced me open with their damned whip, every time another one of his friends . . . .” Standing suddenly, she dumped her stool over behind her.

“Hey!” a patron barked. The stool fell into him and he jumped, sloshing his drink down his front. “Watch what you’re doing, damned drunk.”

Shepard turned to the man, all her peace and control shattering. Tears ran down her cheeks as she reached behind her for a napkin and tried to mop him off. “Oh, sweet baby Jesus, mister, I’m so sorry.” She patted his shoulder hard enough to make him wince. “Do you have kids?”

The man glanced at Wrex, then backed away, his hands held up to ward her off. “Sure, lady. Yeah, I have kids. Um . . . don’t worry about it.” He turned and bolted.

Wrex let out a hearty laugh. “Humans. So skittish. Well, except you; you’re all right, Shepard. Crazier than a pyjak snorting exhaust fumes, but all right.” He called after the fleeing patron, “Coward! My tiny friend won’t hurt you. She’s just swallowed her own weight in . . . .” Wrex lifted Shepard’s glass and sniffed it. “. . . whatever this green stuff is.” He clapped Shepard on the back. “Let’s go, Shepard. Enough fun for one night. Remind me to take you drinking on Tuchanka sometime. The party doesn’t get good until everyone is wearing a few drinks . . . and some blood.”
Shepard let him herd her toward the door, his words floating past her, registered but not really heard. Instead, Anderson’s voice whispered to her from the past.

“I wouldn’t want you to turn my memory into a nightmare that haunts you until you self-destruct. I’d want you to hold onto whatever joy you could find and live a life that turns the galaxy on its ear.”

“Oh, sweet . . . oh my god.” Spinning suddenly, Shepard slapped a hand against her mouth, her stomach heaving. She yanked free of Wrex’s grip and bolted for the sign in the corner of the room, the neon beacon for the ladies room. She slapped the door control, falling through to land face down on the cold floor. Instead of getting up, she pressed her cheek to the tile, letting the chill seep into her head and freeze her thoughts.

The alcohol burned like defeat, cooling to shame as her stomach eased its rolling. “I’m sorry, Daddy,” she whispered. “I know you want me to do better.” She nodded to herself. “It’s been . . . well, a long time since I let shit throw me off the rails like this. Don’t worry, I’ll get it under control.”

She had no idea how long she lay there before the sound of the door opening registered through the Mardi Gras parade of drunken hallucinations and regret.

“Shepard?” Nihlus stepped around her.

Her head lifted, maybe on its own, and wobbled loosely at the end of her neck. “Nihlus? What . . . ?” The rest of the question evaporated before making it as far as her tongue.

Groaning, he slid down the wall to sit next to her. “What’s going on, Shepard?”

“Blindsided by . . . me. Nothing that doesn’t um . . . happen on a reg . . . regular bas . . . alot.” She groaned and covered her mouth as her throat spasmed a couple of times. “In this case, four . . . five . . . some . . . several shots of . . . um green.”

He chuckled and shook his head, his mandibles fluttering slowly. It was an affectionate smile, she realized. Damned turians and their damned faces. Stupid, spikey, plated faces. She blinked a couple of times and narrowed her eyes as she stared at him. Beautiful though.

“The green liquor is what has you lying face down on the floor of the ladies’ head, but seeing you earlier, I’m thinking it’s more a symptom than a cause. What happened today, Shepard?”

He grunted softly as he leaned down to look into her eyes. His were such a remarkable green. “You’ve been glazed over and shocky since you got back from Peak 15.”

“Old ghosts.” She rolled onto her side and rested her head on her arm. “On the Citadel, this thing . . . crawled into my brain . . . took me over. Spiders. So horrible. So dark. So cold.” She shrugged. “Garrus killed the orb thing, but . . .” She widened her eyes, adding a firm nod to emphasize her point. She had a point. What was . . . ? Oh . . . She lowered her voice to a slurry whisper, “They’re still inside my brain.”

One of his brow plates raised a little higher with each of her words. “So, the orb put spiders in your brain?” He blinked a couple of times. “And they’re still there?”

“Yup.” She nodded, letting her eyes drift closed. “Made me remember Mindoir. The slavers stayed on Mindoir twenty-seven hours before the Alliance chased them off.”

“Ah.” He reached up and rubbed his neck just behind his jaw. Nodding, he dropped his hand back to hang off the sharp angle of his knee. “The old ghosts can have a lot of power.”
Shepard studied his long talons, dangling there, covered in their publicly acceptable gloves. After a moment, she reached out to grip them. “You have old ghosts, Nihlus?”

His mandibles did that slow flutter again. “A few. I wasn’t always a Spectre. I wasn’t always strong and stubborn and determined. Saren changed that. He saw something under the cycles of trying to slide along under anyone’s notice.” Bobbing his head, he shrugged. “He dragged me out of a mine shaft, along with a small group of others. After a moment, he passed his side arm to me, told me to protect the group, get them up out of the mine.”

Pushing herself up onto an unsteady elbow, Shepard rested her head in her hand. “You worked in a mine?”

Responding only with a tiny nod, Nihlus took a breath. “Up until that day, I’d spent a long time waiting to die. The conditions there were horrific, but the workers were mostly slaves, so the owners didn’t care. It was cheaper to buy new workers than improve the mine.” Smiling, pronounced and definite this time, Nihlus shrugged. “Then this strong, angry, storm of a torin roared into the mine. He grabbed me by the cowl and yelled at me, threatened me, told me to accept that the galaxy had just demanded that I answer a higher calling.”

“Saren.” For a moment, Shepard allowed a question to form. If most of the miners were slaves . . .

“Our ghosts demand that we answer when the universe calls, Shepard, and that’s all they demand. They don’t want your blood, or your guilt, or your tears. They want you to face the future holding onto hope and peace . . . and allowing for the possibility that when you are called, you will face the challenge with all those ghosts at your back, carrying you forward.”

“Did Saren tell you that?” she asked, pushing herself up.

Nihlus laughed. “Yes, but his version was a lot more colourful, and pointed. It also left several bruises.”

Shepard wobbled up to kneel next to him, her palms pressed to the cold tile. “Anderson told me just about the exact same thing when I was seventeen.”

She stared into his eyes for a moment before her gaze wandered off to follow the sweeping white markings on his face. “You know,” she said, almost tipping over as she leaned in, “if you hadn’t called me a wh . . . a whore that day in the . . . um . . . gymna . . .” A half hiccough-half retch interrupted. Frowning, she leaned toward the toilet. When the threat died before it escalated to actual throwing up, she swung back to Nihlus, her cheek impacting his. “Oops.” She reached up and patted his face. “Sorry about that. What was I saying?”

He chuckled, then sighed, meeting and holding her unsteady stare. “You were saying that if I hadn’t called you a whore that day in the gym . . .”

She smiled and leaned in, her head sagging until her brow touched his temple. “Oh yeah. Right. I would’ve kissed you.” Her hand lifted to the cowl of his armour, steadying her. “You’re beautiful.”

His hand cupped her cheek. “I wanted to kiss you too.” Shifting, he moved to stand. “Come on, Gianna called. We’re cleared to leave. The Board considered our fines paid with that tech you returned. Let’s get . . .”

Shepard pulled him back down, the aching, pounding terror beating its way out through her breast
bone. “What about now?” She pressed her lips against his mouth, shutting down everything else. He smelled so good, and . . . he felt so warm, so solid in the face of the stormy sea rolling around in her head. She arched into him with an almost vicious desperation, the alcohol turning her caresses into clumsy pawing.

“What about Garrus, Shepard?” he asked without pulling back, his voice scarcely loud enough for her to hear over the roaring inside her head. He reached up to brush her cheek, a doomed sigh—a painting splashed with turpentine—dripped thickly between them so long that she thought she’d choke on it.

The tar-slick mass oozed along her brain’s pathways until it found what it wanted. “Nihlus sees the truth of who and what you are.”

*Nihlus laughed and leaped forward, slipping past her defenses. “You just can’t help but throw yourself at anything male, can you?” He flipped her onto her ass and bounced away.*

Lying there, she gasped for a second, then rolled to her feet. Her jaw tightened, molars squeaking together, but she forced a smile. “I could help myself, anytime, anywhere, but I’m choosy.” She took her stance, hands held in front of her face, and beckoned. “You quitting?”

“Choosy is not the word I’d use.” He dropped his hands and backed away from her again, his expression one of contempt and . . . something that made her stomach roll. “Does your behaviour have its roots in your colourful past? Drug addicts frequently need to pay for their habits in less savoury ways.”

Shepard jerked away, anger swarming in to gobble down the panic and the need, leaving a raw, desolate carcass behind. “What’s the matter, Nihlus? Now you know all this real shit about me . . . I’m . . . still some whore?” She took a swing at him, her fingers slapping the keel of his armour ineffectually, but her momentum tipped her onto her ass. The rage boiled, bubbling over in the corners of her eyes.

“Shepard.” Nihlus turned to face her. “I thought I loved you when we met, but . . .” He shook his head, a faint register of movement at the upper edge of her vision. “But I didn’t.”

The darkness and cold swelled, the thunder of its voice crashing against the inside of her skull. The spiders skittered, searching out an even greater fear. “You cannot hide what you are. If Nihlus sees it, you know Garrus will as well and loathe you for it.”

She sucked in a breath, cursing as it hitched in a whining sob. Scrambling, she tried to get to her feet, to escape before he said anything else. “I get it. I’m repugnant.” Swatting at him again, she missed and fell, her wrist letting out a sharp, frozen-wood crack as she landed on it. “Ow, fuck.” She flopped her hand back and forth, testing it, shoving his hands away. “Screw off with your good enough to be my protege, but kissing you makes me want to yack.” Flailing and cursing, she floundered her way up onto her knees.

Nihlus grabbed both her hands and wrestled her back down. “Ow, spirits, Shepard, stop fighting me. I’m not letting you leave until you’ve heard me out, but at this rate, I’m going to have to be medevac’d from the ladies’ head.”

His subvocals came out like someone hitting a wire then pulling it tight, the harsh frequency shift translating his pain even more clearly than his words. She flopped down onto the floor again, her entire body heaving as she sighed. “Fine, bludgeon me some more.”

He chuckled, the sound almost setting her off again before he cupped her jaw in his hands and
forced her to look into his eyes. “I said that I thought I loved you then, but it wasn’t love, Shepard.”

She snorted, a harsh, throaty sound that ended in a sloppy raspberry. “Thanks, got that part, but you know, go ahead, stick the knife in a little deeper. Give it a good twist while you’re at it.”

His hands shook her hard, twice, the mini throttling cutting her off. “Shut up, Shepard. Spirits, you’re a terrible drunk.” Shaking her again but more gently, he drew her eyes back to his. “What I felt then was infatuation. After these weeks of learning more about you, of seeing how deeply you care about everything and everyone . . . how passionate you are under all the ‘Glory hallelujah’, ‘sweet baby Jesus’ crap . . .” He bobbed his head in a tiny shrug. “Now . . . I love you so hard that it hurts far worse than anything five stomping krogan could inflict.”

Another slow, sloughing-paint sigh escaped. “I would give anything to be the one to spend tonight holding you, but there is a better torin waiting on the Normandy. Right now, he’s wondering where his new girlfriend is, and is worried as hell that she’s suffering like . . . well, like she is.”

The tears started again, but not scalding. She laid her hands just inside the cowl of his armour. Dear lord, she was so fucking stupid sometimes. “Nihlus, I . . . I’ve been avoiding you. How can you know . . .” She sighed and shook her head. “. . . anything about me?”

“You’ve been avoiding me, but I haven’t been avoiding you.” He touched her cheek, drying her tears. “What’s that expression? You wear your heart on your arm?”

“Sleeve.” An underdeveloped, famished laugh escaped then collapsed, but it was enough to drive back the blackness, sending the spiders wriggling back out of sight. “The expression is ‘wear your heart on your sleeve’.”

He nodded, then his mandibles and brow plates dropped. He opened his mouth, but didn’t speak for a few seconds. When he did, he pressed his hand to her cheek, his thumb caressing along her cheekbone. “One day, I hope you ask me to kiss you because you want me, not because you’ve had a horrifying day and you’re terrified of what you feel for someone else.” He chuckled, but it came out soft and sad. “Sober would be nice too. Maybe a little less washroom floor on your face.” He stood and held out a hand. “Come on, let’s get back to the Normandy.”

Shepard took his hand and let him lever her up off the floor. She stared at him for a moment, then wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him gently. “I’m sorry, Nihlus. You’re right, I’m an asshole when I drink. I . . . You . . .”

He chuckled and pulled away, slipping an arm around her waist to help steady her. “We’re good, Shepard. We’re good.”
Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the day.

Chapter Notes

We’re just about caught up to FFN, so in the next week posting will slow down to match my writing speed. I do need to get the full arc of this story done by Aug 3rd, so it won’t be too torturous. :)

Garrus met them at the Normandy’s inner hatch. He took one look at Shepard, then sighed and shook his head. “You’re not looking so good. Are you all right?” One hand lifted halfway to her face before he stopped and glanced around as if remembering the eyes that watched them from everywhere. It dropped back to his side. “Maybe we should get you to Dr. Chakwas.”

Shepard stared at him for a moment, life . . . nice, sane, all-systems-normal life, reasserting itself through the fog of the absinthe. Guilt wormed its way to the surface along with the scent and feel of Nihlus pressed against her lips. Pushing it aside with a promise to come clean with Garrus as soon as they could manage some alone time, she forced herself to focus.

What had he said? Right . . . needed to see Dr. Chakwas. “You speak the truth, Brother C-Sec.” She stepped up, meaning to lean through the cockpit access and speak to Joker. However, the door moved at the last second, and she face planted into the bulkhead. “Ow.” Shoving herself away, she managed to line up on the second try. “Joker, have we heard from Legion?”

Garrus pulled her back square on her feet, holding her there with a hand on her shoulder as he replied for the pilot, “He sent his coordinates. They’re ready for pick up.”

“He’s on a straight shot from the docks on our flight path, and he’s on the other side of the mountain, so we shouldn’t get shot out of the sky,” Joker added. “But don’t count on us ever being invited back.”

“I don’t intend to come back if I can help it.” She frowned at Garrus, reaching up to poke at his familia notas as they danced over his face. “Have they always done that?” She giggled and tipped forward, his hand and a quick grab at the keel of his armour catching her just before she fell past him and into the wall. “You’re beautiful.”

“Wow,” Joker called from behind her, “someone’s hammered.”

“You also speak the truth, Brother Joker,” Shepard replied. “I need food.” Feeling a presence at her back, Shepard turned, stumbling a little as it tipped her balance. Once again, Garrus caught her and helped her turn around. “Nihlus . . .” She reached out and took his hand. “Thank you for scraping me off the floor and bringing me back.”
The Spectre nodded. “You’re welcome. Get some rest when you can. We’ll meet in the morning to get on the same page?”

“Sure.” She glanced over at Joker. “What’s our ETA for Tuntau, Joker?”

“1100 hrs.”

“We’ll meet at 0800?” she asked Nihlus. “Oh wait . . . Liara. I need to tell her what happened. Do you . . . ahhh . . . want to be there?”

Nihlus nodded. “I’ll go down and prepare the ship for our new guest. When you’re ready to speak with Liara, give me a call.” He set out ahead of them, striding with purpose until he reached Pressly. He spoke to the XO for a moment, then continued on.

Garrus settled Shepard back on her own two feet. “Come on, Shepard, let’s go get you sorted.” He twisted to look back over his shoulder. “As soon as we get clearance to leave from Port Hanshan control, head for those coordinates, Joker.”

“Guess I missed the memo where you joined the chain of command,” the pilot replied, a layer of real anger sliding underneath the snarky humour.

“I’m the chain of command,” Shepard said, her voice lowering, “and I say, stop being an ass, and take us to pick up Legion.” She pulled away from Garrus, balancing herself with fingertips pressed to the bulkhead.

“Yes, ma’am, Captain Crazy, ma’am,” Joker grumbled behind her.

Shepard let the comment go and took a stumbling step down the CIC. “Whoa, we need to adjust the inertial dampeners.”

“We’re not moving.” Garrus wrapped an arm around her. “Come on, I’ll help you navigate the very tricky, flat deck plating.”

Leaning into his side, Shepard concentrated on placing one foot in front of the other, managing to make it to the stairs without falling over. Once they reached the stairs, however, and the door closed behind them, Garrus lifted her off her feet, carrying her down.

“Hey, what are . . .?” The curving walls swooped around her, taking her stomach along for the ride, but before she could finish the sentence, he set her back on her feet at the bottom. “I’m not feeling so good,” she whispered, clapping her hand over her mouth.

“How much did you drink?” he asked, tucking her in tight against his side.

She hiccuped again. “Not that much, but I’m a com . . . complete lightweight, and that stuff was strong.” Pulling away a little, she put a not professional, but at least not intimate distance between them. Drunk or not, the crew gossiped enough without adding to it. Blessedly, it was mid-shift and the galley stood empty.

Shepard frowned, scrunching up her face as her stomach flopped in a fairly insistent roll. Pressing her hand over her mouth, she took long, slow deep breaths.

“You’re going to vomit, aren’t you?” Garrus scooped her up and burst into the med bay. “Dr. Chakwas, we need a . . .”

“What on earth?” The doctor snatched a bag from a shelf, snapped it open and shoved it under
Shepard’s chin just in time.

Shepard vaguely heard the doc talking outside her bubble of heaving misery, but it slurried into a buzz of sound as her body forcibly evicted the alcohol remaining in her stomach. Only after she passed through the dry heaving stage and into knee-shaking weariness did she notice the doctor’s omnitool scanning her.

She held out the bag. “Could I get something to wipe my mouth, please?”

“What happened today, Captain?” the doctor asked and passed her a handful of wipes. “Hop up on a bed and lay down. It looks like the alcohol is the least of your problems.”

Shepard lifted one leg and rolled onto the bed, laying mostly face down. “What do you mean, Doc?”

“Your neural scans are a mess. You’re showing signs of damage throughout your limbic system. I need you to tell me everything that happened today.” She pressed a syringe to the vein in Shepard’s neck. “This will alleviate the symptoms of your drinking. We’ll have to treat you for a couple of days, but like I said you have bigger issues.”

Shepard’s pulse throbbed three beats under the syringe, then the pressure lifted. Her entire body prickled, her armour and clothing uncomfortable against her skin. After a couple of seconds, the tossed on a stormy sea sensation began to ease, replaced by blades of obsidian pain stabbing and twisting into her brain.

“Damn it, Doc, the booze was the only thing holding the spiders at bay.” She pressed her hands to her temples. “Now they’ve all got knives and assault rifles.” The orange light of the doctor’s omnitool pierced even through her closed eyelids, sending her into hiding behind both arms.

“She complained of a headache and acted like she thought she was being watched while we were on Peak 15,” Garrus offered. He stood next to the bed, his hand on the mattress so that Shepard could feel his talons just brushing the back of her head. “But it didn’t get bad until she fell asleep in the Mako.”

Shepard shuddered but kept her eyes squeezed shut just in case her eyeballs exploded out of their sockets, the danger seeming both imminent and plausible. What had Chakwas asked? Oh right . . . what happened that day. She was pretty sure she’d heard Garrus mention falling asleep in the Mako. “Terrible dream . . . no . . . memory. I heard the voice again. It said that I would reveal who I was. Then the shiny, tar-spiders started crawling through my brain. They kept pulling out memories.”

She wriggled around until she flopped over onto her back. After another second, she returned to her side. “Sweet baby Jesus, there’s nowhere that doesn’t hurt. Tell me how to lie down so it doesn’t hurt.”

“You heard the voice again?” The doctor held the omnitool over Shepard’s head, entering information. “What do you mean you heard it again?”

“On the . . . um . . . Citadel . . .” Shepard winced at the remembered agony, even thinking about it causing a new spike to drive into her skull. “Blackness. Cold. Something invaded me.”

“We were in the Presidium Markets. Shepard stumbled a couple of times, then just grabbed her head and fell onto her knees,” Garrus spoke up. “When she got up, she wasn’t Shepard. Martin, a kid who was with us, saw a dark energy . . . broadcasting through a wall into her head. The origin
of the energy was a black orb about this big.” His hand disappeared for a moment, but then returned, his talons stroking through her hair. “Shepard followed us, but she moved like a . . . one of those dolls with strings tied to their hands and feet. When she spoke, it wasn’t her voice. I shot the thing, it blew up, and she came back . . . shaken up but herself.”

The doctor grumbled under her breath and shook her head. “Why wasn’t I told about this when it happened?” She entered information into her omnitool then held it above Shepard’s head.

Shepard just moaned. Explaining would take too much effort, when the truth of the matter lay in the fact that she had so many other things to worry about. Once Anderson took the orb away, she assumed it would cease to be an issue. Apparently, she’d been wrong.

“Peak 15 was cleared out without any sign of violence against the workers,” Garrus said. “They were just gone. Do you think there were more of those orbs through the facility?”

Shepard uncovered one eye to look up at him. “So they were all indoctrinated, and Saren just marched them out?” A faint nod sent a bolt of pain galloping through her skull. “That actually makes sense.”

“Where is the orb now?” Chakwas asked, her voice diamond hard.

“Anderson is having it studied,” Garrus answered.

“Go, contact him and tell him to send me everything he has on it,” the doctor ordered. When Garrus hesitated, Shepard felt Chakwas push in against the side of the table. “Now, if you please, Officer Vakarian.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Garrus said, squeezing Shepard’s shoulder.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said, affecting a confidence that betrayed her the moment his reassuring presence moved away from her back. She rolled over, her hand reaching out for him but finding only empty space. Her mouth opened, her lungs drawing the air to call him back, but then strong fingers closed on her reaching ones, and she felt Dr. Chakwas lean down.

“Shepard, open your eyes for a moment, and look at me.”

After a moment, Shepard obeyed the order and uncovered her face, wincing in the face of the light drilling into her brain. “What’s going on, Doc?”

The doctor shone a light into the captain’s eyes, flicking it back and forth to test pupil reaction time that Shepard decided must be non-existent based on the drill that continued to burrow through to her optic nerves. Chakwas sighed. “You remember how I said that Han’Gerrel’s brain was badly damaged?”

Shepard closed her eyes, her bad news alarm flushing her veins with ice water. “You said he had about a year to live.” The doctor hesitated long enough that Shepard opened her eyes and leaned up to meet Chakwas’s stare. “Doc? You’re freaking me out here.”

Hard, strong fingers clamped down on Shepard’s shoulder, startling her with their grip. “Good, Shepard, because whomever is behind this is using the psychic equivalent of a crowbar to get at your long term memories. It doesn’t look like they’re trying to indoctrinate you yet, but they’re certainly making a mess.”

Shepard reached out, locking wrists with the doctor to pull herself up, the news breaking through the pain. “They’re afraid of me; that much I got from their attacks. They’re looking for weak
spots.” She frowned, her brows knitting, a bolt of pain and nausea striking between her eyes and sending electric fingers sizzling along her nerves into her sinuses. One hand pressed to her mouth, she held the other out, snapping her fingers until Dr. Chakwas thrust a sick bag into her hand. Dry heaving until her stomach muscles tied themselves into knots, she weaved, rocking unsteadily as her entire body begged to lie back down.

Once the abdominal charlie horses eased, Shepard decided that she could remain sitting up. “They’re trying to decide whether I’m of sufficient use to indoctrinate, aren’t they?” she asked, her voice coming out in a hoarse, acid-torched whisper. A parched chuckle limped along on its heels. “Either way, I’m screwed unless we find a way to prevent or treat their indoctrination.”

The doctor nodded, then spun toward her computer as it beeped. She hurried over, opening it up. “Good, Anderson has had a team tearing that thing apart. Not much to go on, though. Perhaps if we find an intact one . . .” She opened her omnitool. “I’ll send them your scans. The data might be useful in their research.”

Shepard stiffened, “Um, Doc . . . do me a favour. Send them without naming me. I don’t need the galaxy, especially the council, thinking that my brain is falling apart.” She glanced back toward the door. Damn, if Chakwas had already received Anderson’s information that placed Garrus moments from returning. “And, no one on the Normandy knows, Doc. I’ll tell who I need to, when and if I need to. We keep this between us.”

The doctor’s face worked as she thought the request through. “Very well, Shepard, but I need to be able to tell Dr. Solus. He and I have been working with the scans and tests from the Feros colonists, Shiala, and Han’Gerrel. We’ve come up with a cocktail aimed toward stimulating the brain to produce more of the missing neurotransmitters as well as filling the gaps in the meantime.” She moved to a refrigeration unit and began preparing a syringe. “That salarian’s mind works faster than a supercomputer. I’m sure he’ll have ideas for treating you.” After another breath, the doctor turned to face Shepard, her expression almost . . . maternal. “And you need to tell Anderson. He doesn’t deserve to be blindsided if we can’t repair this.”

Garrus walked in the door. He pressed a hand against Shepard’s hip where the doctor wouldn’t be able to see. “You feeling better?” he asked, his voice full of both worry and hope.

“She will be in a moment.” Dr. Chakwas administered the injection. “Just relax here for a few minutes. Let me know if the pain eases.” She returned to her computer. “Have you noticed emotional shifts, unusual smells?”

Shepard leaned back into Garrus’s arm a little. “I don’t recall any smells. I keep flipping back and forth between fear and anger, but considering the memories, they were both relevant. It got better once we got back to Port Hanshan.” Raking her fingers through her hair, she took a breath, the pain in her head backing off a little. “I started remembering things that weren’t as terrible. Anderson talking to me about moving on and doing my folks proud. Things like that.”

“What memories did they pull forward?” Chakwas asked, looking up and holding Shepard in a frank stare that warned her without words to come clean and be honest.

She needn’t have bothered. Shepard knew her life depended on it. A long, soft sigh accompanied a glance behind her at Garrus. The universe seemed determined to strip her naked in front of him no matter how hard she tried.

“Mindoir,” she replied, her voice soft. “My dad sending me out into the forest, trying to save me when the slavers came. Getting caught . . . pretty much every evil thing they did over the next day. Then, later . . . when I was knifed in the fight with my dealer. Anderson visiting me in the hospital
afterward.”

The doctor sat down. Her strong, elegantly attractive features drew together in a thoughtful scowl. After a moment, she nodded. “Safe to say that they were memories that you’ve kept buried?”

Shepard knew the answer, but her sheer panic when she woke up confirmed it. Not to mention how the memories hadn’t just played out in her head, but totally ripped her out of reality. “Yeah, I blocked them out. I had a story—all detached and detail-free—about what had happened to me, but the details . . .” She shook her head and raked her fingers through her hair again. “No details.”

Dr. Chakwas nodded and typed into her computer for a moment. “How are you feeling? Is your headache easing up at all?”

The medication flowed through Shepard like a cool breeze, easing her neurons’ searing complaints. “Yeah it is. Wow.” She chuckled softly as the pressure diffused. “I feel like someone just cut the red wire.”

“Good.” Without looking up, the doctor asked, “How much else do you have planned for this evening, Shepard?”

“I need to tell Liara about her mother and get the rachni queen settled on the ship. Then I was planning on sleeping until 0745. I may or may not eat somewhere in there.” Shepard rubbed her brow, her fingers massaging away a little more of the pressure. “You should do some scans of Matriarch Benezia if Liara is okay with it. She was indoctrinated, but managed to fight it off long enough to warn us.”

Sliding slowly off the bed, Shepard tested out her legs. They’d ceased trembling and held her. The headache rumbled a little—distant thunder—but the invasive march of the greasy spiders had been halted. The relief provided by the basic privacy of being alone in her head felt glorious, curtains drawn over the windows of her glass house.

“Make that wake up call for 0645, Shepard. I want to see you before you do anything else.” The doctor hesitated. “They’re finding their way into your mind through these repressed memories, following them like a forgotten tunnel system. They’re using the power of them against you. You’ve got to face them and close up as many avenues into your mind as you can.”

“I’m sure that they could only wedge their way in because they had their orbs all through Peak 15 and probably Port Hanshan as well,” Shepard argued.

“Even so, it’s high time your past stopped holding so much power over you, don’t you think, Captain?” Once again Chakwas levelled Shepard with a stare that said argument would prove useless or, worse, actually end up reinforcing the doctor’s point.

“Very well, Doc. I’ll drag myself out of bed an hour early, hung over and brain damaged.” She raised a hand to her ear and called Nihlus to let him know she was on her way in to speak with Liara. Hanging up that call, she took a few ginger, tentative steps toward the back lab. She felt like a newborn foal trying to figure out how to use her own body, loose-jointed and foreign.

“I’d prefer you not spend any time alone until we find a way to control whatever they’re doing to you, Captain,” Dr. Chakwas spoke up, cutting Garrus off before he could get a word out. “I can count on you to keep an eye on her, Officer Vakarian?”

Shepard opened her mouth to declare herself more than capable of deciding who could keep any number of eyes on her, but Garrus jumped in to cut her off.
“Don’t worry, Doctor. I’ll—”

Nihlus walked in, earning a grin for his timing.

“Excellent. Let’s get this done.” Shephard shoved her shoulder blades together until they cracked, then rolled her arms and neck a few times before approaching the door to the back lab.

Liara and Shiala both sat at a computer, working in silence when Shephard entered.

“Captain!” Liara jumped up and spun to face them. Her jaw dropped a little when she saw the three of them. “Um. Can I . . . I mean, can we help you?”

Shephard gestured for the asari to retake her seat. “Something happened on Noveria, Liara.” She glanced at Shiala. “Do you . . . um . . . you might want some privacy for this.” Shephard looked back at Garrus and nodded toward the door. He could wait for her outside and give Liara a smaller audience to her grief.

“I’d rather Shiala stay,” Liara replied, sitting down and reaching out for the other asari’s hand.

Shephard smiled, thin and tight-lipped, and sat on a crate. Nihlus hung back by the door, looking Spectre-ish and severe. “We found your mother on Peak 15. When we arrived, her commandos had sealed the central lab and fought to the last soul to keep the enemy from getting to her, but she was gravely injured. Still, she managed to keep herself alive until we got there. She told me to pass on a couple of messages.”

Liara’s face paled, her large blue eyes darkening with tears, but she remained composed and controlled. “Messages?” she asked, her voice taut.

Shephard nodded. “The first was that she loved you. You were . . . are her greatest joy and she has always been proud of your independence and dedication.”

The words elicited a tiny, gasped cry, “Oh, Mother.”

Shephard’s heart constricting as Liara’s lips quivered then pressed together. The knuckles on her hand that held Shiala’s paled as she tightened her grip.

Shephard leaned forward and placed a hand on Liara’s knee: silent empathy. “The second was that you needed to go to Illium and speak to someone named Aethyta who is holding your legacy.”

“Illium? My legacy?” Liara blinked rapidly, then frowned and shook her head. “I don’t know anyone named Aethyta, why would my mother want me to go to her?” A sharp edge crept into her voice, piercing the controlled grief. “I don’t understand. Why did she join Saren? Why was she trying to help the Reapers?”

Shephard gave Liara’s knee a gentle squeeze, asking for her forbearance. “Your mother learned that the council and Saren were indoctrinated . . . being controlled by the Reapers. She hoped to guide Saren along a less horrific path. Unfortunately, she underestimated Sovereign’s strength and was indoctrinated herself.” Shephard took a deep breath. “I think the important thing to remember is that in the end, she was strong enough to fight back. She died free, passing on the information we needed.”

“She’s still on . . . oh.” Another small gasp escaped as she realized her mother’s fate. Liara shrugged. “I forgot they destroyed Peak 15. I was going to ask . . .”

“Your mother’s body is with Legion and our other guest, a rachni queen that your mother insisted
Liara nodded. “Illium . . .”

Shepard stood. “As soon as we’re done with Wrex’s mission tomorrow, we’ll set course for Illium to find Aethyta.”

Liara stood and held out her hand. “Thank you, Captain. Would you be willing . . .” Her voice broke, but she cleared her throat and squared her shoulders. “I mean, um . . . would you come with me to find Aethyta?”

Shepard offered her other arm, giving Liara a quick hug when the asari stepped forward. “Of course. Whatever you need, just ask.” She squeezed Liara’s hand. “We should be picking Legion and the queen up shortly, and I’ll have Dr. Chakwas there to help you with any preparations you wish to make for your mother.”

Liara nodded and stepped back, Shiala standing and wrapping an arm around her waist. Shepard smiled softly and nodded to them both before backing toward the door. “I’m very sorry for your loss. She was a remarkable, strong woman who loved you a great deal.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Liara crumpled into the chair, all her joints folding, a puppet whose strings of composed resolve all snapped at the same time. Shiala moved in to comfort her friend, so Shepard withdrew, herding Nihlus ahead of her.

“Captain Drunken Hard-Ass,” Joker’s voice came through on her radio, “we have clearance to leave.”

Shepard ignored the snarkiness, not being able to blame him. She’d been a little more rough on him than she normally would. “Take us to Legion’s coordinates, Joker. Coordinate with him. I want to get out of here as quickly and smoothly as possible.”

“Aye, ma’am. Joker, out.”

“He’s pissed,” Shepard said. She levelled a glare at Garrus. “Since you’ve apparently appointed yourself my babysitter, don’t let me drink again. I hate the three days of apologizing that follows. Now, let’s go welcome our newest guest.”
Decompressing and welcoming a new guest aboard the Normandy.

The entire ship seemed to take a deep, ragged breath that froze in their lungs as the rachni queen followed Legion up the ramp. Shepard exhaled, a slow hiss of air, and chuckled to herself as she wondered what colour the queen would use to describe the atmosphere on the Normandy at that moment. Mustard yellow most likely. Disguising her grin behind her hand, Shepard focused on the queen. She didn’t have the foggiest clue how a giant bug managed to look stately and dignified, but the queen pulled it off. The rachni transformed the hush in the cargo bay from terror to awe in the space of a couple heartbeats.

Kaidan, Ash, Jenkins, and three Marines closed in on the center aisle, rifles and shotgun in their hands, but held low. Shepard almost told them that the guns wouldn’t prove necessary, but decided against it. Better they make that determination themselves since the queen would be living down here with all of them for a few days.

“Shepard-Captain.” Legion drew her attention away from the strange and terrifying, yet oddly beautiful form of the rachni. The geth held out the OSD that she’d given him for safe keeping.

“Welcome back, Legion. You did some excellent work out there today, thank you.” She took the disk and shoved it into a pocket for later. “Go thaw out and do . . . um, well, whatever it is that you do to rest and recharge. We’ll be needing you in the morning.”

He nodded, his head flaps fluttering. “Understood, Shepard-Captain.” He headed for the elevator, moving aside to allow Dr. Chakwas, Shiala, and Liara to disembark before he stepped over the threshold.

Shepard gave Liara a bracing, empathetic smile before turning to Shiala. Crooking a finger, she beckoned for Shiala to join her. “The queen communicates telepathically. Benezia said she was able to get information from her mind. Could you try to see if you can act as her voice? She spoke through Benezia before, but I’d rather she didn’t.”

Shiala hesitated for a moment before she nodded. “Of course.” Casting a sad, affectionate glance at her friend, the asari let out a musical little sound of grief. “I don’t think Liara would deal very well if her mother started talking. Benezia’s death is hitting her hard. She’s blaming herself for their
A short dagger of memory slit through Shepard’s guts. She knew about grieving for a mother and regretting the note upon which things had ended. “Yeah, I get that. The last thing I said to my mother was ‘I hate you. I can't wait to move away from here!’” Shepard pushed away the memory of the hurt in her mother's eyes. The fight had been over something so stupid . . .

_Not the time, Janey. Focus._

Shepard shook off the melancholy, “Come on, Sister Shiala. Let’s go chat with a rachni queen and pray this works.” Frowning, she looked around. “Where did Wrex get to?” She discovered him lurking in his corner. His posture screamed ‘ready to charge’ and the blue nebula of his biotics sparked around his hands as he toyed restlessly with his shotgun. His eyes narrowed as he stared at Shepard, the warning there clear as day.

“Hey, Wrex, come on.” Shepard gave him a surreptitious flick of her hand, waving for him to join them as they walked over to meet the rachni. The queen stopped at the top of the ramp, her frilled, opalescent head moving in a way that Shepard could only call anxious. The downside of telepathy . . . being able to sense everyone's fear and distrust.

“Welcome aboard.” Shepard stopped a couple of meters back. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t think to ask back on Peak 15 if you had a name.”

Shiala stood just behind Shepard’s arm. The captain understood the reflex. After everything the young asari had been through, her desire for a shield made complete sense. Shiala closed her eyes, her brow furrowing. “Her name is . . .” When she reopened her eyes, Shepard’s heart lurched hard to port at the endless black of her stare. It never stopped being freaky. “It’s impossible to translate . . . just a handful of musical notes.” After a short pause, she smiled, “It reminds me of a song my mother used to sing to me, Amalair Deseau: The Beautiful Wind.”

Shiala closed her eyes, her head tilting slightly to one side. Shepard moved to intervene but stopped as she saw Shiala’s lips sculpt into a wistful sort of smile. “She likes Amalair, and she thanks you for her freedom and your trust.”

“Beautiful?” Wrex harrumphed. “Not sure a giant insect needs a name.” He stepped up to stare into the queen’s eyes. “Your kind killed millions of my people during the war. You twitch the wrong way, your insides will be your outsides before you see me coming. Clear?”

The rachni queen made a musical sound that threw Shepard backwards in time and filled her with warmth. Sometimes, in the spring, the wind rolled over the hills on the farm, playing the wire fence like a massive string instrument. She’d lay out under the trees, eyes closed, breathing in the
spice of newly budding leaves and the bright, honey-sweet scent of the flowers and listen to its eerie music.

Shepard dragged herself out of her memories for what felt like the thousandth time. At least the queen's voice provoked a more pleasant memory. Forcing herself to focus, Shepard started to admonish Wrex, but then the queen made another soft trill of music.

“And your kind drove ours into extinction, extinguishing one song after another until the Singing Planet and our colonies wept bitter, silent tears,” Shiala said, stepping forward as if to protect the queen. Shepard hoped it was voluntary, not some sort of mind control. The ship had enough of that going on. “We do not know why our people turned from beauty to violence, their song soured.” The queen's large, frilled head dipped and swayed a little as if everything were a dance.

“So,” Shepard said, stepping between them, “you killed them, and they killed you. Such as is the case with war. If no one ever takes the first steps toward trust and healing, war never ends.” She closed on Wrex, countering his narrow, red-eyed glare with an encouraging smile and a hand on his shoulder. “Is never-ending war what you want for the krogan, Wrex?”

He rumbled with what could have been a growl or a sigh. “You know it isn't.” He jerked his head to his right, backing her off. Shepard stepped aside, trusting Wrex to keep his word. Jutting out his chin a little, the krogan battle-master hung up his shotgun. “I've given Shepard my word that I'll watch over the rachni and help them rebuild. I'll keep my word as long as the rachni keep theirs. Step out of line and I'll send you back into extinction.”

The air danced with the queen's music and whispers for another moment, then Shiala said, “The rachni will keep their oaths to Shepard as well. They will build in peace and help defeat the black anathema to come. Do not allow doubt to weaken your song, Urdnot Wrex. The rachni have also been shaped into weapons, our strings plucked by those who counted our blood less dear than their own. We will give only the reapers and their masters cause to compose laments laden with fear.”

A puzzled scowl wrinkled Shepard’s forehead and drew her brows in tight above her nose. “Someone used the rachni as weapons? You mean during the war?”

“And before. It is the saddest of ironies to be a species who wishes only to sing in peace and yet possesses a talent and skill for war.” A sigh like fingertips brushed over harp strings followed the queen's words.

Wrex grunted, turned a rueful eye to Shepard and then, with a wave of his hand that labelled them all mad, stalked back to his corner of the cargo bay amidst the crates of his ancestors’ treasures.

Shepard caught sight of Liara and Dr. Chakwas standing a few meters back. “Amalair, thank you for bringing the matriarch’s body out of that nightmare. We can take her now.” She waved for the doctor to approach. “Sparky, Jenkins, could you give the good doctor a hand, please?”

The Marines stepped up, doing an impressive job of hiding any nervousness as they lifted Benezia's body from the rachni’s arms and laid it on the gurney.

“Here, Doc,” Jenkins said, “I’ll give you a hand taking the matriarch up to med bay.”

Shepard smiled and gave the young man’s shoulder a grateful squeeze as he pushed the stretcher past her.

Liara walked up to the rachni queen. Her hands fidgeted a little, but she held herself straight and strong despite her obvious nerves. “Thank you for carrying my mother's body out of that place. It
means a great deal to me.” After a moment's hesitation, she lifted a hand to touch the frill behind the queen's head. Her eyes closed, and she took a step closer, her lips relaxing into a smile even as tears crept from the corners of her eyes.

“Liara?” Shepard whispered, “you okay?” Walking over, she pressed a comforting hand to the young asari's back. Ribbons of colour, tranquil and healing, earnest and yearning, flowed through Shepard's hand. Seeming joyful to find new ground to colour, the currents of vivid emotion swept through her body. They twined and curled around each organ, slipped between strands of muscle, and swept through her mind—a cool breeze under a shady tree in August. Shepard allowed the beauty and comfort to fill her for nearly a minute, long enough that she heard people moving in to intercede.

“Thank you,” she whispered, pulling back, a flower closing itself off from the sun. She waved her people back with a couple of flips of her hand. Any concern she'd harboured over the queen being aboard faded, replaced by the certainty that she posed no danger to anyone, at least anyone on the Normandy.

“Shiala,” Shepard said, looking back to the asari, “I know you'll want to get up to support Liara, but could you help the queen get settled? Whatever she needs is fine. Just send me a report when you're finished.” Hiding a yawn behind her hand, Shepard felt the long day and its many highs and lows creeping up on her. If she moved quickly, she might get some food into her before she passed out.

“Go ahead, Captain,” Shiala replied. “I look forward to getting to know the queen better. Her mind is so beautifully peaceful. I'll send my report when I'm done.” Her fingertips brushed Shepard's forearm, giving her the slightest push. “We'll be fine.”

Shepard looked to Kaidan and Ashley. They'd put their guns away and watched the proceedings with faintly bemused expressions. “Keep an eye on for a couple of hours?”

“Aye aye, ma'am,” Ashley replied. The chief raised an eyebrow. “What happened when you touched Dr. T'Soni? It looked like you wandered off on us.”

“I sort of did. I think I was feeling the queen's thoughts or emotions as she comforted Liara. It felt amazing . . . beautiful and peaceful.” She grinned and gave the chief a wink. “If I hadn't been afraid that you were all about to open fire on her, I'd still be standing there, soaking it in.”

“It was a little freaky, ma'am.” Ashley shifted her weight a little, biting the inside of her lip. “I . . . uh . . . well, you seem okay.”

“I am. Don’t worry.” Shepard followed Ash’s gaze as the chief looked over at the queen.

Liara still stood with her hand pressed to the rachni’s frill, eyes closed. After a few seconds, she pulled away from the rachni, tears falling, but an expression of peace on her face. “Thank you,” she whispered then turned and started toward the elevator.

“Liara?” Shepard called, keeping her voice low. “Are you all right?”

The asari stopped and smiled. “I’m fine, Captain. She showed me my mother’s last thoughts about me.” Liara swiped at her cheeks. “Knowing that Benezia respected my choices and loved me . . . . I’m fine.” A wistful expression crossed her face. “I’d better head up.”

Shepard watched the asari walk into the elevator, envying her a little for that glimpse into her mother’s heart. When the door closed, she spied Nihlus standing back by the right hand ramp to
engineering, just looking on. She strode over to him. “Why did you stay back? Are you feeling all right?” She touched his cheek. It felt clammy and cool.

He pulled away from her hand. “I'm fine. I didn't want to overwhelm the queen with too many people pressing in on her.”

“Go on up to med bay and check in with Dr. Chakwas.” She scanned him with a critical eye, seeing how he favoured his right side despite his tough guy posture. “You shouldn't have even been on your feet today. Who knows what damage you've done to yourself.”

Nihlus stiffened, his mandibles jutting out, defiant despite the fact his knees visibly trembled. His armour held him up, the paper wrapper around a broken crayon, but he tipped precariously on the edge of collapse. “You're very stubborn for someone your size,” he grumbled.

Instead of arguing with him, Shepard nodded. “I always loved horses. My parents bought me a Shetland pony when I was six. Tiny thing. Just ridiculously stubborn. My dad said it was because ponies were smart, they questioned your right to command.” She grinned. “I learned a lot from that pony.” Taking his hand, she led him to the elevator. “Come on, if you go without a fight, I'll tuck you in and read you a bedtime story.”

His warm chuckle surprised her. “As long as they aren't like my mother's stories. When she was done terrifying my much younger self with bloody dismemberments, exploding heads, and glorious battlefields covered in varren tearing apart rotting corpses, sleep was the last thing I wanted to do.”

Just before the elevator door closed, Ashley ran in.

“Ah, ma’am . . .. Permission to speak freely?”

“Of course, Chief. What’s up?” Shepard leaned back against the rear wall of the insanely slow box.

“It’s just . . . it really looked like the rachni queen put the whammy on you. I’m just a little worried that she might be trying to influence you . . . influence us all into trusting her when we should be keeping an eye on her.” Ash shuffled a little and crossed her arms.

Nihlus nodded. “She’s broadcasting vocalizations to make herself seem less threatening. It’s not all that different from the way turian subvocals carry the emotion and subtext of what we’re saying.”

Shepard frowned. “I did worry that she influenced Shiala to step between her and Wrex. Did you pick anything up that made you concerned?” She looked to both of them for an answer.

“Nothing here,” Nihlus replied. His head bobbed in a slight shrug. “She knows her people’s history with the races. Add to that she was hatched by people who held her prisoner, experimented on her, and drove her offspring mad in attempt to enslave them. If I were in her position, I’d be trying to keep the atmosphere calm and let the people who rescued me know I meant no harm.”

Shepard nodded. “Yeah, I felt nothing but peace, but by all means, Ash . . . keep an eye on. If you see or feel anything that sets off an alarm, let me know right away. She’s an unknown.” She squeezed Ashley’s shoulder. “Thanks for coming to me with this.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The chief remained in the elevator when the door opened, letting Shepard and Nihlus out on the crew deck.

Shepard accompanied him to a very busy med bay, the activity centred around Benezia, who lay on the far bed, covered by a sheet. That didn't really make for a comfortable sleeping environment. “Dr. Chakwas, my friend here could use a quick check up. He overtaxed himself today.”

The doctor excused herself from a vid call and strode over, her omnitool active and scanning even
before she reached them. “Spectre Kryik, what were you told as a condition of your leaving med bay today?”

Nihlus answered with an exaggerated scowl and an incoherent grumble.

The doctor let out a comical, long-suffering sigh. “Sit up on the bed. I'll treat you, then you will eat at least a thousand calories before returning to your closet for no fewer than seven hours of sleep. If you do not comply with these instructions, I promise things will go badly for you.” She glowered at him long enough to prompt a petulant mutter of agreement. Victorious, Chakwas turned to Shepard. “How about you? Headache and flashbacks holding off?”

“Yes, ma'am, you mix a mighty fine cocktail.” Shepard steadied Nihlus as he sat on the bed. “All right, I am off to bed people.” Jabbing a finger at Nihlus, she fixed him with an exaggerated steely stare. “And you, Brother Kryik, shall feel the mighty wrath of the Enkindlers in all its fearsome glory if you don't head straight from here to bed.”

“Yes, ma'am.” A soft chuckle followed her to the door. “Hey, what about my story?”

Shepard laughed and shook her head. “I'll owe you.”

The simple yet glorious relief of arriving at the end of a long day slipped over her as she exited med bay. She wrapped it tight around herself as she crossed the galley, eager for the quiet and solitude of her quarters. “This has been one seriously messed up day.” She glanced at the ceiling in the default 'higher power must reside above you' pose. “I understand the whole ‘what doesn't kill you makes you stronger’ concept, but you know, sometimes lessons that don't involve horror and violence are nice too. Glory hallelujah.” Blowing a raspberry at the universe, she palmed the door to the captain’s quarters. “Stupid universe.”

“Stupid universe?”

Shepard grinned at Garrus, the rich timbre of his voice warming her through. “Yep, stupid universe.” She walked over to where he sat at the table, typing on a datapad. “Whatcha doin’?” Her grin widened as she saw the covered food trays awaiting her arrival.

“Just doing a little research to see if those black orbs have been seen before. So far, no luck.” He looked up from his work, his gaze warm and welcoming. He set down the datapad and held out a hand. The gesture sent relief, affection, guilt, and fear all pouring into her inner coliseum, emotional gladiators ready to fight it out.

“Been waiting long?” she asked, taking his hand. When he pulled her in against his side, she ran the backs of her fingers along his fringe then slipped her arm around his neck. He'd changed out of his armour into the long robe which softened out his angles a touch. His warmth soaked into her, a little like the sensation of the rachni queen's thoughts, but strong and vital.

“No, not long. Maybe ten minutes. How did the introductions go?” He tilted his head back a little to look up at her, his intense, interrogator stare softened by concern and affection.

She rested her brow against his fringe and closed her eyes. “Really well. Shiala and Liara came down to meet Benezia's body, and although they can't read the queen’s mind per se, they were able to get the idea behind what she was trying to communicate.” She pulled away and sat in the closest chair. “I touched her thoughts for a moment . . . or more appropriately, her thoughts touched mine and they were so beautiful, like . . . quicksilver ribbons of colour and emotion and intent.” She shrugged, unable to put the experience into words. Blushing a little, she chuckled. “Anyway, it was pretty incredible.”
“They’ve just been lining up to get into your head today.” He pushed her tray over in front of her. “Just be careful, Shepard. It sounds like it was a positive experience, but . . .” A small shrug punctuated his worry.

“I will be. Nihlus said she’s broadcasting a subvocal to make herself seem less threatening, but after what she’s been through, I can hardly blame her for trying to influence us to accept her. Ash, Kaidan, and Wrex are keeping an eye on her.” Shepard lifted the lid, a burst of steam rolling up, carrying with it the scent of spaghetti. She moaned, low and throaty, and reached out to squeeze his hand. “Okay, you're a keeper. This looks amazing. Thanks C-Sec.”

“You're welcome.” He dug into a big slab of meat covered in small brownish things that looked a little like burnt eggs.

Twirling noodles onto her fork, she examined what Garrus had said about aliens lining up to fuck with her head. She couldn’t take a chance that the queen might be trying to hide a dark agenda, but how to know if she was being influenced? She’d be the last one to know.

“I’ll keep checking in with Dr. Chakwas,” she said, knowing even though it came out of the blue, he’d be worrying on it too. “And you can keep an eye on me. If I start acting too trusting etc. jump on it.” She laid her hand over his. “I don’t take this stuff lightly, C-Sec, but in the end, I just have to keep going, you know?”

He nodded and cleared his throat. “So, tomorrow is Wrex’s last stop, then we're moving on to Illium. Virmire after that?”

Shepard nodded. “Yeah. I want to get some aerial drone footage of Saren’s compound on Virmire before we move against it.” She pushed the OSD Benezia had given her on the table. “Hopefully this has information on it that will help. Virmire's jungle, rocky shorelines, and deep coastal waters favour the defender. The more intel and the tighter our plan of attack, the better.”

A couple of mouthfuls later, Shepard's omnitool beeped with an incoming message. She set down her fork and opened her mail. The message was text only and from Aria T’Loak. “Hm. That’s weird.” After clicking on the message, she stared at it for a good thirty seconds just trying to decide if it was a hallucination.

“What?” Garrus raised a brow plate. “Is it top secret?”

Laughing, Shepard shook her head. “No, not top secret, just confusing. All the message says is 'Debt repaid.’” She met his eyes and nodded. “But that's not the truly puzzling part. Attached are the deeds to four buildings in Kima District on Omega, including the one we tracked Tali to . . . at least I think it is. I’m not all that familiar with property title legalese on Omega.”

Garrus stabbed at his steak for a few seconds. “How . . . why would she even think of giving you those buildings unless . . .?”

Nodding, Shepard scowled, puzzlement turning to something a lot darker. “Unless she heard us talking that night.” Shaking off the dread, she closed the message and picked up her fork. “I don't want to have to figure Aria out tonight. I have other, more pressing, things to worry about.” She took a bite, her eyes watching him the whole time. When she swallowed, her lips quirked in a crooked smile. “So, when you agreed to keep an eye on me . . .?”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head, but the flick of his mandibles gave him away. “This cabin has enough room for me to bunk on a cot.” Bobbing his head in a disinterested shrug, he focused
Shepard chuckled. “That’s true. Of course we have managed to sleep in the same bed before without ravishing one another. It might be safe enough.” She made a show of coiling a perfect roll of spaghetti noodles around her fork, taking time to stick all the ends in and make it neat before she put it in her mouth. Chewing slowly, she dragged the moment out, grinning wider and wider on the inside as Garrus let the loaded silence go unbroken as well. She swallowed, took a drink, then shrugged. “So long as you realize you have zero chance of scoring.”

A strangled sound was followed by choking. Garrus pounded a fist against the side of his chest and looked up, eyes narrow. After sputtering a couple more times, he pushed his tray away. “Someone certainly considers herself irresistible.”

Leaving the last scraps of her meal, she covered the tray. Her shoulders popped in a joking shrug as she chuckled. “It's a simple fact of biology, C-Sec. I have yet to meet someone I couldn't turn into silly putty with my wiles.” As quickly as she said the words, all the humour drained away, blood leaching from a clenched fist. She frowned, a sick sort of hollow pit forming in her gut that made her dinner churn. It didn't mean anything. Being able to rub herself all over Harkin to ply him for information meant nothing. She'd turned her body into a weapon with one hell of a recoil.

“Garrus.”

The name dragged her attention back from her pity party. “What?”

“My name is Garrus. C-Sec is fine for when we're out there, but when we're alone . . .” He shrugged, a sincere one that time.

Shepard reached out to take his hand. “Okay, Garrus it is.” She squeezed his talons. “I'm a mess, Garrus. You know that. After what the slavers . . . after Mindoir, I detached, you know? I just cut that part out of me, locked it up. The rest is just show, no heart. It doesn't take anything away from me to flirt with someone like Harkin because there's nothing of me in it.” Staring at their joined hands, she let out a long, slow sigh.

He stood, pulling her up with him, and led her over to sit on the side of the bed. Saying nothing, he turned, pulling his knee up on the mattress so he faced her. The interrogator stare softened as she looked up, meeting his stare.

“I kissed Nihlus back in Port Hanshan,” she blurted out, the sick center of her launching it like a missile. “I was drunk . . . scared . . .” She chewed on the inside of her lip. “I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, I knew, but I'm glad you told me.” His mandibles fluttered hard.

“How?” Her neck began to burn as a blush worthy of Sparky crawled up over her cheeks. She tried to pull her hand away, but he held onto it.

“Pheromones. You both told me everything the second you came through the hatch.” He reached up with his other hand and brushed her cheek with his thumb. “I don't own you, Kahri. We've made no promises, taken no vows. I'm no more threatened by Nihlus's feelings for you now than I was a week ago. I know you, and I've gotten to know Nihlus a little. There's an attraction between the two of you, but I'm not jealous of it. I trust what we're building here. If you want to explore that avenue, you just need to tell me.”

She shifted around so she knelt on the bed and wrapped her arms around his neck. He pulled her in, sitting her on his thigh, and slipped his long, powerful arms around her. “Mmmm,” she sighed,
tucking her head under his chin. “This is my new favourite spot in the galaxy.” A comfortable silence wrapped around them, Shepard content to let it embrace them for long minutes before she broke it. “Chakwas says I have to start talking about my past, dragging it out into the light of day so the Reapers can't use it against me.”

He just caressed her back—his hand rubbing slow circles—encouraging her without speaking.

Shepard curled in against him, burrowing into his warmth and strength. “How is it that you make me feel so damned safe? Some sort of magic spell woven through those sub-vocals of yours?” Instead of waiting for an answer, she pushed ahead. “When the Alliance made it to our little corner of Mindoir, the squad's medic took one look at me and moved on.” Reaching around, she laced her fingers with his. “Anderson stopped, spending the time to check for a dead girl's pulse. He woke me up as he shouted for everyone to come back. There was no way for him to unchain me, so he dragged the stakes out of the ground with his bare hands.”

She let the story fade into silence for the space of a few breaths, the memory sharpening from foggy grey to full colour. “He talked to me the whole time the medic prepped me for the shuttle ride to their ship. The pain made me wish I’d died along with my father, but Anderson’s voice gave me an anchor to hang onto . . . kept me sane when it was the last thing I wanted to be. Once their medic finished, Anderson carried me out of there, cradled me on his lap through the shuttle ride, then held my hand the whole time their doc treated me.” She sighed and wriggled in closer. “He saved me, Garrus. Well, most of me anyway.”

She pulled away far enough to kiss him, her lips soft and chaste against his mouth. “You make me want to find the rest and put all those pieces back, but . . ..”

“It takes as long as it takes, Kahri. I'm not going anywhere. You have more than enough pressure and more than enough to worry about. This is meant to be respite for us, not more stress.” He nuzzled her lips and along the line of her jaw. “I'll go down and get a cot.”

Shepard shook her head. “No. I could really use the company tonight. Let me take a shower and then we can get some sleep.” After pressing another soft kiss against the rigid plates of his mouth, Shepard stood. “I'll be right back.”
Bad hair, vid calls and Krant Urdnot begins their mission to retrieve Wrex's armour.

Shepard stumbled down the short ramp into the comm room, her knuckles mining for sleep crusties in the corners of her eyes. “Who was it calling again, Joker?” she asked, her voice slurring a little. “I wasn’t quite conscious the last time you told me.” She ran her fingers through her hair, pausing to glance in a monitor. “Oh man, I shouldn’t have gone to bed with wet hair. I look like Cruella de Vil.” She shook a fist at her reflection. “Bring me those puppies!”

She sighed, shoulders sagging, and ran her tongue over the fur coating in her mouth. “Oh good lord, carpet mouth.” What damned time was it, anyway? She wanted to be all warm and cozy, snuggled up against her own personal turian-shaped heating pad. So toasty. Whatever the bastard wanted, whomever it was dragging her out of bed so early, it had better be damned important.

“It’s Admiral Hackett,” the pilot answered. “Did you get up without putting your brain in this morning?”

She sighed. “Something like that.” She patted down her hair. “By the way, lack of brain function does not make my being so short with you yesterday any more acceptable. I’m sorry about that, Joker, but I have asked Garrus to pick up my slack if I’m incapacitated. So on occasion, he may have an order.”

“Aye aye, Captain Cruella. Patching the admiral through now.”

Yep, still pissed off. Oh well, he’d get over it when he got over it.

Shepard turned away from the monitor and hurried over to the comm terminal. As the holographic image of Admiral Hackett appeared, she snapped a crisp salute. “Admiral Hackett. How may I help you, sir?”

The admiral smiled and returned her salute, then shook his head. “You just roll out of your rack, Shepard?”

Shepard felt her neck heat, and try as she might to keep her hands at her sides, they crept up to pat down the massive rooster tail sticking out of her head. “It’s a new tactic, sir. Frighten the enemy to death with terrifying hairstyles.” Her hands dropped back to the console.

“And how is that working for you?” One eyebrow raised, stretching the terrible scar across his face.

“Not as well as I would have hoped with the turians.” She shook her head. “Terrible hair envy there. I’m considering starting the Hair Club for Turians. I’ll make a fortune. Retire.” She chuckled and shrugged, her smile fading when the admiral barely cracked a grin. Something major was going on. “As much as I always enjoy hearing from you, sir, you have the look of an officer with a problem more serious than my unique flair for style.” She cocked a hip and crossed her arms, not liking the way he stiffened. His was a posture of catastrophic news. “What’s happened?”
“We’ve lost control of the VI that manage enemy tactics at the Luna live fire simulation base. It’s gone rogue. Killed everyone on the base. I sent in Adolisky and Neve with nearly a full platoon of Marines. It wiped them out.” He leaned back, the mirror image of her closed off posture. She sensed something lurking behind his practiced calm, something other than reaction to losing a lot of good men and women to a VI.

“The VI, sir . . . is it still a VI? Those simulations have to learn, plan, anticipate . . . . Is there any chance it could have grown out of bounds?” The slight play of muscles along his jaw answered the question.

“We’re not that careless, Shepard. It’s still a virtual intelligence, not an AI. It’s not thinking on its own.” He dropped his arms and straightened, hands darting to clasp behind his back. “It’s not aware.”

She allowed a ghost of a smile to lift one corner of her mouth. Full plausible deniability mode. Once upon a time, months could pass at a stretch without her seeing the company man behind the soldier. “What’s going on with the Alliance, sir?”

He shook his head, one sharp movement to either side. “Nothing you need concern yourself with, Shepard. Divert to Luna at your earliest possible chance and shut that thing down. I refuse to lose any more people. Understood?”

She opened her mouth to argue. Ice crackled through her cells, chilling her to the core as his eyes told her the exact opposite. They also told her to shut up and play along. “Yes, sir, I understand. Until I do get there, the facility is quarantined? No one in or out?”

“It is.” His chest rose and fell sharply with a heavy sigh. “I know you’re busy with Saren, but I can’t see throwing away any more people when I know you can handle it.”

She saluted. “Understood, sir. Send everything you have on the base, armaments . . . anything I might face going in. I’ll be there within four days.”

“I’ll have everything we’ve got on the base and the VI sent to your terminal by 1200. Good luck, Shepard. Hackett out.”

Shepard leaned forward against the console, allowing all the confusion and misgivings that had just pricked the surface during the call to work themselves all the way forward in her head, jostling for position.

“Nothing unusual about that at all.”

Shepard spun, her heart taking off like a partridge flushed out of long grass. Pounding on her chest with a fist, she cursed, then laughed. “You just scared the living snot out of me, Kryik.” Collapsing into the nearest chair, she leaned back. “You don’t carry a defibrillator, do you?”

He chuckled and sat in the chair next to hers, turned so he faced her. “Hackett thinks they have a rogue AI, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah.” Shepard pushed herself up, crossing her arms as she leaned back. “There’s more going on than that, though. He just can’t talk about it.” She looked him over. “You look better today. How are you feeling?”

“As though I’ll definitely survive.” He shrugged. “How about you? You look a little ragged around the edges, but your eyes don’t look —”
“Shepard?” Joker called, interrupting Nihlus. “You have another call coming in. This one is from an Admiral Kahoku.”

Shepard stood and tried to pat down her rooster tail yet again.


“I’m Admiral Kahoku.” He snapped a crisp salute. “Thank you for finding my men, Captain.” He deflated a little, his shoulders bowing with some unseen weight. “I know their deaths have something to do with Armistan Banes. I’ve put out feelers . . . even gone to the Shadow Broker trying to find out why they were killed.” He shifted into parade rest, his hands clasped behind his back. “The only thing I have been able to turn up is the name of a pro-human splinter organization, Cerberus.”

Shepard stiffened as she heard the name and glanced back at Nihlus. “I’ve heard of them in connection to a shady scientific project. But if Banes is dead, why bother killing the men who found his body? It doesn’t add up, Admiral.”

He nodded. “I agree. Nothing about this has made sense. My men found the body drifting on that ship, brought it back to Arcturus, and then the paper trail just disappears.”

Shepard took a deep breath, debating whether or not to even ask her next question. “Is it possible the body your men found wasn’t Armistan Banes? I know an old acquaintance of his who’s pretty sure he’s still alive and in contact with her.”

“The iris scan said it was Banes, but they had no reason to doubt it was him, so just brought him back without further inquiry. If Banes is still alive, who the hell did they pull out of that ship?”

Shepard shook her head. “If the body is gone, we’ll likely never know. I’m working with Nihlus Kryik, one of the council’s Spectres.” She nodded for Nihlus to join her. “Let us dig into this from here on, Admiral. We’re already after Cerberus to try to find out why it’s involved in this other matter. Whatever we find out, we’ll report back to you.”

The admiral nodded as Nihlus stepped up just behind Shepard’s shoulder. “Thank you both. I can’t help but feel as if this entire matter is going somewhere very dark, but hell if I know where. According to scuttlebutt, Cerberus has their hands in assassinations, supposed ‘accidental’ eezo exposures, experimentation to create super soldiers. Be careful, Captain.”

Shepard nodded, then snapped a salute. “You too, Admiral. We’ll be in touch when we learn anything.”

“Thank you. Kahoku out.”

Shepard turned to face Nihlus when the channel closed. “Like we have time for this.”

The Spectre nodded. He turned and paced to the ramp, then back. “They’re considered a terrorist organization by the council and the Alliance, but we’ve never heard of them? Barla Von sent a packet of information that the Shadow Broker has relating to them, but it’s minimal. The sites of a few bases, some suspicion that they were behind some threshre maw attack that wiped out a platoon on Akuze.” He perched on the edge of the closest chair, still looking uncomfortable, but much better than the day before. “Same deal as Kahoku’s men, a distress beacon placed where the Alliance personnel would walk into the nest.”
“Yeah, I heard about that. Nasty business.” Running a hand through her curls, Shepard let out an exasperated sigh. “We’re being snowed under here. A side trip to Luna, Wrex’s armor, who knows what we’re going to need to do after Illium . . ..” Throwing up her hands, she thumped down in the seat opposite his. “Now Cerberus . . . and why the hell am I worrying about this Armistan Banes guy anyway? Dr. Michel is reporting that everything is fine at the clinic these days. Maybe he is dead.”

Nihlus just stared at her for long seconds before he asked, “After this base, we’re headed straight for Illium?”

“Yeah. I was planning on taking Liara, Shiala, and Ashley to meet with Aethyta. Did you want to come with? I’m hoping whatever legacy Benezia left behind helps us out.” Her eyes narrowed as she finished, evaluating his condition the best she could through the plates and his even more inscrutable stoicism. “How did you come through yesterday? Any new damage?”

He chuckled, the sound warm and reassuring. “I’m fine. You did more damage wrestling with me on the floor of the ladies’ head.”

She winced. “Yeah, sorry about that. I really am a terrible drunk.”

“Shepard?” Joker’s voice came through over the intercom once again.

“What can I do for you this time, Flight Lieutenant?” she asked, turning toward the console. She needed to get showered and go over the OSD Benezia had given her.

“Another call for you, Captain.”

Sighing, she pushed herself out of her chair. “Aren’t I just the most popular girl today?” Spinning on her heel, she stalked back to the console. “Who is it this time? An admiral needing me to pick up his dry cleaning? Take his dog to the groomer? Organize his sock drawer, maybe?”

“No, ma’am. He said his name is Armistan Banes.”

The ice that Hackett had sent slithering through her solidified, freezing her in place for a moment before it shattered, melted away by the hope that she might catch a glimpse of the hand manipulating the puppet. She nodded and took a deep breath, searching through the detritus left behind by the weeks of stormy seas to find the old Shepard. The smart ass who took no prisoners.

“Put him through, Joker. Thanks.” When the channel opened, she almost laughed. Someone had been watching way too many spy vids. Armistan Banes, if in fact that was the identity of the person in front of her, sat shrouded in shadow, only a faint profile visible in the darkness.

“Captain Shepard,” the figure said, shifting slightly in his seat. “I hear you’ve been trying to get in touch with me?” A faint flash of light glowed orange against clean shaven, pronounced features as he lit a cigarette.

She smiled and clasped her hands behind her back, feet shoulder width apart. “That depends on who I’m speaking to.”

He chuckled, a warm sound that made her skin crawl, an infestation of termites eating away just under the surface. He pulled a long, slow drag on his cigarette. “I’m sure the irascible Lt. Moreau told you my name.”

“Yes, he told me a name. Whether it belongs to you remains to be seen. My information says that Armistan Banes is dead and has been for quite some time.” Watching him carefully gave her no
clues as to his identity or whether he was telling the truth. Although, her gut pointed toward truth.

“Death is very often a useful cover for those wishing to disappear, but between Admiral Kahoku, his men, muscle who can’t keep their mouths shut and you . . .” He sighed. “Well, let’s just say that I didn’t expect to be so diligently hunted without first having broken several major laws.”

She shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know about diligent. I’ve had a few more important things on my mind. The good doctor Michel seems to be just fine now with her krogan body guards looking after her. If Kahoku hadn’t just called me, I’d have forgotten about you completely.” She shrugged, hands flipping in a helpless little flourish. “So many things for little ol’ me to keep crammed into my head.”

Banes chuckled. “Come now, Captain, we both know that what resides between your ears is much more maze full of tricks and steel traps than the cotton you’d like people to believe fills the space.” He took another long drag, making a show of tapping and cleaning the ash off the end of his cigarette as he blew the smoke out. He shrugged. “Kahoku no longer interests me. He is tilting at windmills.”

Shepard watched Banes, narrow-eyed and calculating. He only showed his weaknesses in the tiniest glimpses. Everything about him read false: an actor playing a part. Her gut twinged, but she packed the reaction down. He was reading her with the exact same level of scrutiny. She needed to be a mirror. “If the admiral no longer interests you, why am I speaking to your carefully constructed image right now?”

“Because you interest me, Captain, and because you interest my employer even more so. He thinks you possess a great deal of potential.” He shifted in his seat, uncrossing his legs to lean against the arm of his chair. “The other call you took this morning also greatly interests me. A rogue VI? Ah, the possibilities there are intriguing indeed, aren’t they?” He leaned toward the camera a little. “Has the Alliance been colouring outside the lines on AI research?” He smoked for a few seconds then shook his head. “No, they’re too busy trying to suck up to the council to risk anything so interesting. That leaves spontaneous self-awareness.” He sucked in an eager breath. “Oh, that is exciting, isn’t it? The birth of a brand new baby. Not ideal it being born with its hands full of guns, though.”

Shepard shook her head and cocked a hip. “There’s nothing to say it is an AI. As far as I know, it’s a VI with a penchant for killing Alliance soldiers. I don’t know how you found out about it, but if I see anyone other than my team at that base, I’ll treat them as the enemy.” A cold smile of warning blew over her features, freezing them in place. He dismissed that with a wave of one hand. “Oh, don’t worry, I have no intention of running between you and an entire Alliance firebase full of weapons operated by a mad VI. I leave the dodging of bullets to others.” He held up his hands. “These are the hands of a precise sort of scientist . . . a surgeon if you will.” He shook his head. “Besides, my employer is curious to see Captain Shepard face a worthy challenge.”

Shepard paced to the edge of the camera’s range and back. “I don’t take requests. Your employer gets the urge to have someone dance for his amusement, there are many fine gentlemen’s clubs.” She leaned into the console. “You both just need to stay away from me, Dr. Michel, and Admiral Kahoku. Don’t make me bump you up to the top of my list of priorities.”

He nodded. “You aren’t my department, Shepard. I agree we should give one another a wide berth, for Admiral Kahoku’s sake. He’s getting up there, and his heart isn’t what it used to be. You and my employer are on the same side of this whole Reaper invasion unpleasantness. To that end, he wanted me to extend this courtesy. Stay out of his affairs, and he’ll do the same. He’d hate to have
to bump you up his list of priorities.”

Shepard opened her mouth to tell him where to shove his threats, but he held up one finger as his other hand stubbed out his smoke. “Take care, Shepard. We’ll talk again, I feel certain of that.”

For nearly thirty seconds, Shepard stared at the spot where the enigmatic figure had been projected, chasing the encounter and all its elusive subtext through her thoughts. It hadn’t been about warning her off, of that much she felt certain. It hadn’t been about Kahoku either, she sensed that they didn’t care either way if she helped the old man investigate. They intended to mow him over without the care put into digging out a weed or pulling a splinter. She’d send a message to Hackett to keep an eye on Kahoku, but if the admiral insisted on taking on Cerberus, they’d find a way to kill him.

No, that conversation had been about something else entirely, and the real message had been written under the surface.

“That wasn’t meant to scare you off,” Nihlus said, stepping up behind her again. “It was meant to entice you.” He shook his head. “I’ve heard a lot of whispers about Cerberus and seen a lot of damning testimony, but that call was the only thing that has ever made me nervous. They want you in a bad way, Shepard.”

She scowled and looked up into his eyes. “They do, but hell if I know why. Maybe they’re just held captive, bound and helpless by the amazing allure of my sultry beauty.”

Nihlus shrugged, his mandibles sweeping thoughtfully, but then they dropped and he shook his head, deadpanning, “No, that’s not it.”

Shepard laughed and elbowed him gently. “Very nice. Be still my heart. You turians and your hopeless romanticism.” After a second, she shook off the lingering dread from the call. “Come on, let’s go kick some mercenary butt. We have enough real enemies lined up in front of us. Don’t really need to be inventing any.”

“I blame you,” he said, a warm chuckle following the words out. “You’re an enemy magnet. Everywhere you go, everyone hates you.”

Shepard cackled. “I know. It’s great, isn’t it?” She palmed the door and slipped past him. “I think it’s a magical power.”

He shrugged. “It’s something.” When she took another swing at him, he just reached out and placed his hand on her head, holding her at arm’s length. “Ha! Why didn’t I think of this weeks ago?”

Shepard spun, ducking out from under his hand, bringing around a kick that she halted right before it impacted his midsection. “That would be why, smart ass.” She walked through the door down to the crew deck and trotted down the stairs. At the bottom, she turned to face him. “I am going to grab a shower and tame my bedhead. Meet you in my quarters at 0800 to go over Noveria and Benezia’s disk?”

“Sure. See you in a bit.” He ducked off toward the crew quarters and his closet.

When she walked around the table into the galley and saw the med bay door, Shepard groaned. Damn, she needed to go in and get her head shrink. No time for showers or even breakfast. Life was cruel, especially since she felt pretty good, all things considered. Head didn’t hurt, thoughts seemed clear and unmuddled with memories. Oh well, she needed to make it through the fight, and
if that meant talking about her childhood invisible friend named Mr. Roofydoofus . . .

“Shit, I hope I don’t have to talk about that,” she sighed, heading for the med bay door. “I’ll sound like an idiot.”

* * * * *

“This is going to save us a whole metric buttload of time,” Shepard said, letting out a half-sigh, half-chuckle as she moved over the 3D holographic map of Saren’s compound on Virmire. “I was going to head there and do all this mapping after Illium, but this frees us to go straight to Luna.”

Nihlus leaned over the table, peering down at the map like a giant raptor. “Do you believe we can trust it and the intel Benezia provided? She was indoctrinated. This information could be a trap.” He looked up at Shepard without lifting his head. “We need to confirm it before we act on it for sure.”

Shepard nodded. “We do.” She sighed. “Keep that eagle eye on me. I want to trust this too much. I want to trust the queen too much.” She shoved away from the table and paced to her desk. “I’m not a trusting person, Nihlus. I don’t trust anything. Add that to how much is messing with my head . . .” Spinning on her heel, she turned back, meeting and holding his gaze. “So, please, keep an eye on me.”

A quick nod answered her request. He straightened and stepped around the table. “What do you want to do with this information?” Three long strides carried him across the few metres between them.

“I don’t want to take a couple of days doing the surveying just to prove we had correct information to start with.” She leaned her hip against the edge of her desk. “See if Barla Von can confirm the information.” A smile softened her frown lines, easing the tension between her eyebrows. “He’s going to start feeling like our personal information broker soon.” That thought started with a chuckle, but then as it settled, opened up an avenue of doubt. “Should we be trying to secure some independent sources of intel? Having all our eggs in the Shadow Broker’s basket might not be the best plan.”

Nihlus laid his hands on her shoulders. “If it helps, I trust Von. The Broker, no, but Von has done nothing but excellent work for us. I’m sure we can trust what he brings us, if only because what we’re giving him back has more than compensated him.” He gently pushed Shepard toward the bed. “I want to get some intel of a more pressing nature at the moment.”

She frowned up at him, but let him guide her. “And what would that be?” She sat on the edge, watching him through narrowed eyes as he sat next to her and turned, lifting his knee onto the mattress to face her.

He stared at her for a second, then shrugged. “I want to know what’s going on, Shepard. You’ve been off for days, and now you’re telling me to keep an eye on you like you think someone is controlling you. It’s time to bring me up to speed.” Surprisingly, she relaxed under his scrutiny, the contact supportive, not at all uncomfortable as it had been a couple of weeks earlier.

Shepard shook her head a little. For almost a month, they’d wandered a winding and painful road to get back to where they’d been on the second or third day. She’d pushed him too hard back then, so sure of herself, so convinced that she could just flirt her way into a relationship that she could control. God, how could she have been so insanely naive? In the intervening weeks, tornados and
hurricanes ripped through, shredding the blissfully ignorant town of Shepard, leaving mobile homes and prefabs sticking upside down out of trees and in ditches.

“Yeah, I suppose you need to know.” She slumped a little and settled back onto the bed. “I don’t want it to be common knowledge, though. If things get bad, if my decisions and actions become questionable, then we’ll take it to the team.” She hardened her stare, warning him without a word that she wouldn’t tolerate that knife being turned on her.

He nodded. “You can trust me, Shepard.”

Twenty minutes later, Shepard checked her chrono. “We’d better get suited up. It’s time for Urdnot Wrex’s krant to swing into action.” She herded Nihlus to the door. “Are you going to contact Barla Von about confirming Benezia’s information?”

Stopping before she could chase him all the way out, he turned back to face her. “Thank you for trusting me.” He palmed the door. “As soon as I get into my armour, I’ll call Von.”

She nodded and stood in the door, watching him walk to the elevator, moving in long, easy strides. At least she didn’t have to worry about his injuries any longer. By the time they saw any real action on Luna, he’d be healed up just fine.

Shepard started back into her quarters, but stopped just inside the door and peeked out at the sound of Garrus’s voice.

“Wrex!”

The turian walked over to the table, more hesitant than she could remember seeing him. Usually he strode right into things, but he minced as if being dragged to his execution.

The battlemaster glared up at him through narrowed, red eyes. “What do you want, Vakarian? Shouldn’t you be suiting up?”

Garrus cleared his throat, but didn’t back down. “I may have been . . . um . . .” He cleared his throat again. “…insensitive when I listened to the cockpit recording after Shepard drove through that threshor with you and Alenko in the Mako.” Taking a deep breath, he straightened until his back cracked. “After driving across Noveria with her, I wanted to apologize for that.”

Wrex held the glare for a moment, then nodded and harrumphed. “Sure. No hard feelings.” He held out his hand, but instead of shaking, at the last second he opened his omnitool and hit a button.

Garrus’s frantic, flanged curses roared through the galley gaining in volume and pitch until Shepard flinched, covering her ears.

The crowd at the table burst into raucous laughter, and Wrex stood, buffeting the turian with a sharp slap to the shoulder.

“Thanks for the apology, Garrus,” he said, a deep, rough chuckle chasing the words out of his mouth.

Garrus spun to face Legion, who was replacing his chest panel with a piece of male armour. “Legion!”
The geth looked up, his head flaps shifting in a gentle sigh of movement. “Officer Vakarian?”

The turian stormed over, every inch of him bristling with fury and indignation as he towered over the geth. “How did Wrex get that recording?”

“We were told the information was needed for educational purposes,” Legion replied, his tone remaining so completely even that Shepard began to worry that Garrus might just start peeling off head flaps.

“Hey! C-Sec!” she called, stepping out through the door. “May I speak with you for a moment?”

Glowering, Garrus hesitated before spinning on his talons and stalking toward her. The second he passed through the door, however, she stopped worrying for Legion’s welfare. All the rigid fury drained from his features, the actor stepping off the stage. Still stalking, but playful rather than angry, he closed on her.

“You called, Captain?” he asked, mandibles fluttering a little. “Did you need something, or just distracting me from giving Legion a 7.21 calibration error?” He laid his hands on her shoulders then slid them down her arms, warm and familiar, intimate in a way that sparked a small nova in her gut. Fear whispered beneath it, but she pushed it into the fire, turning it to ash. A mission waited, a chaperone pacing outside her door to be sure things weren’t allowed to go anywhere terrifying.

Shepard grinned as she looked up into his eyes. “I was worried about Legion for a moment or two, but now . . . Legion who?” The grin widened as he returned her smile with a sly, turian one. “Too bad we have a mission in a few minutes.”

He chuffed and shook his head. “There’s always going to be something that needs doing, Shepard. It all just depends on your priorities.”

Her smile melted, candle wax sliding down her jaw to drip on the floor. “This war, finding Saren . . . stopping the Reapers . . . they have to be my priority, Garrus. I can’t let anything distract me from that.” She looked down as one hand lifted to hover between them for a moment before lowering, her fingers brushing his hand on their way back to her side.

He caught them. “I know, and I understand, Shepard. That wasn’t what I meant. My job is to support you and make sure you have what you need to pull out the win. Sometimes that will mean seeing how many different ways I can get your skin to do that gooseflesh thing.” His grin brought hers right back as he added, “Right now, that means chasing you out to your locker and admiring the view while you suit up.” His large hand cradled her neck and most of the side of her head, his thumb tracing the curve of her smile. “That’s better.”

“Let’s get moving. The Alliance tossed another mission at us, so we’ll be heading straight from Illium to Earth. One of the training VI’s has gone rogue on Luna.” She stood on tiptoes to kiss him, still needing to grab onto his yoke to pull him down before she pressed her lips to his mouth. Her smile deepened as his arms slipped around her waist, pulling her in. She’d never experienced the simple but amazing feeling of just wanting to kiss someone and have him hold her. After a second, she shook off the sentimentality and pulled away. “Urdnot Wrex awaits, and he is one hell of a taskmaster.”

Garrus straightened. “He is.”

As she slipped into her armour and they made their way down in the elevator, they discussed the problems inherent to uniting the krogan under a single leader, of which there were many. Just like
trying to bring the quarians and geth together, it was a road laden with hurdles that had no easy fixes. It required a great deal of cooperation and trust from a people unused to even trusting each other.

Most of the team had already assembled in the cargo bay when Shepard and Garrus arrived. Wrex paced at their head, practically vibrating with eagerness to spring into action.

“Captain?” a soft voice called from behind Shepard’s right shoulder.

Shepard turned to face Shiala, her brow furrowing a little as the asari and the rachni queen walked toward her. Garrus touched the captain’s shoulder and headed off to join the rest of the krant.

Despite the fact that Shiala said she hadn’t felt anything other than peace and beauty in the queen’s thoughts, Shepard worried about the queen’s influence and possible control over the asari and the rest of them. Still, despite her concerns, the Reapers and Saren had tried to subvert the rachni because they were an enemy that posed a serious threat. That meant a level of trust she could only pray paid off.

“Captain?” Shiala called again, her face creasing to match Shepard’s frown. “Are you all right?”

Taking a deep breath, Shepard shook off her hesitancy, glad for her suspicions, but needing to set them aside. “I’m fine, thanks.” She looked from the asari to the queen. “Is there something you need?”

Shiala hummed softly as if undecided about speaking then stopped, her head tilting as she presumably listened to the queen. “The queen understands that you are accompanying Urdnot Wrex on a mission? That this mission will help turn his song from darkness to hope.”

Shepard nodded. “Yes, we’re recovering artifacts that belonged to his people. It will help restore the krogan people’s pride and connection to their forebearers.”

The queen made a melodic trill, carrying beneath it the eerie whisper that Shepard could just about understand. It infused her with understanding and empathy.

“The rachni pass their memories down from queen to queen,” Shiala said. “Each new generation is born with that ancestral memory intact. To the rachni, losing the memory of the ancestors is a huge tragedy . . . it is the loss of everything their people are.”

The queen sang again, bringing to the cargo bay an atmosphere of cohesion, purpose, pride in identity. Within two breaths, Shepard saw the effect on the team as they prepared for the mission. They stood straighter, pulling together as a unit in the truest sense of the word. Manipulated by the queen’s song or not, they’d go out and kick ass. That alone could prove priceless beyond measure in the coming battles.

Shiara opened her mouth to speak, but then spun around, staring into the queen’s face. “No, you can’t. You don’t have any weapons, any defenses.” While Shepard watched, puzzled by the outburst, the asari closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. “Very well.” She turned back to Shepard. “She wishes to accompany you on the mission . . . to help Wrex retrieve the memories of his people.”

Shepard frowned, turning her attention over her shoulder for a second as she felt someone walk up behind her. Seeing it was Nihlus, she turned her scowl back to the queen. “How do you answer about defenses or weapons? I can’t send you into a firefight if you’re unable to defend yourself.”

“She says that she is neither helpless nor risking herself foolishly.” Shiala shrugged. “She’s very
determined, Captain. The crew of the Normandy are afraid of her and view her with suspicion. She believes this will help.”

Glancing back at Nihlus, Shepard raised her eyebrows in query. If the queen didn’t think herself at risk, who was Shepard to tell her no. It wasn’t even Shepard’s mission.

Nihlus bobbed his head in a shrug, but his mandibles spread and flicked hard in a way that made her think of a boy being allowed to take his most impressive toy into school to show his friends. “If she thinks she can handle it, I say leave it to Wrex. It’s his show.” He chuckled. “I doubt she’ll take any fire. Between her and Legion . . . those mercs will run for their lives.”

“She believes this will help.” Shepard levelled a scowl of mock disapproval at him and gasped. “Oh! I see how it is. You want to get your picture taken looking all badass next to a rachni. Strut down the Citadel admiring your image on posters, t-shirts, and lunch boxes.” She shook her head. “Sweet baby Jesus, that’s shameless. I feel a little sick.”

He chuffed. “Yeah, you have that nauseating effect on me too. Lunch boxes?” Brow plates raised, he shook his head. “Sometimes I swear that nothing but crazy falls out when you open your mouth.”

Giving the Spectre a flippant shrug, Shepard refocused on the queen. She hoped Nihlus was right about the rachni not taking fire . . . the terrified enemy could decide to invest all their bullets in taking down the giant spider. One could never be too sure which way fear would turn. However, if the queen assisting Wrex on his mission helped smooth the path to cooperation between the two species, it could prove well worth the risk.

“True enough.” Shepard levelled a scowl of mock disapproval at him and gasped. “Oh! I see how it is. You want to get your picture taken looking all badass next to a rachni. Strut down the Citadel admiring your image on posters, t-shirts, and lunch boxes.” She shook her head. “Sweet baby Jesus, that’s shameless. I feel a little sick.”

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Giving the Spectre a flippant shrug, Shepard refocused on the queen. She hoped Nihlus was right about the rachni not taking fire . . . the terrified enemy could decide to invest all their bullets in taking down the giant spider. One could never be too sure which way fear would turn. However, if the queen assisting Wrex on his mission helped smooth the path to cooperation between the two species, it could prove well worth the risk.

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knew.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” she said, slapping him on the shoulder and retreating back to the second line, elbowing her way in beside Ashley.

Shiara and the queen approached the krogan battlemaster, but Shepard couldn’t hear what they said. Wrex stiffened for a second then shrugged, his voice carrying as he said, “Fine, but you stay with me. If you even look at something the wrong way, I’ll put you down. They take you out, it’s no skin off my hump, just one less bug uglifying up the galaxy.” He jutted out his chin and grunted. “Get in line.”

Shepard chuckled softly, one eyebrow raising toward her hairline. She hadn’t expected Wrex to go along with it. “Curiouser and curiouser,” she muttered under her breath, wondering if the queen had used her song to influence the krogan.

“Alenko,” Wrex called out, a sharp bark of sound that yanked Shepard from her thoughts and made everyone jump, “you’re piloting the Mako. Vakarian, canon. Chase, turret. Intel shows four sniper perches and a small platoon of ground troops with portable cover. You’ll have fifteen minutes to take them out before we land.” He waited a second as those three stepped out of their lines, snapping off sharp salutes. “I want to walk in there like I already own his ass. Make sure I do.” He nodded toward the Mako. “Go!”

Shepard grinned as the entire assembled team jumped again, startled by the krogan’s bellow. He had them all scurrying like FNG’s straight out of zero g training and still green around the—

“Shepard! Kryik! Williams! You’re team leaders. The building has one entrance. When we go in, Shepard will lead Team Pyjak to the left and up the stairs. Clear the upper level so we aren’t taking fire from above.” He stalked back and forth along the front line as irascible and ornery as ever, but with an air of command that held everyone’s attention in a strangle hold.

Shepard stepped forward and saluted, calling out, “Yes, sir,” before stepping back in line.

The air seemed to shimmer around Wrex as if the gravity of his personality pulled it in, shaping it into a physical manifestation to propel them off the ship and into action. Shepard’s heart beat strong and fast, her muscles tightening, a broad smile spreading across her face. She’d rarely experienced the privilege of serving under a leader with the power and presence of Urdnot Wrex. To her right, the Mako roared to life, the throbbing rumble of its engines adding to the palpable alacrity.

Wrex ignored the competition for their attention, easily out-roaring the machine. “Kryik, you’ll lead Team Princess down the center and clear the left side of the building. Williams, Team Varren Pup follows me down the right hand side. We’ll be the first team through the doors, give the other two cover as they move into position.” He paced for a second, long enough that the assembled crew began to lean toward him. As if a timer went off in his head, he snapped around, a crooked, wicked grin making him look more intimidating rather than less. “This isn’t a nuclear bomb, it’s a tactical strike. Put a few down and let them crawl home to whine to their mommies about the thrashing the Normandy’s crew gave them. The rest . . .” He chuckled, a deep, slow-rolling growl of sound. “The rest die screaming with piss sloshing in their boots.”

“Mako drop in five minutes,” Joker’s voice called over the comms.

“All right, we’re ready to move, princesses! Team leaders, organize your squads. It’s time to show the galaxy that the krogan are stepping out of the shadows . . . that I won’t let them be ground into dust under anyone’s heel.” His grin widened and his eyes narrowed. “We’re going to save them
from the Reapers, whether they want us to or not.” His voice rose through the sentence, reaching a crescendo at the end that had Shepard hollering “Oorah!” along with the rest of her crew.

Wrex nodded. “Move out.”
Shepard gathered her squad, ran through a quick inspection, giving them a nod of approval. “Never have I seen a more impressive collection of monkeys with guns. Glory hallelujah brother and sister pyjak, get your butts in formation behind the princesses.” She cut a teasing glance across at Nihlus. “And by the light of the holy Enkindlers, try not to stare at their tiaras. It makes them cranky.”

She took her place in the march order, feeling a twinge of regret that she wasn’t piloting the Mako. The Normandy didn’t land very often, favouring dropping the teams in the APC, and she wished she could see it from the outside. A scowl creased her face as she glanced at her chrono. Maybe she had time to ask Garrus to record it.

“Team Leader, this is Team ‘Thank the Spirits Alenko is driving the Mako not Shepard’. The exterior defenses are down.” A grumbled curse greeted Garrus’s voice coming through on the comms. Damn his timing.

Nihlus snickered from Shepard’s right, earning her best death-glare. “That’s right, laugh away mighty leader of Team Princess.” A wide, smile answered Nihlus’s closed-dialect curse. “I know what that word means, oh so pretty princess.”

“Stow the flirting, pyjak,” Wrex barked before cutting over to Ashley. “Varren pup, you’re up.” The krogan strode to the ramp, crooking a finger at the rachni queen. “You, with me.”

Shepard watched Shiala, the asari remaining behind while the queen stepped up beside Wrex. As the asari wrung her hands, Shepard found herself struck by an image of a mother sending her child on her first sleepover, or the first day of school. “It’s a strange old universe,” she muttered. The Normandy’s thrusters kicked in for landing, grabbing her attention. The deck plating rumbled, throbbing with a powerful bass—a thunderstorm early on a summer morning.

The moment she caught her first glimpse of the Normandy, Shepard laughed aloud with delight . . . the sleek, gleaming hull poised to soar, a legendary raptor sitting on a branch, head raised to the lightning, it’s wings spread to face the storm, trembling in the wind. That instant attraction had become a flirtation that grew deeper each day she served aboard. However, in that moment, as the raptor swept toward the ground, its great wings becoming the thunder itself, Shepard fell madly and helplessly in love.

She had no idea how or why the universe chose her, but she felt incredibly honoured to have been gifted the chance to command such a remarkable ship and crew. Pity she couldn’t remember the grand deed that had earned her so much of the universe’s good will.

Sighing, she settled into parade rest to wait, softly singing to herself. “Nothing comes from nothing. Nothing ever could. So somewhere in my youth or childhood . . . ” From just ahead of her, Jenkins joined in for the last few words, “I must have done something good.” She grinned. “A
“Sound of Music guy, huh?” Shaking her head, she clicked her tongue. “I honestly don’t know what to do with that, Jenkins.”

“Always make sure I’m on your karaoke squad?”

The ramp touched down, revealing a large prefab building like a million others spread across the galaxy. The Mako idled outside the front door, almost appearing impatient as the chassis bounced with the vibration from its engine. If it were a bull, it would have been snorting and pawing the turf.

“Move the Mako onto the ridge and keep your eyes open,” Wrex ordered, marching down the ramp. “Actus has never shown signs of having a brain larger than my back left nut, but anything’s possible.”

“Roger that, Team Leader,” Alenko answered.

“Move out,” Wrex called. “Come on, bug.”

Stately, graceful, and terrifying, the rachni queen moved along at the krogan’s side, the two of them striding out like royalty surveying a conquered land. In that moment, Shepard knew they would be fine. Somehow, their races would find a way to work together, becoming one of the galaxy’s great juggernauts. Heaven help the council races if they turned their back on them rather than accepting their people as partners and equals.

Wrex led the team down the ramp, marching strong but controlled, just as he’d said . . . he intended to go in as if he already owned Actus’s ass. Varren Pup followed, their every movement exuding menace, and Shepard chuckled, knowing why the queen wasn’t worried about being attacked. Her ability to project emotion would keep her safe.

As Wrex and the rachni queen burst through the inner door, and the air filled with hollered swears and cries of confusion and panic, Shepard found herself cursing her height for the first time in a lot of years. All her fine work bringing the players and the plan together and now a krogan battlemaster and a rachni queen were terrorizing the greedy merc bandits, and she couldn’t see over Jenkins’s head.

“Life just isn’t fair,” she grumbled waiting for Nihlus to move his princesses through the doors. Maybe she could still catch some of the action. “I should be able to command my corporals to duck down and let me stand on their backs.”

“Not today, ma’am,” Jenkins whispered. She didn’t need to see his face to know he wore a big, stupid grin.

“May the Enkindlers smite you with . . . .” She floundered, falling in over her depth of Galactic Brotherhood doctrine. “. . . whatever they have that smites tall people who won’t move out of the way.”

“Want me to pick you up so that you can see?” Nihlus asked just before swinging around out of cover, his shotgun coughing death at an asari in leathers.

“Great, just what I need,” Shepard grumbled without any heat behind it, “another turian who thinks he can toss me over his shoulder at will.” When Wrex gave her the nod, she waved her team forward, moving them along the back wall of the main room.

When the last of her team made it through the door, she followed, double timing it up the line to take point. Two mercs dashed through the door, seeking cover from the battle in the main room,
but at least one of them took cover just on the other side. Shepard pulled a grenade and lobbed it in front of the door, letting it roll lazily over the threshold before she hit the button.

She halted her team, going through on her own to be sure the pair were down before signalling for her pyjaks to move forward. As usual, she took point up the stairs. Sporadic gunfire echoed in the main room, men and women still screaming back and forth, trying to figure out what was going on. Those who survived could chalk up the krogan/rachni/geth terror to a really lightweight rehearsal for the Reapers.

Confident, Shepard took cover behind the door jam at the top of the stairs. A quick peek out confirmed five mercs along the railing, shooting down at the other teams. She gestured to her team, assigning them targets, then stepped out, Roger tearing into a krogan on the far right. The merc's shields crashed before he could even get turned around, but in true krogan style, he didn't let that get in the way. Roaring with fury and pain, he spun on Shepard and charged, a pulverizing tornado of armour and bone.

Retreating back through the doorway onto the stairs, Shepard dropped two grenades on the top step before running to the bottom. She kept her thumb on the button to blow them early, but she didn't need to. The krogan eased through the door, wary, his massive head swinging around before he stepped through, shotgun belching ineffectual shots down the stairs at her. The explosion tore him off his feet, shredding his armour and legs. He flew down the first half of the long staircase without touching ground, his long flight ending in an armour splintering crash. Limp but not dead, he slid down the remaining stairs. Shepard halted his descent, jamming a boot against the top of his head.

“If you live, would you return to Tuchanka and rally under the banner of a strong leader?” she asked, her emerald, hawkish stare curious and piercing as she leaned over him, forearm across her knee. “Or would you keep selling your loyalties to this sort of scum?”

His reply came out too garbled to make out the words, but she understood him just the same and straightened, three quick squeezes on Roger's trigger relieving him of any further decision making.

Shepard ran back up the stairs. All but two of the mercs lay sprawled across the prefab flooring, their life running down the rubberized grooves. Those two crouched huddled behind a couple of crates, popping up sporadically to shoot wild rounds that hit nothing. Shepard tossed another grenade, and they popped up one last time.

Scanning the rafters and the tops of the piles of crates, Shepard moved down the long balcony, but nothing moved. She took cover next to the door at the end, her team forming up around her, two keeping an eye on their backs, the others ready to meet any resistance on the other side. On the three count, she palmed the control, and the door slid open. Empty.

“Bit of an anticlimax,” someone grumbled. “I hardly got a shot off.”

Shepard walked to the railing and looked down over the confusing maze of crates, shelves and what looked like mining equipment or building struts. The fighting had moved to the far back corner judging by the noise. She turned and drew a circle in the air to enclose three of her pyjaks. “Keep an eye out from up here. Let me know if you—”

“Hey! Shepard!” Nihlus called from below. “Was that you demolishing the building over our heads?”

She stepped back to the railing and took a deep bow, complete with flourish. “Why yes it was. Thank you very much for noticing my work.”
“Yeah, noticed it when a loose girder nearly took my head off.” He ducked his head and pointed to a small blue river flowing down his neck. Nodding toward a hatch in the roof, he called, “Did you clear the roof, or too busy practicing for your career in demolitions?”

“I was about to clear the roof when you called to complain.” A bright light burst down over her and something hit her from behind, throwing her into the railing. The edge of the low wall slammed into her gut, driving the wind out of her lungs in a belching sort of cough as her attacker’s momentum flipped her over the edge.

Scrambling, the need to avoid falling three storeys foremost in her mind, Shepard caught hold of the railing with one hand. Her team lunged forward, snagging her arm. Her attacker grabbed her legs, his weight crashing down hard enough that her shoulder let out a sinew tearing pop. The moment he gripped her armour, he began to flail, trying to climb her, his legs kicking and forcing her into a partial spin back and forth.

Her pyjaks snatched at her pinwheeling free arm, trying to catch hold, but they just managed to make the situation worse.

“Stop trying to rescue me, and someone shoot him!” she shouted. Two rounds fired, one kicking into the metal about a hand’s width from her backside, the other spraying the merc’s brains up her back. “Lovely. Thank you.” She heaved up, her free hand catching the railing. “Pull me up for pity’s sake.”

“You’re welcome,” Nihlus called from below.

Once her feet were rooted back on deck plating, Shepard looked down. “I wouldn’t have been caught off guard if it weren’t for you.” She rotated her shoulder a few times, then climbed the roof access to find it clear.

“All clear!” Wrex called on their radios. “Shepard to the back room on the main floor.”

“Start moving these crates onto the Normandy,” Shepard called as she strode back toward the stairs. “I want to be on Illium first thing in the morning, so let’s move.”

She found Wrex alone in the back room, standing next to a wall safe. If she didn’t know the battlemaster better, she would have thought him nervous or trepidatious by his posture. She approached. “Hey.” She looked from the safe to the battlemaster and back. “Is it in there?”

Wrex nodded and stepped back. “I tried my way to get it open, Shepard.”

She grinned and nodded. “Understood, sir. My way, it is.” She activated her omnitool and hacked the lock. When it popped open, she ushered him up with a wave of her hand. “It’s all yours, Battlemaster.”

Wrex opened the safe, staring into it for a moment before he reached inside. Shepard tried to see around him, but his massive hump blocked her on every angle. She’d begun to suspect that the safe was empty when he backed up, holding an ancient, battered suit of armour.

“What a piece of shit,” he grunted, the expression on his face one of amused satisfaction. “Oh well, at least it’s back in krogan hands.” He threw it over one arm and turned to look at her. “Thank you, Shepard, not just for my pride, but for that of the krogan.”

She punched his shoulder. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I just commanded one of your fire teams. Thanks for making us the pyjaks.” She laughed. “The look on Princess Nihlus’s face will keep me going for years, although making Ash the Varren Pup has me thinking you might be
“Watch yourself, Shepard.” Wrex gave her a playful shove that just about put her through the wall.

“You watch yourself, old man.” She turned and walked to the door, a great, invisible spider spinning strands of silk, tethering her to each of the amazing people on her crew and filling her with the most remarkable sense of connection. Glancing back when she reached the threshold, she winked and said, “Sweet baby Jesus, at your advanced age . . . a girl like that’ll kill yah.”

His rumbling laugh followed her from the room. “Yeah, but I’ll go smiling.”

Chuckling to herself, Shepard ducked between teams working zero-g dollies to move crates, making her way to the exterior door. Halfway across the main room her inner alarm sunk barbed teeth into the base of her skull, an electric jolt of warning. She stopped, looking up, trying to place what she felt.

There’s more than the Normandy and Mako’s engines running out there.

She nodded to herself. The energy—vibration—in the air felt off.

“Shepard!” Joker called through her radio. “Three geth drop ships coming in from all directions.”

Damn being right! “Get the Normandy in the air, Joker, and see if you can’t take them down.” The subtle sound and vibration in the air grew stronger. “However, if the Reaper is in orbit, go stealth and get the hell out until it leaves.”

“But what about . . . ?” Joker protested.

“We’ll be fine, just keep my ship safe. Shepard out.” She ran for the door. “Fire teams, geth incoming.” Racing out the front door, she saw that most of the portable barricades remained intact. “Get these back up, pull them in close, under the overhang of the second floor.”

She reached up to her radio. “We need a team back in the Mako.” As she spoke, the Normandy thrusters flared to life, lifting the ship off the ridge. Fifty metres up, Joker sent her darting forward, the thunderbird returning to the clouds, where she belonged. Shepard tore her eyes away from her ship’s graceful beauty, spotting a geth ship coming in from the south.

“Prepare yourselves. Come on people, get your asses onto the firing line.” She spotted Ashley. “You’re in command down here, I’m taking Ingrid onto the roof.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the chief called back.

Shepard looked around, searching, hating how naked and exposed her back felt now that they found themselves deep in it. “Where’s C-Sec?”

“Mako!” someone called back.

“Damn. Nihlus! I need another sniper on the roof.” Without waiting for an answer, she ran back inside.

The rachni queen strode toward her, obviously intending to join the others outside.

“Oh no,” Shepard called, throwing up a hand as she ran by. “You stay inside. Singing won’t defend you from the geth.” She spun around just inside the doorway to the main room, running backwards for a few steps. “Stay inside.”
Nihlus caught up with her at the stairs, and they ran side by side up to the roof access. The first geth ship had just settled into position at the ridge, dropping troopers. As it began to pull up, thrusting away from the ground, twin blasts from the Normandy’s weapons tore into it, slicing along the dorsal spine of the ship. It exploded out over the lowlands, pieces raining down onto the grassland beyond the ridge. The ground shook.

“Glory hallelujah, Brother Joker!” Shepard let out a whoop as she pulled Ingrid off her back and sighted the troopers moving in on the barricades. Both sides already traded bullets. She felt the air tremble with another incoming drop ship, but then a lighter vibration hit her—a smaller vehicle. Much smaller.

“Nihlus! Down!” She slammed into him, driving him to the floor a moment too late. A heavy warp field drove her to the floor. It felt like being immersed in a bubble of magnetic water, each molecule of it ripping loose the molecules of her body, tearing them apart. She cried out, agonized and jagged but strangled by the warp.

It dissipated, leaving Shepard gasping and twisted, her cheek pressed to the hot metal of the roof. “And that was just a glancing hit.”

“Nihlus!” Nihlus scrambled up and turned her onto her back, supporting her with his arm. “Are you all right?” He ran a hand over her hair.

Catching movement out of the corner of her eye, Shepard’s heart stopped even as she cried out a warning. A hovercraft zipped toward them, the person aboard riding low, his arm glowing blue and extended toward Nihlus. Even as her brain screamed in denial, that arm snatched Nihlus right off the roof. Shepard leaped up, lunging after them, trying to snag any part of the Spectre’s armour, but too slow. Her fingers slid over the ceramic without catching hold.

“Saren!” Her scream followed them out over the grassland behind the building and away from the fight. For a moment, she stared after them, frozen with disbelief, but then the ice shattered as fury burst through. “God damned sloppy . . .” She spun around, throwing the hatch open with such force that she tore it right off the hinges and flung it across the roof. Jumping down, she grabbed hold of the stair-railing, swinging over and sliding down a couple of feet before letting go and dropping the rest of the way.

She hit the ground running, but didn’t head for the stairs. She threw herself over the low wall, arms and legs pinwheeling as she flew through the air, managing to snag the top of a shelving unit. Momentum slammed her body into the metal, tipping the unit over against the next one. Rolling to the side, she dropped to the floor and raced past the rachni queen to the door.

“You let yourself get caught with your ass hanging out again, Shepard,” she growled, slamming into the door control. “Stupid. Predictable. Idiot.”

Outside, the battle continued, another ship full of troopers and a handful of the huge walking tanks ranged along the ridge and closing. She stuck to the front of the building, ducking behind her team until she made it to the corner and dug in, sprinting down the shadowed side of the base. She just prayed she got there in time to put a good dozen bullets into Saren before he got a chance to put any in Nihlus.

“Shepard!” She cleared the building and brought Ingrid to bear.

The two Spectres faced off a good fifty metres away. Saren faced Shepard, but he ignored her completely, all his attention riveted on his ex-protege. With the fight raging behind her, she couldn’t make out anything they said. For the second time, she stood, staring at the mentor and
apprentice, hesitating, not sure whether to fire and just take the bastard down, or to leave it until Nihlus either requested help or showed signs of needing it. The last time, she’d saved Nihlus only by the narrowest of margins. Fortune might not favour her another time.

“Damn it,” she grumbled, moving forward steadily, not letting her crosshairs move off Saren’s head. A few squeezes of the trigger and their problems would be . . . she grumbled again. Their problems wouldn’t be over. Saren wasn’t the big problem. Sovereign was. Heart beating hard and fast, her hands and knees beginning to tremble ever so slightly as the adrenaline wore off, she began her warrior breathing in time with her steps. In, two, three, four, five. Out, two, three, four, five. The trembling eased as oxygen flooded her system.

“You were nothing but an angry malcontent on the brink of washing out of the military when I found you. I gave you pride, a way to serve and rise above all your mother’s grasping ambitions. I created you! How can you turn your back on me now?” she heard Saren call out. “Come with me, Nihlus. You can survive the coming armageddon.”

She smiled, hard and cold, as Nihlus replied, “I created who I am, Saren. You aren’t even who I thought you were. What sort of coward agrees to sacrifice innocents to save himself?”

Awe tingled down her spine and out to her limbs. “Glory hallelujah. Preach it, Brother Nihlus,” she whispered, overlapping Saren’s next words.

“To save our people! Are the humans and volus so dear to you that you would watch the turian people vanish beside them?” Saren threw his arms out toward the battle. “Sovereign speaks for the Reapers. If we make ourselves useful to them, we can be spared.” He took a step toward Nihlus. “Thousands of cycles of evolution, of civilization, glorious battles, miracles of art and science . . . the great stories, Nihlus. The ones our fathers raised us on. All of it will vanish in a heartbeat.”

Saren held up his arms as if he could embrace the entire galaxy. “What is left of the Protheans, Nihlus? The Reapers all but obliterated them from galactic memory. Would you consign us to that fate?”

Shepard frowned and stopped inching forward, although her sight never wavered from his brow. Yes, she knew indoctrination ate at his will and reason, replacing it with Sovereign’s, but the passion and the sincerity in his voice . . . For the first time since Eden Prime, a rusted iron sliver of doubt worked its way into her guts. What if they couldn’t prepare for the Reapers? What if Saren and the council had the right of it? Wasn’t it better to save some rather than none?

“Our people are about honour, Saren,” Nihlus practically screamed back. “Honour above all. That is what becoming a Spectre meant to me. I would see our people pass honourably into oblivion rather than sell their souls to become slaves to those monsters.” He pulled his rifle off his back, taking a step to close the distance between them again. “I’ll fight them alongside Shepard, and we’ll defeat them, Saren. We will defeat them. Save yourself. Save your honour and your spirit.” He held out a hand. “Break free of that thing’s hold on you.”

Saren backed onto the hoverboard, his posture slumped, but as Shepard watched, something moved within the Spectre . . . not anything willing to show itself, but revealing itself just the same through his expression and bearing. Shepard started forward again, lifting into a jog.

“A long time ago, I told you the terrible secret about your father’s death,” Saren yelled, the hoverboard thrusters firing, lifting him into the air. Shepard squeezed off a shot, but Saren’s shields deflected it. His face twisted into a gruesome expression of cruel satisfaction. “Today, I’ll tell you the even more horrible secret of your mother’s death.”
Shepard fired again and again, switching to Roger as she got closer, needing to tear down Saren’s massive barriers before he tore her partner down. Nihlus opened fire as well, but without her conviction. Heart sinking with every centimetre Saren opened between them, Shepard squeezed the trigger. One, two, three. Pause. One, two, three. Pause. Roger chattered his mechanical rhythm, almost loud enough to drown out Saren. Almost.

“Your mother wasn’t the one who killed your father. It was a mining accident.” Saren sailed up into the air as Nihlus froze mid step, like a badly balanced statue. “I just needed to cut the cord that tied you to that bitch.” After staring at Nihlus for another moment, Saren looked over to Shepard. “But I see you’ve just gone and roped yourself to another one.”

A gloating grin transformed his face into something so hideous that Shepard started to look away. But then the Spectre’s hands ignited with a halo of blue energy that built until it enveloped his entire body.

“I wonder what it will take for me to get you to kill this one?” he asked, his words fruit dropping off a dead tree, bitter and rotten, oozing venom. He unleashed a warp at the still-paralyzed Nihlus then soared off.

The world slowed to a crawl as Shepard bolted forward, her finger locking down on her trigger until her gun overheated, burning the side of her cheek. She flung the rifle to the ground as Nihlus contorted, a tortured scream roaring from both larynxes as the warp twisted and wrenched his body from the inside out.

“No! No, no, no, no. Nihlus, don’t you dare let Saren do this to you. You let him kill you, and I swear by the holy light that I’ll kick your ass from here to Tuesday.” Shepard slammed into the ground, breathless, knee-guards carving furrows through the rich, loamy earth. She hovered over him, hands fluttering helplessly, praying that the warp died before Nihlus did.

Finally, the warp dissipated, and she pulled Nihlus across her lap, turning him over with a strength born of panic and horror. He looked conscious. Frantic hands searched him for wounds, but found nothing.

The Mako rumbled up behind her, its engines shaking the ground. The back hatch squeaked open. “Shepard?” Garrus started to get out, but she waved him back.

“I’m fine. Go help the others finish off the geth,” she shouted, the battle and wind snatching at her words, stringing them out over the grassland.

“Are you—” He asked, hesitating, but not obeying.

“Go! Help the others.” An impatient hand flicked his direction, then took hold of Nihlus again. “Nihlus, come on big guy, holding your prone bod is getting old. I’ve done this way too damned much for being partnered with the best Spectre in the galaxy.” He appeared conscious, his eyes open, but the look in them bore into her, frozen termites spreading a deathly chill as they ate the heart out of her. “What happened?” She shook him gently. “Come on, talk to me.”

Nihlus stirred slightly, but didn’t try to sit up or pull out of her arms. “It was a lie. All these years . . .” He turned his face into her breast, his eyes closing. His voice came out rough, his subvocals practically roaring with a fury that made her hair stand on end. “Can you hate someone enough to kill them?”

She chuckled, warm and soft, and lowered her brow to the top of his head, her heart hammering in relieved fury. “You mean without the aid of a bullet?” He nodded, and she sighed. “Udina’s
persistence in drawing breath says no, but I live on hope.” She pulled back. “So, you’re intact. No large holes spilling litres of Nihlus blood onto the ground?”

“Yes.” He took a long, slow breath and wrapped an arm around her for a second before pulling away and sitting up. “The blade Saren used doesn’t leave wounds you can see.” Still clouded, but clearing, his eyes looked toward the skirmish. “We got too predictable.” He cursed and levered himself up off the grass. Stretching he cracked most of his joints. After adjusting his armour, he reached out to help her up.

She nodded and took his hand. “Yeah, we got stupid. Forgot that we might not be the only ones on the hunt.” Standing, she dusted herself off. “That was the strongest warp I’ve ever seen,” Shepard said. “Are you sure you’re okay? I swear I heard your atoms coming apart.” When he tried to walk away without answering, she stepped in front of him and gripped his forearms. “Nihlus . . ..” She waited until he met her eyes before continuing. “Come on, Spectre. Talk to me.” Staring into the shuttered green eyes felt like looking at a mirror or running into a forcefield.

He took her hands and squeezed her fingers. “I’m okay, Shepard. He won’t blindside me again. Twice is more than enough. Give me some time to ignore what happened and then stew over it, then I’ll talk about it.”

Shepard nodded, but then stepped into him, wrapping one arm around him in an attempt at a battlefield acceptable hug. “Saren stepped way out of bounds, Nihlus. He was trying to take the heart out of you.”

He bent down, quickly touching his forehead to hers before striding off to join the fight. She watched him walk away, then sighed and jogged over to pick Roger up off the ground. “Come on, old man. You know, things were a lot simpler when you were the only man in my life. I kept you clean and oiled, you shot bullets into the people trying to kill me. It worked. Why did I have to go and start getting all quivery kneeed over not one—oh no, that would be too easy—but two turians? Turians! I’m insane.”

Geth chassis lay strewn, broken and smoking, across the grassy incline to the ridge of rock by the time Shepard got back around to the front of the building. Still, the team hunkered down, pinned behind cover, two of them down with injuries but alive. Five colossi closed on them from the ridge separating the base from the open grassland beyond.

Shepard started to pull together a plan. The team already concentrated fire on the closest, the Mako haranguing the other two with canon and turret fire, but five at once presented too much armour and firepower for small arms. They needed a plan and fast. She threw herself down as a ball of plasma streaked toward her head. Cursing, she slid in behind one of the barricades, the stink of burning hair telling her how close the shot came.

The Mako roared past, heading straight for the first colossus.

“Who’s driving that thing?” she asked, spotting Alenko hunkered down behind the next cover.

“Wrex,” Ashley called. “You been giving him lessons, Captain?”

Shepard just let out a grumbled curse, watching as the krogan made a suicidal charge, taking at least one out of every five plasma bursts from the giant geth tanks. Strong shields protected the Mako, but they couldn’t last forever against the that sort of pounding. At the last second, Wrex turned, circling around, pulling the geth fire away from the team. Shepard traded Roger for Ingrid and lined up the first colossus in her sights, firing as continually as the old girl’s cool down allowed.
“He’s trying to pull them out into the low spot,” she called on the radio. “Keep up the fire on their back side. Take advantage of the distraction.” As she watched the APC’s tires spinning, tearing up the loose sod as it turned to race back, she knew what Wrex had planned. She just hoped his theory proved correct.

Time after time, the krogan drove the Mako in a rush toward the colossi, keeping them chasing him, ducking back and forth, their attention concentrated on trying to hit the erratic machine. Gradually, he got them moved out far enough that Shepard began to hold her breath as the Mako swept out away from the ridge, praying that Wrex didn’t get caught in his own trap.

Strung out in a staggered line—the closest a good ten metres on the other side of the ridge, the furthest a hundred metres out—the colossi didn’t stand a chance when the ground began to tremble, then rock. The first disappeared as the earth erupted in a plume of soil and a nightmare of tentacles. Forsaking the vexingly hard to hit Mako for the thresher, the colossi scrambled to avoid the blasts of acid that tore straight through their shields to reduce their chassis into melted slag. The battle didn’t even last a full minute, the grassland falling silent as Wrex brought the Mako down the ridge, the vehicle smoking and sparking, but still intact.

The vehicle stopped a couple metres ahead of the barricades, the metal clicking and banging as it cooled. The team began to stand, helping each other to their feet, supporting the wounded. Shepard stepped around her cover and stood, hip cocked, arms crossed, waiting.

Ten seconds later, the back hatch of the APC opened, a visibly shaken but jubilant Garrus hopping out. Wrex followed a second later, a wide grin showing his massive, slate-like teeth.

“You look pretty proud of yourself,” Shepard deadpanned. “Can you explain the state of my Mako?”

Wrex glanced back and shrugged. “Thought the day would be a complete loss until that last bit. Then it got fun.”

Shepard laughed and straightened. “Nice work, battlemaster. Nice work.” She lifted her hand to her ear. “Joker, you have things cleaned up?”

“Yes, ma’am. Took out one more, the last one just took off . . . made it through the relay. We’re on our way back to pick you up now.”

“Excellent.” The captain’s grin widened as she looked up to see her ship swooping down out of the black. “And I even get to watch her land. Praise the great glowing asses of the Enkindlers.”
Onward to Illium

“We’re wrapped up here, Captain,” Kaidan called, striding to the top of the ramp, staring down at her.

Shepard grinned and popped the last bite of her peanut butter sandwich into her mouth. She hopped down off the crate she’d been using as her seat, working the peanut butter off the roof of her mouth before replying, “No you aren’t, Sparky.” She thumped the crate with her palm and strode up the ramp, leaning into the incline. “Forgot one.” As she climbed, she scanned through the notes she’d made on the datapad while she waited for the loading to finish.

Once aboard, she looked up, searching for Wrex. She found him over in his corner, pulling krogan artifacts out of a crate, spinning tales about some of the pieces for an enraptured audience of crew members. Her smile warmed, the threads of connection glowing bright and strong between them. “Webs,” she whispered to herself. “It’s all webs. Some light and woven, some dark and tangled, but all webs just the same.” Shepard shook her head as Wrex held up a dagger made out of a massive tooth, roaring as he enacted the titanic struggle to defeat what she thought might be a thresher maw.

“Hey, Battlemaster!” she called, brash and teasing as she swaggered up behind his audience. She stopped, hip cocked, arms crossed, the datapad held up where Wrex could see it. “Your crazy maneuver with the Mako today planted a crazy idea inside my head.” She gave the pad a jaunty little wave, then tossed it to Wrex and turned, striding for the elevator. “Think the krogan could find a way to collect and weaponize thresher acid?” she hollered over her shoulder.

She was still waiting for the lift when he roared, “Shepard! You’ve got to be mad. This . . .” He held the datapad over his head, looking as though he might chuck it at her. “. . . is the craziest idea I’ve ever heard.”

Grinning, she glanced back and nodded. “All the best ideas are completely mad. Think about it.”

When she reached the crew deck, she headed for medbay. Grieco, Pakti, and Berrett had all been injured during the geth attack. “Hey, Doc,” she called, walking in the door. “How are my people?”

“These three will all be fine in a couple of days, Shepard. The ones I’m concerned about are the two dozen who thought somehow I’d miss the long line of people sneaking in to raid the medi-gel dispenser.” Chakwas sighed and strode over to scan Shepard. “How about you? Everything all right?” The doctor hummed with enough disapproval and dry humour to assure Shepard that she already knew the answer to that question. “Take a seat for a second.”

Shepard did as she was told. “I’m fine, Doc. No issues at all today.”

“You mean other than being hit by a very strong warp field?” The doctor keyed in information then scanned again.

“Am I coming apart at the atoms?” Shepard chuckled.
“No, but your body’s electrical field is showing signs of severe disruption.” She stepped away to prepare a syringe. “It should sort itself with some sleep and a neuro-chemical stabilizer.”

“In that case, I’ll make sure that Nihlus checks in with you. I just took a glancing blow; he took one full force.” She shuddered remembering the horrible sensation of being pulled apart from the inside out. Nausea followed hot on the memory’s heels. Jolts of imagined, electric agony seared down her limbs as she put herself in Nihlus’s shoes for those moments. He’d screamed like Saren’s warp was ripping his soul apart rather than his cells. That thought made her heartsick in a way she hadn’t felt in a long time . . . or maybe a way she always felt.

Automatically, she tilted her head off to the side as the doctor moved in with her injection, but her mind remained fixed on Nihlus. Truly, over the weeks since they met, the Spectre had lived in a state of constant torture. The way he’d cried out in that warp field had spoken to the betrayal, not just of a friend and mentor but of his entire life. He’d told her weeks before that he lived for the work, not taking time for the indulgence of relationships. Then, when Saren claimed to have created Nihlus, the Spectre lashed back, saying he created himself through being a Spectre.

Shepard heard the doc talking to her and looked up, dragging herself out of her thoughts. Murmuring a noncommittal positive toned response, she smiled. “Thanks, Doc. I’ll see you bright and early for our usual appointment.” Without waiting for an answer, she raised her hand to her ear and opened a channel.

“Hey, Nihlus, get your butt to medbay.” Shepard grinned as a rumbling groan vibrated through her ear. “She promises not to hold you prisoner, but you need to make sure that warp didn’t pull apart any cells you actually need. You know, pretty much any cell except brain cells. We know those all turned moron the second you came aboard.” A melodramatic gasp followed his very colourful reply. “Sweet baby Jesus, Kryik, watch your language. Get down here, and then get some rest. That’s an order.” She hung up without giving him any time to argue.

The rest of his life might have betrayed him, but her cause, her crew . . . she wouldn’t.

After a few minutes spent chatting with her injured crew members, Shepard headed for her quarters. On her way across the mess, she typed out a message to the team going ashore on Illium. After Saren’s little surprise on Tantau, she decided to add Alenko to the roster. A big team might attract more attention, but if Saren knew about Aethyta, and she’d bet the Father of Light’s diamond tentacle rings that he did, she wanted the extra gun.

Sending the message, she sighed. “Okay, shower and then the intel on Illium.”

She’d just returned from the shower when someone knocked at her door. Leaving the towel draped over her head, she grinned and called out, “Yes?”

“It’s Liara, may I speak with you for a moment, Captain?” a soft voice replied from the other side.

“Of course, come on in.” Shepard stood and dragged the towel off. She’d expected her turian babysitter. Liara had never made any attempt to speak to her outside of missions or briefings. Granted, thanks to ‘Embracing Eternity’ with Liara’s help, she wasn’t all that eager to spend time in the same space. Liara had been given access to the vault of terrible unmentionables. No one ever got access. Ever. For good reason.

The door opened, and Liara stepped through, giving Shepard a shy smile and slight nod. “Thank you for seeing me, Captain. It sounds like it turned into quite the fight down there.”

Shepard smiled and gestured toward the table. “It was. Please sit. What can I help you with?” Once
Liara perched on the edge of one of the chairs, Shepard sat.

The researcher leaned forward against the table, wringing her hands a little. “I guess I’m just feeling a little overwhelmed by everything. A few weeks ago, I expected to go from dig to dig in relative obscurity, struggling to find something my colleagues would call credible evidence of my theories. I thought my mother would live another two hundred cycles or so . . . plenty of time to reconcile.” She slumped back in the chair, her hands folded primly in her lap.

Shepard nodded, ignoring the whispers from the past that leaked through.

*Focus on Liara’s mother, dammit, not your own.*

“Benezia also regretted not getting that chance.”

“I’m one hundred and six, Shepard. My people consider me little more than a child, and now . . .” A long, tremulous sigh whispered through her lips. “My mother wants me to manage her estate, run her businesses . . . take her place.” She shook her head, then shifted in her seat, her hands hovering between her lap and the table as if even that decision proved too great.

“What usually happens in situations like this?” Shepard asked. Her knowledge of asari customs amounted to just slightly more than nil.

“It depends, of course, on the age of the child. In a case like mine, one of my family would hold the legacy in trust until they deemed me of age. However, Mother already made arrangements with my aunt to assist me in administering the estate so I could inherit now.” She laughed, but it came out incredulous and almost bitter. “My mother took fewer than half her acolytes when she joined Saren. My aunt says the rest have already sworn themselves to me in obedience to my mother’s wishes.” Her hands gave a helpless little flip in her lap. “What do I know about leading acolytes? What do I have to teach them? What do I know about doing any of the things my mother wants me to do? I’m an one hundred and six year old researcher. I’ve spent my life alone, crawling through ruins.”

Shepard said nothing for a long moment before she leaned forward on the table top, elbows braced, fingers steepled against her lips. “Your mother possessed a lot of resources to throw behind discovering what happened to the Protheans.” She shrugged. “We’ve discovered how important your research is, Liara. You don’t have to prove anything to anyone now. The proof is riding in on us hard and fast.” She let her arms drop, folding a little as they settled to the cool polymer, and met Liara’s eyes with a fierce, resolute stare. “What you need to do now is fill in the blanks. We need to know exactly what happened to the Prothean Empire, and of all the people I know, you are the best candidate for that job.”

Liara straightened a little. “I have found several references, even in my mother’s least encrypted files, that lead me to believe there may be one or more major sources of prothean data and technology on Thessia.” She smiled, this time a spark of excitement glinting in her eyes. “I’ve also found highly encrypted partitions in her computer files.”

“That sounds like a good start.” Shepard turned in her chair a little and leaned back, crossing her legs. “What do you know about Aethyta?”

“Very little.” Liara shrugged. “I spoke to her yesterday. She already knew of Mother’s death. She’s a matriarch, but she’s a bartender at a bar called Eternity. I have never met her before, but if Mother trusted her with her legacy, she must have been someone of importance to her.”

Shepard smiled. “Yeah, it’s not the sort of thing you ask of some bartender at a watering hole
several systems away. Well, I guess at least some of your questions will find answers in a few hours. You should get some sleep.” When Liara didn’t move, Shepard leaned forward, laying a hand over one of Liara’s. “Where you go from here is your decision, Liara. You have a place on the Normandy for as long as I command her. If you decide to accept the charge your mother left, you can do so from here if that’s feasible. And if you choose to leave us, you can always come back. Consider the Normandy your home until you find somewhere else you want to be, okay?”

The asari turned her hand over and squeezed Shepard’s fingers. “Thank you.” She smiled a little less tremulously than before. “Knowing that I can come back helps.” Standing, she pulled her hand away. “Good night, Captain.”

Shepard stood and followed Liara to the door. It opened to reveal Rael’Zorah pacing outside. “Blessed Enkindlers, haven’t I been threaded through enough needles today?” She closed her eyes, letting out a long, grumbling breath to vent the steam before stepping into the fire. After a moment, she plastered a vague smile on her lips, squared her shoulders until her spine cracked, and stepped through the doorway. “Admiral, what can I do for you?”

The small male stopped pacing and spun to face her. “My people report that twenty six more of our pilgrims and . . . other quarians have gone missing.” Angled toward her and holding himself puffed out like an angry cat, he stormed up to her, the reflective silver of his eyes flashing like tiny bolts of lightning as he blinked. “What you can do for me is either tell me how you intend to help me get our youth back, or let me go about finding a way to do it on my own.” He leaned closer. “You have no authority to hold me prisoner on your vessel.”

Shepard leaned back on her hip and crossed her arms. “Admiral, unfortunate things happen to people who crowd my space. Back up a bit and calm yourself.” She stared at him until he drew his leading foot back, slowly and reluctantly enough that she needed to bite back a smartass grin. Ah, the back-breaking combination of good ol’ military ego and bullheadedness.

“Thank you. Now, in just over two days we have to disable a VI on Luna that has killed a couple platoons of soldiers. The very next thing is heading for Virmire to get your people back.” She straightened. “I am only human, so once I have the very tricky and complicated assault on our lunar base planned and executed, I’ll call you, Tali, Legion, and everyone else involved into a planning meeting for the assault on Saren’s base.”

Despite giving her the extra space, Rael’Zorah’s words lashed out, biting all the deeper. “How will we assault Saren’s headquarters without council backing? You will make the quarian people terrorists as well as outcasts.”

Shepard shook her head then glanced up as Garrus walked around the elevator. “I’ll deal with all of that when I’ve successfully brought all my people back from Luna alive.” She stared him down. “You’re not a prisoner, Rael’Zorah. You’re a guest.” She let out a long breath and leaned against the wall. “You know, in certain ancient, Middle Eastern cultures on Earth, it was one’s obligation to accept a guest in need of aid or a place to stay. It was a grave dishonour to refuse. However, a guest also had obligations to his host . . . to abide by the rules of the household . . . be considerate to others . . . that sort of thing. On this ship, your obligations are to help out as much as you can to offset your burden on my crew and resources, and allow me to do my job.”

She turned away, walking back over the threshold into her quarters. “You are one piece of a very large puzzle, Admiral,” she said, turning to look back. “One piece, each dealt with in its time. Goodnight. Rest well.” She let the door close, leaving it to Garrus to enter when he felt comfortable. Probably after Rael’Zorah cleared out.

She sat back at her computer and brought up Benezia’s files from the OSD. The evidence the
matriarch collected against the council and Saren amounted to nothing less than damning. “You three are slimy bastards. The Father of Light could learn some lessons on screwing people over from you.” She sighed, read a few more entries and another, longer sigh chased after the first. “Problem is, I can’t use any of it. I have to let you pieces of worm-ridden filth get away with it. At least for now.”

The door opened. “You’ll need to play your cards a lot closer to your chest than that,” Garrus said. Light steps crossed the decking, telling her that he’d already changed out of his armour. “If you’re going to discuss things like the council’s guilt with yourself, you’re going to need to lower your voice.” Large warm hands covered her shoulders, his thumbs massaging the knots in her *levator scapulae*. “This ship has thin bulkheads.”

“I can’t help it. They piss me off.” She leaned back into the painful relief and closed her eyes. “If I use any of this, I get everyone I know killed.” Tilting her head back, she opened her eyes to look up at him. “I’ve got to go to the council about Virmire. Rael’Zorah is right. If we just attack it, we’ll be branded terrorists, the quarians will as well, the geth will still be public enemy number one, and it might even backlash on the Alliance.”

He reached over her shoulder and turned off her display, then stepped to her side and held out his hands. Smiling, she took them, allowing him to pull her out of the chair and over to the bed. “You are,” he said, sitting down on the edge, tugging her into a gentle embrace, “the single most clever person I’ve ever met. You’ll find a way.”

She sat on his thigh and looped an arm around his neck, nestling into his solid warmth. Brow resting against his jaw, she said, “Even if I just go to them with what I know about Saren, they’re going to extrapolate that I know about their involvement as well. That’ll paint a bullseye on me and on Nihlus . . . possibly the entire crew. That isn’t acceptable.” She laced the fingers of her left hand with his. “I don’t know what to do.”

He tightened his arm around her. “We’ll figure it out. We have a few days and a lot to do before we need to worry on that.” He nuzzled his face in against her neck, his breath soft and warm as it brushed her skin. “Like, where do you want me tomorrow on Illium?”

She smiled, grateful as he diverted her thoughts from their path down the wormhole of self-doubt. “You and Sparky can go in ahead so that you can use your superpowers of perception on the place, see if anything feels off. Then head for the bar and relax, get something innocuous to drink, and keep an eye on our backs.”

“What about your backs on the way in? If Saren’s going to ambush you, he probably won’t choose the bar.” His head turned, his tongue tickling the soft skin under her ear. She brushed her lips over the plate above his right eye. “Anyway, Brother Distraction . . . Wrex and Nihlus will follow us in. Breaking him and myself up should throw a little confusion into an ambush. Ashley, Shiala, Tali, Liara and I will go in together. Five ladies out for a drink won’t draw any attention.”

He nodded and pulled back. “Sound solid. If it were anywhere but Illium, especially Nos Astra, I’d suggest having Legion and Tali hack into the surveillance network, but that place is even more paranoid than Noveria.” Clearing his throat, making it plain that he planned to change the subject, he asked, “Have you eaten?”

“Yeah, had a couple of peanut butter sandwiches while the crew was loading up.” She stood, extricating herself from his arms to pull back the blankets. “I got an idea today when I saw the Thresher acid go straight through the shields on those colossi.”
Garrus chuckled and stood. “Wrex showed me. Missiles filled with thresher acid that detonate right before impacting a ship’s shields.”

She looked over, studying his face to see what he thought of her idea, the pulse high in her throat hammering against the skin, hopeful but afraid he’d think it too crazy. When she saw no sign of ridicule in his expression, she sat on the side of the bed, dimming the light.

He shook his head. “If they can find a way to harvest the acid and then stabilize it inside a missile casing, I think the idea is brilliant. No way to tell if it will work against a Reaper, but still brilliant.” He lay down on his side of the bed, propping himself up on his elbow to watch her. Those ice-blue eyes held an intensity and heat that set a pack of feral butterflies loose in her stomach. “Yes, you’re the most intelligent person I’ve met, but you’re also the most creative. It’s incredibly sexy.” His easy grin transformed the butterflies’ virulent fluttering into a pulsing warmth that made her heart race from equal parts terror and want. “The Reapers had better watch themselves.”

Shepard rolled over and leaned up to kiss him, her lips just grazing his mouth. He pressed into it, his hand lifting to cradle her jaw as the kiss deepened. She relaxed into him, their mouths speaking far more eloquently without words. After what felt like an impossibly long instant, she pulled away. “We’ll never get any sleep if we keep that up.” She lay down on her side, facing him.

Garrus settled in and pulled the blankets up over his shoulder. After a couple of moments, he stopped fussing and let out a long breath. “So, what happened with you, Saren, and Nihlus?” he asked. “If it’s okay for me to ask.”

Shepard shook her head. “You can ask, but I don’t know what happened, exactly.” Her fingers played over the small, rough patches of hide behind his jaw as she ran through what happened on Tuntau. “It sounded as though Saren told Nihlus a really huge lie a long time ago . . . something that amounts to the deepest cut . . . the most unforgivable breach of trust. I tried to get Nihlus to talk, but geth were still attacking, and that warp had just about disassembled him. Not a good combination for a heart to heart.”

After a few breaths, she traced gentle fingertips along the lines of his face. “I’ll get it out of him eventually.” She grinned and ran her lower lip between her teeth as her touch provoked a gentle, rumbling purr deep in his throat. “Goodnight, Garrus.”

* * * *

“Wow, and I thought the music other places was bad.” Shepard winced at the uneven bass cadence falling out the club doors to flop around on the floor like a . . . well, like a bass. She chuckled to herself, drawing a curious stare from Liara that she answered with a sheepish sort of grin before deflecting with, “My theory is that it’s all part of a sinister plot by the Enkindlers to turn us into mindless slaves in preparation for their return. The Father of Light is behind it all.”

Liara rolled her eyes. “Enkindlers, my backside. The Father of Light is the king of crazy-jelly-land, and you . . .” She stared into Shepard’s eyes, a sparkle flashing through her gaze as she locked her lips down tight on a smile. “. . . are the queen.”

Shiala gasped. “Heresy, Sisters Liara and Shepard.” She aped a convincing swoon, stumbling into the wall.
Ashley laughed, jogging past them up the stairs two at a time. “Try living with three sisters who love this techno crap. Then add Dad and his ancient cowboy music.” The chief shuddered, but she smiled. “I wore headphones a lot.”

Shepard grinned, reveling in the unexpected camaraderie, yet again. “Well, at least it isn’t turned up loud enough to make my teeth vibrate, glory hallelujah. Praise the Enkindlers’ great shiny butt cheeks.” Shepard palmed the door and stepped through, not missing that Liara lagged behind as the rest of them crossed the threshold.

The asari researcher took a deep breath then stepped through. “How disappointed are you going to be when my research proves that Protheans had neither shiny nor glowing backsides?” A smile returned to her lips, but it cost her an obvious premium.

Shepard took in the bar in one quick sweep, then wrapped a companionable arm around Liara’s shoulders. “Devastated, Sister Liara. Just devastated.” She spotted Garrus and Kaidan at the far end, conversing with one of the two bartenders, a turian. “Let’s hit the bar, ladies,” she called, guiding them toward the other bartender, an asari. “We deserve a drink.”

Shepard guided Liara toward the bar. Thin, trembling, the asari felt like a frightened child looking for shelter. Shepard knew that feeling all too well. She pulled Liara in tight against her side, and looked up at the bartender. She hoped that Aethyta turned out to be someone who could truly help Liara come to terms with her mother’s death and everything it meant. A warm smile crept up on her as she remembered the dark shadow crossing her hospital room door, the constant line of dealers refusing to sell her 17-year-old self drugs. Anderson. Hopefully Aethyta could step up and be Liara’s Anderson before the young asari got a chance to lose her way.

“Welcome to Eternity, ladies. I’m Aethyta,” the asari said, her voice warm and husky, “matriarch and bartender.” She radiated a quiet authority and yet kindness, one of those people able to instantly set people at ease. “Let me know if there’s anything I can get you.”

“You ladies here on leave?” the bartender asked, pouring out four drinks.

Shepard shook her head, holding the matriarch’s gaze, judging the reactions she saw there as she said, “No. Just stopping by to pay our respects to our friend’s mother.” Understanding and a deep kindness blossomed in the brown eyes that met Shepard’s. Something else appeared there, but Aethyta shuttered it away before Shepard got more than a glimpse. It felt like some sort of tie, and a strong one.

The captain looked to Liara. “A drink to Benezia?” When Liara nodded, Shepard lifted her glass and stepped back so Shiala, Tali, and Ashley could join them. “To a brave lady who fought like hell for peace and to steer the galaxy out of harm’s way. I knew her ten minutes, and she awed me. Rest in peace, Benezia.”

Liara stepped closer into the circle, her back straightening as her glass raised. “To a mother who understood me far better than I ever gave her credit for, and who loved me enough to let me find my own way. I never realized how hard it must have been to just step back and trust that I’d come home one day until it occurred to me that now, when I do, she won’t be there.” Her lips worked for a moment, her eyes going a stormy blue as tears misted along the rim of her eyelids. “Goodbye,
Mother, I’ll miss you.”

They touched glasses, then tossed back their drinks. Shepard gave Liara a one-armed hug. “All right, let’s go find somewhere to sit.” When she glanced back at the bartender, she saw Aethyta watching Liara with an intensity that set off her internal alarm. It died a half second later when she realized that the expression on the matriarch’s face wavered back and forth between wonder and fear.

Aethyta shook herself, just a slight vibration that Shepard watched slither down the asari’s spine. It lasted a fraction of a second before more than seven hundred years of living won out over the doubt. The matriarch recouped almost instantly, covering the reaction as she pointed toward a doorway on the far wall. “There’s no one in the back room right now. Go ahead, I’ll bring your next round and put up the ‘occupied’ barricade.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind. We’ll do that.” Shepard turned toward Garrus and Kaidan who stood at the far end of the bar, their backs to the wall. A quick wink acknowledged them and then she moved on, herding her ducklings through the thin, late morning crowd.

Nihlus and Wrex walked in as the five ladies crossed the bar. The Spectre said something to Wrex, and they parted ways, Wrex heading over to join Garrus and Kaidan while Nihlus followed Shepard’s party into the back room. Shepard figured that he intended to join them, but when they sat at a long, oblong table, the Spectre took a seat at a smaller table off in a corner.

Shepard sat next to Liara and gave the maiden’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. “That was really beautiful, Liara.”

The asari glanced behind her at Nihlus, shifted in her seat, then focused back on Shepard, her spine and shoulders stiff. “Aethyta seems nice,” she said, shrugging, her shoulders jerky and awkward. Glancing back toward the door, then Nihlus, Liara adjusted herself in the chair again. It was like watching someone try to get comfortable sitting on a handful of tacks.

“She does.” A quick smile and secretive duck of Shepard’s head accompanied a whispered, “Aethyta seems as nervous to meet you as you are her.” Looking up at the other end of the table, Shepard chuckled at Ashley and Tali, trying to look completely absorbed in a discussion about flexible straws. “Wow. Remind me not to assign them to covert missions. They’re both as subtle as an elcor pole dancer.”

Liara frowned, the delicate markings on her brow pulling together. “Do you really think so?”

Shepard nodded. “Yeah, elcor pole dancers are terrible.” She laughed and reached out to squeeze Liara’s shoulder as the asari shot a glare at her. “Yes,” she said, “I know you meant Aethyta, and yes, she seems nervous. She’s keeping her emotions carefully masked.”

Liara let out a musical, quizzical hum. “I wonder why?” Another glance shot over her shoulder toward Nihlus, and she shifted again.

“I guess we’ll find out in a few minutes,” Shepard replied. She turned in her chair, levelling Nihlus with a wide-eyed glare, then jerked her head toward the chair next to her. If he stayed there, Liara would never settle. He frowned and looked confused, eliciting a grumble and a more emphatic gesture for him to join them. Finally, just as Aethyta placed their drinks on the table, he moved up closer.

“What?” he whispered into her ear.
“You were making Liara even more twitchy. It was like you were some sort of government
examiner or something. Sitting in the back of the classroom placing judgement on the rest of us.”
She chuckled at that, despite the truth of it. Then Aethyta closed the room and approached the
table, drawing Shepard’s attention back to the matter at hand.

“Well, I was judging you,” Nihlus whispered in her ear. “Not Liara, or the others, just you.”

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forearm, a silent encouragement to stay calm and listen. Liara cleared her throat, sinking back down onto the seat of her chair, and Shepard withdrew.

Aethyta’s mask slipped a touch. “As I said, Benezia didn’t trust your aunt to resist all the political pressure.” Aethyta laughed, brittle and sharp, sparks crackling along a wire. “She knew that I left Thessia because I got sick of getting the blue laughed off my ass for making practical, intelligent arguments for asari advancement.” A slight shrug tugged at her shoulders. “But she also knew that I’ve never backed away from a fight that needed fighting.”

Liara’s brow furrowed and her hands tucked under her thighs as she adjusted herself in the chair. They sprang back into position, fingers laced, as the archeologist shook her head. “No, I mean, who were you to Benezia? Why would she ask you to do this?”

The hair on the back of Shepard’s neck stood up as the biotic field kept building around Liara. Her hand drifted back toward Liara’s arm, but hesitated, unsure if it would calm Liara down or force them all to flee as the warps and singularities began to fly.

Aethyta smiled and the mask fell away. Leaning forward, she placed one hand on the table, extended toward Liara but not touching her. “Look babe, it’s not like she had a lot of choices. The matriarchs were nervous about her joining Saren, and they’re even more nervous about you joining up with your pretty little friend over there.” She nodded toward Shepard. “I know Benezia suspected the council of working with Saren. I don’t know the details, I didn’t look, which is part of the reason she asked me. She knew I wouldn’t.”

The tempest settled around Liara, the blue aura glowing around Liara bright enough that Shepard eyed the door. Neither asari appeared to notice. “That’s a lot of trust for some bartender she barely knew.” She jumped up, her hands slamming down on the table with enough physical and biotic force that it jumped a hand’s width into the air. “Who are you, and how did you know my mother?” Her voice lashed out, shrill and desperate, frightened and oh so very young.

Aethyta sighed and looked at the rest of them one at a time before her eyes returned to stare into Liara’s. “Are you sure you want to have this chat in front of your friends?”

“Yes,” Liara snapped, a jolt of biotics flaring along the tabletop. Tali and Ashley snatched their hands back from their drinks. “I don’t have secrets from Shepard and the crew. They’re . . . they’re family.”

The matriarch nodded. “Okay, if that’s what you want.” Another casual shrug flowed out from her neck to end in a small flip of her hands. “Benezia and I were involved a long time ago. I believed we’d be together for . . . ever, but her star was rising, and she didn’t want the stigma of being bonded to another asari.” Aethyta lowered her eyes to stare at Liara’s hands pressed palm down against the table. Her expression loosened as if she’d been wearing her calm laced too tight. “She left, and it was a long time before I discovered that I had a daughter.”

Liara’s knees gave way, an avalanche slipping loose to crash into her chair. She stared, the biotic aura sparking out, her mouth working as if trying to form words without the aid of her brain. After a very long minute, during which Shepard held her breath, her heart aching for the both of them, Liara managed to whisper. “You’re my father?”

Aethyta nodded. ‘I am.” She kept her posture neutral and inviting, everything about her saying it was all right for Liara to ask or say anything she needed to. The longer they sat there, the more sure Shepard became that the rest of them should wait outside.

“Why haven’t you ever contacted me?” Liara asked, her voice and body contracting, drawing down
toward a singularity at her core. “Weren’t you curious? Or were you just embarrassed by your pureblood daughter?”

“Of course, I was curious. I went after you, but Benezia wouldn’t let me see you.” She activated her omnitool and brought up a folder that amounted to a scrapbook of Liara’s life. “I always figured that I’d track you down one day, explain things, but Benezia didn’t even give me that.”

Aethyta shifted, but as though spikes prickled under her skin. Her smokey voice cracked, its warmth bleeding through the fault lines, sorrow leaching in to replace it. “She showed up at my door six months ago, told me that the council and Saren had discovered something terrifying. She hammered into me the importance of you being given full access to her intel, resources, and acolytes. I promised. What else could I do?”

Liara opened her mouth to answer, but Aethyta interrupted with a bitter sort of chuckle. “Well, one other thing.” She glanced from Liara to Shepard and then Nihlus. “I promised her I’d help you stop the council and that turian bastard from laying waste to the galaxy.” Closing her eyes, she sighed, her chest heaving a little melodramatically. “When I left, I swore I’d never set foot on Thessia again.” When her eyelids lifted, her gaze fixed on Liara. “Oh well, somethings are worth taking a kick in the quad.” She shrugged. “Sorry . . . my father’s influence. Sometimes, it just slips out.”

Shepard sat back, listening and sipping her cranberry juice as Aethyta told Liara what she could. Most of Benezia’s files and information resided in heavily encrypted, secure databases back at her home on Thessia. What she did have amounted to Benezia’s Last Will and Testament, asking Liara to travel back to the asari homeworld with Aethyta. Security in the form of acolytes with commando training and a private yacht awaited Liara’s decision.

“Captain,” Liara said, turning to face Shepard, “may I please have a moment with the matriarch and Shiala?” Her large blue eyes seemed to shimmer with the heady combination of both terror and excitement as they pleaded with Shepard for a little space.

“Of course. We’ll be right outside the door.” Shepard fought the angry nipping of her inner alarm for a moment, but its teeth proved too sharp, and she crooked a finger at Shiala. “Walk us to the door?” Pushing up out of her chair, she slipped her sidearm off her hip. Just before she walked out, she passed it to the asari, leaning up a little to whisper, “If you need to, slap Aethyta’s ass with a singularity and fill her full of holes.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Shiala slipped the weapon into a side pocket, within easy reach, before returning to the table.
Disquiet prickled along every inch of Shepard’s skin, doubt gnawing at her a little more as each second hobbled past. She should never have left Liara. Who knew if Aethyta could be trusted, and if she couldn’t . . . it didn’t take a gun or blade to bring down someone as vulnerable as Liara was in her current state. The captain shoved herself up out of her chair and paced over to the bar. Despite scrolling through the menu on the kiosk three times, she didn’t order anything. Her brain didn’t even register the drinks, her mind’s eye trying to see through the closed door behind her.

_You never stop risking people, do you? It’s pathological._

She jumped, a faint curse escaping as a hand closed on her elbow sending sparks searing along her nerves. “Sweet baby Jesus, Nihlus.” She slapped a hand over her heart. “You scared the crap out of me.”

“Most people come to bars to relax rather than wind themselves into a knot so tight it’ll take a couple of tow barges to pull it apart,” Nihlus whispered. He pointed to the screen and outloud said, “Try this one. It’s juice from a tree-fruit native to a small asari colony planet. I can’t drink it, but I’ve heard it’s very good.”

She answered him with a soft, grateful smile. Juice ordered, she allowed him to guide her back to the table where she returned to stewing. Ashley and Tali chatted back and forth, but their conversation washed over her without registering. Sipping the juice, she found herself pleasantly surprised.

“Good?” Nihlus asked.

“Yeah, really good,” she replied. “Don’t really have anything to compare the flavour to, but it’s wonderful. Thanks for recommending it. My usual cranberry juice has competition.” She reached under the table to squeeze his hand. “I’m fine, Nihlus. I just . . .”

He nodded, turning his hand over to grip hers. “I know, you’re just imagining every sick or horrible thing the matriarch could be saying in there to mess with our young Prothean expert.”

When she pulled her hand back—professional distance rearing its practical head—he held onto it, not so tight that if she really wanted to get loose, she couldn’t, but enough for her to know that he needed an anchor. She could give him that.

The door to the back room opened, and Liara emerged, the asari searching out Shepard even before crossing the threshold. She didn’t look at Aethyta as the matriarch passed them, returning to the bar. Shepard did, glad to see the matriarch’s body language relaxed, although her expression remained . . . complicated. For the most part, the asari matron mask remained in place, but here and there fault lines allowed brief flashes of regret . . . and love . . . yeah, love and a bright joy to shine through. If Shepard doubted the story of Aethyta’s paternity, those last two chinks in the asari’s armour reassured her.
“Ready to get back to the Normandy?” Shepard asked, standing to greet Liara. She gripped the researcher’s upper arm and searched Liara’s expression. Unlike Aethyta, Liara remained completely inscrutable, so either things hadn’t gone well or she was practicing her asari matriarch several hundred years early.

Liara smiled. It came off tremulous and wan, but a smile it remained. “Yes, Captain. May I speak with you when we get back aboard?” She glanced at Nihlus. “You as well, if I may, Spectre Kryik.”

Nihlus stood, giving Liara a curt nod. “Of course, Dr. T’Soni.”

“Okay,” Shepard said, keeping her voice low as she spoke into her radio. “Nihlus and Wrex on point. The lovely turian-human couple can follow drag at a good distance.” Glad to be moving back toward her ship, Shepard struck out, wings spread to guide her ducklings through the door. She didn’t like so many of them being so exposed in an environment that limited both visibility and control over the environment.

Before she walked out the door, she glanced back to find Aethyta watching her. The matriarch smiled and nodded. Despite not having a clue what Aethyta meant by either, Shepard appreciated the attempt to communicate. Perhaps she meant the gesture as reassurance. At that point, Shepard would take what she could get.

They made it back to the Normandy without incident. She supposed that Nos Astra proved a far more public place to ambush than the back grasslands of Tuntau. Still, she remained outside the airlock, herding her people inside before following. Just before Tali slipped past, Shepard caught the quarian’s arm. “I’d like to speak with you in the comm room after Liara is finished with us,” she said, keeping her voice soft and between the two of them.

Tali nodded.

“Thank you,” Shepard called when the inner hatch opened to release them from decon. “Good work, people.”

Liara said nothing as she walked alongside Shepard down the length of the CIC and into the comm room. She just took her usual seat and folded her hands in her lap, watching as Shepard and Nihlus seated themselves. Nothing about her demeanour alarmed Shepard, but neither did the young researcher give anything away. She’d closed off, which made Shepard suspect she knew what choice Liara had made regarding her mother’s legacy.

Settling into her chair, Shepard waited, allowing Liara to control the conversation. Her alarm remained quiet at the base of her skull, not helping in the least.

“I’ve decided to accept my mother’s charge,” Liara said, her voice soft but sharper than before. “Aethyta will accompany me back to my mother’s estate on Thessia. The fact she’s my father and Benezia’s executor will ensure that I maintain control of my inheritance.” Her head shook a little as if some hidden part of her still didn’t believe any of it could be true. “Shiala wishes to remain aboard until the rachni queen is settled, then she’ll join me as well.”

“Good.” Shepard gave her a tight smile. “Like I said yesterday, we’ll support you, even bail you out if you need it.” She shrugged, a certainty settling into her gut. “But, I don’t think that we’re going to need to. You’ll be brilliant. Just don’t give up the old passion completely.” She winked. “That new dig on Eden Prime might be glad of a patron with some mad archeological skills.”

Liara giggled, a little of the girl showing through again at last. “I was thinking that I might do that,
and then make sure I keep up a tight schedule of inspections.” A small sigh wiped away the smile. “My mother’s private yacht and a large squad of her acolytes are ready to go whenever I am.” She stood and squared her shoulder. “I’ll message you when I’m ready to leave?”

Shepard stood and walked over, gripping Liara’s shoulders. “Absolutely. Take your time. It’ll be hours before we get clearance.”

Liara gripped Shepard in a quick, but tight hug, whispering, “I know that we don’t know one another as well as it seems to me because of our melding. I’ve kept my distance, not wanting to intrude. I know how private you are.” The asari flushed, colour rising across the bridge of her nose. “But, we’ve shared those memories . . . if you ever want someone to talk to . . .” She pulled away, not quite meeting Shepard’s eyes.

“Thank you, Liara. The offer means a great deal.” Shepard backed up a couple of steps, feeling more naked than if the asari had snatched away her clothing. The offer would remain unaccepted, but that didn’t diminish the kindness of the gesture. She glanced toward Nihlus, glad that the Spectre remained in his seat, and hopefully out of earshot.

Giving them both a quick, shy nod, the researched fled up the short ramp and out the door.

The door didn’t even get a chance to close before Tali stepped through. “You wanted to see me, Shepard?”

“I did.” Shepard gestured for Tali to sit. “I have a huge favour to ask of you, Tali . . . on behalf of your people.”

Tali giggled and looked from Shepard to Nihlus and back. “You’re asking me to do a favour for my people?”

A serious nod met her question. “I am.”

The quarian mirrored the captain’s earnest sincerity as she drew herself up, perched on the edge of her seat. “Anything, Shepard. You know that I’ll do whatever I need to.”

Shepard smiled. “I do.” She walked over to sit beside Tali. “I need you to partner up with Legion. Both of you will be at the Luna planning meeting in the morning. I intend to team you up for one of the strike teams, but more than that, I want you to work together every day between now and Virmire. You’ll lead a team to find and free the pilgrims and Saren’s other hostages.”

Tali wrung her hands, the three fingers in constant motion, tangling and twisting. Shepard reached out and gripped them. “I’m going to ask Legion to bring in two more geth to assist with the op. It’ll only work if the two of you trust one another as much as we can manage in the time we’ve got.” She let out a long sigh, relaxing down into the chair a little. “You can say no, Tali, but I think if we manage this, after Virmire we’ll be able to convince a small group of your people to launch an expedition to Rannoch. A first step in getting your people back on their planet where they belong.”

Shepard looked to Nihlus, meeting the stare that burned into her with both a raptor’s intensity and a sort of wonder . . . the latter making her more uncomfortable than the first, but she wanted to see if he thought her idea mad or not. She fought to keep a grin off her face. Most padawans would probably have cleared it with their Jedi first. She wondered if Nihlus had boarded the Normandy knowing that she’d run him as much as she did.

Tali let out a soft, musical sigh, drawing Shepard’s attention back to her. She nodded. “I can do that, Shepard. I said anything, and I meant anything.” She chuckled, but it trembled a little like a
the soft warble of a dove. “Even become partners with a geth.” She turned to face Shepard a little more squarely. “Thank you, Shepard.”

Glancing around, suddenly as awkward as she felt assured the moment before, Shepard shrugged. “For what, Tali?”

The engineer took a deep breath, hesitating for a few seconds as if ordering her thoughts. “For everything, but mostly for believing in me, in my people . . . even in the geth. I never expected to find people like you . . .” She looked over at Nihlus. “. . . and Nihlus . . . any of the crew . . . on my pilgrimage. Quarians are just suit rats to ninety-nine percent of the galaxy. You’d make us valued partners. That means so very much to every quarian, even if I’m the only one to say it. Thank you.”

Shepard nodded. “You’re welcome, but you should be thanking yourself. Your people couldn’t have a better ambassador.” She nodded toward the door. “Go find your new partner, do a little bonding. I’ll see you at 0630.”

Tali nodded, popped up out of her seat and hurried out the door.

Nihlus let out a soft chuckle. “You’re a mad woman, but it always works to the best. How do you manage that?”

Shepard gave him an honest, baffled shrug. “No idea. Let’s just hope my luck holds.”

“So . . .” Nihlus stood, stretching a little as he adjusted his armour. “About what happened on Tantau . . . .”

She leaned back and crossed her ankle over her other knee, but just met his gaze with a curious one.

“Meet me for dinner tonight? We can catch a little shore leave, and I can explain what happened somewhere the walls don’t have ears.” He took a couple of steps toward her.

“Sure.” She checked her chronometer, her mind whirring through the schedule too fast to allow her heart and nerves to chime in on the whole dinner with Nihlus idea. Feeling the slip in her concentration, she focused on the time and started talking. “Jeez, it’s already 1600. Meet in an hour and a half? That’ll give me some time to mug someone for some civvies and slap a face on, but give us a few hours before port authority clears us for departure.”

He nodded and smiled. “I’ll meet you at the airlock.”

* * * * *

“Spirits,” Garrus said then let out a soft whistle. “Who are you, and what have you done with Shepard?”

Blushing, her heart doing a salsa inside her chest, Shepard twirled, both savouring the sensation of the candy-apple red silk clinging to her curves and feeling a little exposed. Although, compared to the black number on Omega, the short sleeves and knee-length skirt practically constituted a nun’s habit. “You like?” She grinned at the helpless sort of mandible flutter that answered her question. “I borrowed it from Ash. Poor woman hasn’t even had a chance to wear it.” Running her palms down over her hips, Shepard shrugged. “It’s too big, but at least I won’t stretch it out.”
“Yes, I like it very much.” He chuckled and held out a hand. “Stop fussing; you look stunning.” Pulling her into his arms when she took his hand, he caressed her cheek with the backs of his talons. “Nihlus will be the envy of everyone who sees you tonight.”

“How about you?” she asked, only sort of teasing. She loved his lack of jealousy and possessiveness, but hated it too. And she hated that she hated it. She shouldn’t need someone to act jealous to feel wanted. She closed her eyes and shook her head, trying to clear away the crazy.

She opened her eyes, meeting his stare as he cleared his throat and nuzzled her cheek. “Well, I’m a special case.”

A twinge . . . a vague ache pushed against the inside of her ribcage at his words, but she covered it with a smile, refusing to give her insecurity a chance to lose its head. “You are that.”

He smiled, just a small flutter of mandibles underwritten by a subvocal rumble. “Well, I know who you’re coming home to.”

The ache burst into a bright nova of happiness so keen that it shamed her a little, and though she smiled and reached out to touch his cheek, she stepped back.

Garrus cleared his throat and looked down. “So, while you were in the shower, I modified your omnitool.” He reached out to activate it. He held her wrist gently between his talons. “I boosted your shields by 300%, but don’t abuse them. Still get behind cover as quickly as you can, because as overclocked as the emitters are, they take a good long time to cool down and bring your shields back.” He drew her toward him. “They’re for surviving the first few seconds of an ambush, not for swaggering through a long fight like some sort of crazy woman.”

Shepard sighed and grumbled. “Aw . . . think how hot I’d look in this dress . . . these shoes . . . gun in both hands.” She laughed at his chuff and kissed his nose. “Thank you. I promise to use your upgrades in the pursuit of surviving the fight rather than being the sexy hotness of death.”

“Thank you.” Garrus gathered her back into his arms, pulling between his thighs to press her against him. “I want you to do me a favour tonight,” he said, his mouth next to her ear. His breath sent effervescent sparkles of delight racing through her body, lifting her skin into gooseflesh.

She pressed her cheek against his mandible. “What’s that?” She turned her face into his warm, tough hide and inhaled deep, his scent turning the sparkles into fireworks.

“Treat it like a date.”

She pulled back as far as he’d allow and scowled at him. “Why would I do that, Garrus?”

His mandibles worked, his head tilting a little as he considered his reply. Couldn’t be anything good if he needed to put that much thought into how to say it. Her heart fluttered, the wings of a baby bird poised on the brink of falling from its nest.

“Exploration,” he said at the end of the long pause. He reached up and caressed her face. “Exploration in the spirit of making an informed decision. You and Nihlus have a connection.” He shrugged, but it wasn’t dismissive, quite the opposite. “You need to know what sort of connection it is, because just hanging out there, unresolved, it’s going to make it impossible for the three of us to work together.”

Shepard wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling herself in tight. “Thank the great, glorious light of the Enkindlers that I slobbered all over Harkin to find out about you.” She chuckled then pulled back far enough to kiss him, their mouths moving softly against one another.
“Wait . . . those lips touched Harkin? Gross, Shepard. Get back!” He chuckled and nuzzled along the line of her jaw. “Go, just be Jane Shepard for a night. I’ll use the time to catch up on all the sleep I miss because of your snoring.”

Shepard kissed him again. “Behave. I’ll be back in a few hours.” She pulled away a little, a thin trickle of sadness running through her. They should be spending some normal time together. “When do we get to go on a date? I don’t count making out in the cockpit of the Mako.” She caressed his cheek.

“When we get to the Citadel after Luna, we’ll go out on a proper date. Okay?” He nodded, then reached around her to pat the small of her back, grinning when he found her sidearm hidden under her skirt. “I was going to suggest you take it. Forgot who I was talking to for a moment.” Jerking his head toward the door, he gave her a gentle push. “Get moving, you’re going to be late.” He squeezed her hand and then released her.

“Yeah. See you later.” She backed toward the door a few steps before turning to stride out. On the other side, just before the door closed, she glanced back to see him staring at his hands, showing just a split second of honest regret before he drew in a breath and straightened.

“There it is. Thank goodness. You are something else, Brother Garrus,” she whispered then turned away and hurried for the stairs to the CIC. She had little doubt that Nihlus would be waiting, and yes, as much attraction as she might feel for the Spectre, right then, she just wanted to curl up next to her . . . she gave her head a small shake of disbelief . . . boyfriend.

“Wow,” Joker called, wolf-whistling as she stepped into the cockpit. “I take back what I said before the Afterlife mission. When you go for the pretty, you do almost look female.”

“Why haven’t I installed a brig, yet?” she asked, cuffing him gently on the back of the head. “That’s no way to speak to your captain, mister.” She heard the distinctive tread of pacing boots on deck plating coming from inside the airlock. “Take care of my ship, Mr. Moreau.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Nihlus spun to face her as she stepped through the inner hatch. His mandibles spread wide and flicked once before pulling in tight against the sides of his mouth. “Shepard.” He took a step toward her. “You look wonderful.”

A soft smile met his discomfort as her thoughts remained in her quarters, playing that split second of Garrus’s regret over and over, worrying it like mala beads. How could he expect her to treat the night like a date? She understood the whole “set them free and if they come back” concept, but . . . did she want to date Nihlus?

Starting, she realized that the decon cycle had ended, and Nihlus stood in the open hatch, waiting for her.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Fine, sorry, just worrying over everything.” She smiled and slipped her hand through his elbow. “So, where are we off to?”

A half hour cab ride later, they arrived at a restaurant built at the end of a pier that stretched more than two hundred metres out over the water. The staff appeared to know Nihlus well, leading him straight out onto an outside deck. Even though most of the patrons gave them no more than a curious glance, a couple called out to greet him. Shepard almost made a joke about him bringing
all his dates there until she saw the waiter scrambling to add another place setting.

_That’s just unbelievably sad._

The Spectre held her chair out for her, surprising her for the third time in five minutes, although she supposed that none of it should have. “Thank you,” she said. Looking out over the remarkable sunset-painted waves, she drew in a long breath and shook her head. “Just look at that. Amazing.”

Nihlus sat ninety degrees around the table from her and nodded, his gaze travelling out over the water. “I love it here.” He chuckled. “Where I grew up could barely be called a colony. More of an outpost—mercs clinging to the edge of the nothing.” His brow plates rose. “Palaven has seas, of course, but turians don’t tend to be water people—all the flotation capacity of a rock. As soon as I saw this place, something about it pulled me in.”

Shepard nodded, understanding exactly what he meant. “I loved the water as a kid. I spent most of the summer in the lake or the local pool. Trying to get me out always resulted in a battle. I had to push until Mom was ready to string me up.” She chuckled as she pictured her mother’s face, beautiful blue eyes flashing with classic Irish ire, brow furrowed, lips pressed thin. “I guess some things never change.”

She watched him as he distracted himself with the menus, deciding to leave it to him to choose when to talk and what about. Impatience pricked her with its thorns, but she calmed it with a quick glance at the time. The _Normandy_ couldn’t leave for three hours anyway.

Nihlus set down the menu datapad. “Would you like more of the juice you tried earlier?”

“Mm, yes please. That was very nice.” She browsed down a list of human favourites, deciding on a ravioli covered in a white wine blush sauce and filled with goat cheese, mushrooms, and sundried tomatoes. She had no idea what Nihlus ordered, but if Garrus’s food choices provided a valid gauge, the order involved meat and meat with a side order of more meat.

Once they’d ordered, Nihlus leaned back in his chair, his entire posture settling. “I spent most of my free time in the mines when I was young. My father worked a platinum mine on the beta shift.” His expression opened up, his eyes staring out to sea, relaxing in a way she’d never seen from him. “If I ran after classes, I could meet him at the front gates on his way to work. He’d boost me up onto his cowl and carry me.” He chuckled. “His shift gave me my own safety helmet and breather apparatus for the anniversary of my sixth cycle.”

A nostalgic smile teased Shepard’s lips as she pictured a young Nihlus riding down into the dark on his father’s shoulders, happy as one of the guys. The image morphed, shifting into one of looking up at her father through a space in a car’s engine, her small hand reaching up for a wrench. So many happy hours spent covered in grease and talking about everything under the sun.

“I sat on the back of the digger and did my homework,” Nihlus continued. “Ate in the mess hall and fell asleep leaning against him on the seat.” He reached up and ran his hand over his fringe. “I adored my _pari._”

Shepard smiled, her eyebrows lifting at the unfamiliar word, rich with rumbled subvocals through the middle and ending with a sort of click. “Pari?” she asked, blushing as she butchered the pronunciation.

“The human equivalent is dad.” He reached out and brushed her cheek with the back of his first talon. “The closed dialect isn’t easy without a second larynx.”
Their food arrived, and he shook himself, sucking in a long breath that carried enough of an edge to let Shepard know he was shutting down that topic, at least during the meal.

They discussed small matters while they ate. She filled him in on her full plan to get Tali and Legion on Rannoch in the wake of a successful mission on Virmire. He made a few suggestions, laughing when she asked him if their Spectre/candidate relationship was everything he’d imagined. The deftness with which he skirted the question was awe inspiring.

She swallowed her disappointment, wanting to hear his answer. Despite her earlier misgivings, she found herself having a good time, Nihlus proving to be a charming date. Could Garrus actually have a point about giving both relationships a shot? No . . . that just felt, well . . . sorta slimey. People did it though, didn’t they? Dating? Exploring their options? For a moment, it took all her self control not to smack her forehead into the table. Why couldn’t life just be simple?

“Would you like to go for a walk?” Nihlus asked, interrupting her new batch of crazy. He gestured toward a staircase that descended the pier, the slope leading back toward shore.

She stared at him for a moment, worrying those mala beads to death before letting out a strong sigh.

*Okay, Garrus, a date it is. Damn you.*

Shepard nodded, already savouring the sensation of what looked like buttery-soft sand between her toes. “Sure, I’d love that. It’s been a very long time since I last felt ocean waves around my ankles.” Garrus’ admonishment echoed through the back of her mind yet again.

*Fine, already. I’m exploring.*

She held out her hand. “Come on, Spectre. Let’s go for a stroll.”
Nihlus grumbled when Shepard tried to pay, then led the way down to the water’s edge. Shepard gripped his arm to balance while she kicked off her shoes. Not wanting to carry them, she tucked them under the stairs out of view.

Grinning, she dug her toes into the sand, her eyes slipping closed as its warmth trickled over her skin. “Aw, man, that’s gorgeous.” She laughed, self-consciousness making her cheeks burn. She moaned in pleasure, slippery beads of polished silica dancing between her toes.

“Would you and the sand like to be alone?” he asked, mandibles flicking playfully.

She looked up, frowning thoughtfully. “I don’t know, we just met. Maybe later.” Nodding toward the water, she grinned. “Come on. I’ll save you if you somehow lose all coordination, fall in, and flail your way out into water deep enough to drown in.”

He chuckled and followed her down to where the waves lapped at the sand. “I’m not afraid of water, and I can actually swim pretty well.” He flashed a wry smile. “Well, for a race of drowners.” Still, he let her walk in the low surf, keeping to mostly dry ground.

Shepard looked up at the Nos Astra skyline towering in the distance before returning her attention to kicking her toes through the warm, foamy water. “This city seems to have the best of both worlds.”

“And the worst of many others,” he said, the words rolling out on a heavy layer of disgust. “The asari try to convince the galaxy that Illium is a paradise of commerce and freedom, but the dark side here sinks deep enough that even after all my cycles as a Spectre, it still terrifies me.” He shuddered. “This place swallows people whole and never lets them go.”

“So basically Omega on a planetary scale, but lacking the good grace to just look as ugly and corrupt as it is.” She nodded at his flanged hum of agreement. “Fifty years ago, my people looked up at the stars and imagined wondrous things awaited us out amongst them. I think that had they known how much more of the same awaited us . . . crime, injustice, starvation, overcrowding . . . they might have written space travel off as a bad idea.”

Nihlus’s bare talons slipped around her hand, enclosing her fingers in warm, calloused strength. “It’s not all dark side. We just chose careers where we spend every day buried in the worst of everything so that those people up there don’t have to.” His head bobbed a little as he shrugged. “At least in theory.”

She nodded and squeezed his hand, but didn’t reply, sensing that he was working himself around to what happened between him and Saren on Tuntau. Whatever it was needed to come out in his time and without unnecessary commentary from her. From the very beginning, she’d felt like their relationship was one of those turian figures made from spun glass, and between them, they only managed to stop chucking it at one another while they worked. Even with their friendship and how
well they worked together, the damned thing spent way too much time in the air for her comfort. And a world of pain awaited when one of them slipped and it finally smashed on the floor. She sighed. Such was life. Even the good stuff exacted a price, eventually.

Five minutes further down the beach, Nihlus sucked in a huge breath of the sea air. “Want to sit?”

Shepard look down at the sand, imagining all the places it could work its way into. Silk undies lost something with a nice, gritty sand thong underneath. “Ahhh, yeah.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “I didn’t exactly dress for beach sitting.”

Chuckling, he undid the front panel of his suit, revealing a light, smartly tailored white shirt beneath. “This is the only suit I brought with me,” he said, his tone already lamenting the demise of the black and red tunic. Still, he laid it down on the sand lining side up. “Better?”

She gave him a shallow curtsy. “Such a gentleman.” She accepted his hand, managing to ease herself down onto the tunic without putting anything on display. Skirts really were the devil.

“Yeah, better late than never, right?” He sat at her side, knees drawn up, arms wrapped around them.

She bumped him with her shoulder, trying to reconcile the torin next to her with the one who’d stomped around being such an arrogant ass his first few days aboard. “Give yourself a bit of a break, Nihlus. You haven’t had the easiest time of it lately, and I do like to push people off balance. We’ve both had our share of moments outside the Enkindlers’ light, so let’s just let it go at that.”

She leaned back, her arms braced behind her, and crossed her legs at the ankle. The sea rolled in gentle swells of colour, deepening from cerulean to navy as the sky washed toward the horizon, its dyes bleeding into the water. She looked up, seeing pinprick diamonds peeking out between the clouds.

“At this time of year, the sun barely makes it above the horizon,” Nihlus said, his voice quiet, sub-vocals rich, “but it’s the only time of year that most races can tolerate the heat during the day. On Illium, the beaches tend to be a nighttime hangout.”

Shepard nodded, but left him to fill the silence. It whispered, slipping along on the breeze, poignant and forlorn, colouring the pocket of universe that closed around them. Once it settled, trusting and thick, Nihlus shifted a little, edging closer as if borrowing her strength.

“I adored my pari,” he repeated, starting the conversation back up. “But, my mother was a very different story. She was what most would call a social climber.” He spoke so softly that she could barely make out his words over the waves and the distant sounds of the city. “When she met my father, he was rising quickly through the ranks of the military. Everyone said his potential was unlimited. That suited her very well. His being nearly crippled two years after they bonded did not.” He shifted to lean back, stretching out.

“Pari moved them to the only place he could find work, a platinum mine in the middle of a merc outpost. It was a rough place to live, but he kept clear of trouble . . . tried to keep me clear of it when I came along. He made enough credits to afford a comfortable life, but Mari was miserable outside hierarchy space, her dreams of a glamorous life of power and riches dashed. My birth trapped her completely.”

Watching him out of the corner of her eye, she saw his head bob in a shrug. The mandible flutter that followed it said that he wasn’t nearly as settled with the past as his tone tried to portray. She
rested against his side a little, wanting to support without adding pressure.

“Pari died when I was sixteen. When I grew up enough to see past the facade he kept erected around me, I realized that outpost was little better than a pirate operation. They mined using slaves and safety was never as important as profit.”

Slaves. Shepard tried to hide the shudder that ripped down her spine as the word unleashed a thousand shrieking, snot-drenched screams inside her head. No. No, her past didn’t get to keep Nihlus from dealing with his. She shoved the screams back behind the wall.

“One day,” Nihlus said, dragging her from her battle, “a couple of cycles after I became far too lautus to spend time with my father, he went to work and never came home.” He cleared his throat. “We were well outside Hierarchy space, but Mari saw her chance and forced me into the military. With her mate gone, her son could elevate her to the position she desired.” A bitter chuckle broke from his throat like a clap of thunder, turning her head. He met her stare. “She must have been so disappointed. I was always good at being a soldier—spirits, I grew up fighting—but I had a tiny problem with authority.”

Shepard chuckled. “You? I can’t see it.”

He bumped her shoulder. “Yes, very much like your own love of bureaucratic stulti mendur.” He shook his head and looked up at the stars. “Then Saren came along. I’d seen him before, when the Spectres raided the mine to clear out a bunch of slavers. He said I’d make a good Spectre . . . changed everything.” He scoffed, softly and deep in his chest. It rumbled like a storm on the horizon. “Mother was thrilled. She moved herself to the Citadel, and met a mid-level embassy bureaucrat. Still, she rode me constantly to prove myself and make her the queen of her social circle before she was too old to enjoy it.”

“Didn’t you resent it?” Shepard asked, wincing as she broke her ‘just let him talk’ edict.

“All the time. I lived in a state of almost constant fury. Saren . . .” He sighed. “. . . well, that suited Saren. He liked me to view the universe with as much disdain as he did . . . liked me brutal, but he resented not being the most important influence in my life.” Shaking his head, Nihlus lifted a hand to his throat. “Back then, Saren was everything I wanted to be, Shepard. I worshipped him. I . . . loved him.”

Shepard reached out to slip her fingers around his talons. God, Saren’s heartlessness sank to depths she couldn’t even imagine. Had the Spectre ever loved his protege back? If he truly had, how had he fallen far enough to shoot Nihlus in the back of the head? Had Sovereign stolen Saren’s soul?

*Does that mean that thing is going to scoop out yours as well? It’s already trying.*

Swallowing a couple feet of razor wire, she shuddered again, able to feel the damned spiders wriggling through her, eating away at who she was, leaving nothing but ice-cold darkness behind. Was that what Saren felt every moment? That horrible nothing where once a heart had beat strong and quick with love?

*How long before you’re trying to shoot Nihlus . . . or Garrus . . . or Sparky in the back of the head?*

The razor wire sliced through her chest, wrapping around her heart, and tears sprang into her eyes. . . tears shed for both of them. Tears of empathy for Saren and ones of terror for herself. Another shudder. She glanced at Nihlus to see if he’d noticed. If she kept it up, he was going to drag her to Dr. Chakwas for seizure treatment.
Sighing, she forced the reaction back under control. The pain was a good sign. She wouldn’t let Sovereign rip the heart out of her. She wouldn’t succumb like Saren did. She’d been through too much to be taken apart so easily.

Focusing back on Nihlus, she decided that the information about his relationship with Saren shone a new light on the ambush on Tuntanu. Saren wanted Nihlus back even more than he wanted him dead. Without Benezia, he needed . . . someone. Maybe someone he cared about? Maybe someone who cared about him?

“He tried to convince me to break all ties to my mother,” Nihlus continued. “I just couldn’t. Pari raised me with a few iron-cored ideas about responsibility and honour . . . about respect. He made me promise to look after her if anything happened to him.” He stopped, his face dropping into a scowl equal parts sorrow and fury. He lifted Shepard’s hand, his talons playing with her fingers a little.

“Ah, yeah, I understand. It didn’t matter how your mom behaved, you were keeping your promise to your dad . . . honouring your love for him.” A soft muttering sigh underscored her words. There had to be people out there who grew up in happy, normal families, didn’t there?

Nihlus stiffened beside her, his grip on her hand going cold and rough. “And then one day Saren came home and showed me messages and money transfers sent by my mother to contract someone inside the mine to sabotage Pari’s machine.” He looked up, his throat working, mandibles dropped.

She squeezed his talons, her thumb brushing the back of his hand. “Did you confront her?” Her voice disappeared into the growling keen forcing its way through his second larynx. It made her heart race and her nerves tingle with its promise of violence.

“I did. She flew into a rage at the accusation, attacked me.” He released her hand, wrapping his arms back around his knees as he drew them up to his keel. “I killed her. I didn’t mean to, I was just trying to keep her talons out of my throat. Still, she died, and she didn’t deserve death, even as foul as she was.”

Shepard nodded, the pieces all falling together. “And then yesterday . . . The horrible truth Saren talked about . . . it wasn’t her at all. I’m so sorry, Nihlus.”

He nodded. “At the time, I used Saren’s evidence to convince myself that I’d just found some justice for Pari, and it felt so good to be free of her shadow. Saren was the bright, volatile center of my galaxy; I never doubted him. He encouraged my anger, nurtured the violence in me. I was a naive idiot.” He looked at her, his brow plates angled down, mandibles drawn tight. “You’re not afraid or disgusted . . . disappointed?”

Shepard shook her head. “I’d already pretty much put the pieces together from what Saren said yesterday, but no, my opinion of you hasn’t changed, because you haven’t changed. Our pasts are what they are. All we can do is try our best to make our present about doing the right thing.” She smiled and wrapped an arm around his waist. “You’re still an idiot, but you’re a strong one. Saren doesn’t have what it takes to break you and neither does the council.” She shrugged and sighed. “I do, but I’ll show mercy.”


“You were right yesterday, Nihlus. You built yourself into this torin, not Saren, not your mother, and not the council. And this guy . . .” She shrugged. “Well, you know . . . he’s all right.” She grinned and rested her chin on his arm. “The council has turned its back on us, but you never really worked for them. You worked for all those people up there.” She gestured behind them at the
city’s looming silhouette. “And all the ones down here.”

He straightened. “And we’ll save them whether they like it or not.”

“Glory hallelujah, Brother Nihlus.” She shifted around to kneel next to him, one hand on his shoulder. “Loving someone unworthy of it doesn’t devalue that love. Trusting someone not worthy of trust . . . well, it’s just a lesson to be more careful the next time around. Now, you have a partner you can trust to constantly make plans without consulting you first, but who will have your back until the moment she dies, Nihlus. No matter what.”

He caught up her other hand again. “I trust you with everything, Shepard.” Those remarkable green eyes clouded over a split second before he looked down at their joined hands. “Did I break something that can never be repaired?”

Shepard slipped the hand on his shoulder around his neck and rested her brow against his temple. “No. No, it’s been repairing for a while now. I told you, we’re okay.”

Looking up, he stared into her eyes, all the arrogance and anger and even awkwardness gone. “I had no idea,” he whispered, not continuing or explaining, just looking into her as if he could see all the way to her center.

Her damned skin betrayed her yet again, a heavy flush crawling up her neck under the intensity of his scrutiny. Garrus looked at her with affection and heat in his gaze, but what she saw in Nihlus’s stare felt almost like adoration . . . or something even less comfortable . . . whatever it was, she knew she didn’t deserve it.

Shepard cleared her throat and pulled away, sitting back on the sand. “Sit by my side, and let the world slip: we shall ne’er be younger,” she whispered, then let out a long breath to calm the sudden acrobats tumbling around in her belly. A hand firmly keeping her devil skirt from riding up, she lay down, the sand warming her even through Nihlus’s tunic. She closed her eyes, savouring the heat.

For a moment, she allowed herself to imagine Nihlus leaning over, his keel pressing into her side as his mouth brushed hers. Heart leaping into her throat and hammering so hard that a wave of dizziness washed over her, she snapped her eyes open, only relaxing when she saw him still sitting by her side staring out over the water. Damn. Not the best reaction.

“You’re such a chicken shit.”

“What’s that line from?” Nihlus asked, apparently oblivious to her internal drama. “It was beautiful, if roughly translated.”

“Shakespeare.” Keeping her eyes fixed on the stars, she watched as the moonlit clouds clutched their silver linings close, scuttling across the sky like people shuffling between rows of seats in a crowded theatre. “It’s from the Taming of the Shrew.” She laughed, her eyes darting to glare at him, the irony already sending heat roaring up her neck yet again.

He stared at her, his mandibles spread and flicking, his eyes puzzled as if trying to decide if he’d heard what he thought he heard. “The Taming of the Shrew?” Another moment of puzzlement and he began to laugh, a deep, rumbling belly laugh. He flopped down on the sand, his laughter gaining momentum. “Spirits, Shepard,” he said between gasps, catching his breath for a moment, “that’s just . . . so appropriate.”

She elbowed him. “Hey, it’s not that funny. It’s meant to be inspiring, not a chance to guffaw over
the delicious irony of my sparkling self quoting a play about a difficult woman.” When his laughter continued, she smacked him and clambered up off the sand. “Come on, laughing fool, we should start back.”

He ran up behind her a handful of metres down the beach, his arm slipping around her waist.

She glanced up to see his face working as he struggled unsuccessfully to rein in his mirth. “Oh fine, get it out of your system.” Despite her tone, a bright smile bloomed across her face. Nihlus had lanced a deep, old and ugly wound. She sensed the poison flowing out of him.

Sobering, he shook his head. “No, I’m done.” He bumped her gently then started chortling again, a wonderful, rumbling purr of sound. “Okay, mostly done.”

Shepard hip-checked him hard enough to send him stumbling up to his knees in the surf then shrieked, “Oh no! Turian in the water! Someone get a life preserver!”

He spun toward her, the look in his eye promising a terrible end to Ashley’s dress, so Shepard bolted, fleeing for the pier.

“Okay, mostly done.”

She snatched her shoes from under the stairs but didn’t pause to put them on until she reached the top, gasping for breath even as she laughed.

“So slow in your old age, Spectre.” She cackled merrily. “A tiny human female outran the great Nihlus Kryik.”

“Or he let you outrun him,” Nihlus replied, grinning as he guided her through the restaurant door. “Next time you might not be so lucky.”

They caught a cab out front, riding back to the docks where he landed at the far end from the Normandy. “We still have time to walk back, take in the view, pretend we don’t know about all the shadows hiding under the bright lights,” he explained.

When he offered his hand, Shepard took it, sauntering along the open balcony that overlooked the city. The arcologies soared into the heavens, a strange contrast to the ground-hugging domes, and everywhere . . . people crowding outside to enjoy the cooler evening air.

Pulling Nihlus along with her, Shepard wandered to the railing and looked out over the gleaming white buildings splashed in a million hues of light.

“You know me and anything so urban. It’s all a blight, but the lights . . . the sky . . . it really is beautiful,” she said, her voice soft. She let out a breathy chuckle, just a single puff of irony. Out the corner of her eye, she saw Nihlus turn to face her. He leaned into the railing and just watched. Her, the city, then back to her, holding her hand gently in his. She looked out over the city, time stretching out as every sense in her body became keenly aware of its passing. Such rapt attention should have her crawling out of her skin, needing to break it any way she could, but the energy coming off him felt restful, quiet. Their talk, letting all those demons free had lanced the wound, allowing him to reach detente in a war that he’d been fighting a long time.

Her smile came easily. While her imagination ran wild on the beach, his war had been winding down, suits for peace still being drawn up. But he’d left Saren and all that confusion and betrayal behind on the sand. Sighing, she closed her eyes, the play of light showing in negative inside her eyelids. She felt him press closer, close enough that his heat envelope warmed her entire left side. Close enough that her heart began to flutter rather than beat. Every nerve sprang to life under her skin, reaching out like tiny proximity mines ready to go off at the slightest contact.

A soft touch brushed along her jaw, the back of talons cool and hard, warm flesh barely grazing her
skin. Detonating in tiny shivers of pleasure, the mines lifted her skin into gooseflesh and send a shiver down her spine. She opened her eyes to look at him then, returning his gaze as he bent down. Despite the invasion of acrobats and their fire-breathing friends in her belly, she didn’t pull away. In the spirit of exploration. Breath hitching, entire body alive and electric with anticipation, she stared into his eyes, answering his unspoken question with cautious willingness.

His mouth whispered against hers, as gentle and hesitant as a butterfly’s wing, then withdrew a hand’s width away, his breath fanning the short waves of her hair.

He’s waiting, Janey. You’ll have to make the next move. Somewhere in the last couple of weeks he learned patience, glory hallelujah.

Eyes closing, just letting her body’s hyperawareness guide her, Shepard lifted onto her toes, her lips finding his mouth. Driven by the fire-breathers as they warmed her belly, her hands lifted to his cowl, pulling her in tighter. Her lips caressed the tough hide, so familiar, but so very different as well. The years had sculpted deeper lines and ridges into Nihlus’s plates and hide, and where Garrus vibrated with a deep, solid energy, Nihlus’s felt frenetic, gloriously alive and passionate but also afraid, almost desperate.

Their kisses deepened, tongues exploring without being invasive. It seemed he had learned his lesson. She wrapped an arm around his neck, lifting a little further into the embrace. He bent down, wrapping a long arm around her, pulling her up tight against the right side of his keel. Slowly, she felt him begin to let slip the tight reins holding his desire under control. He pressed his mandible against her cheek, his mouth open, panting hard.

“Spirits, Shepard.”

His hand wrapped around her ribs, nearly large enough to cover her from her sternum all the way around to her spine. Turning back into her, he kissed along her jawline and down her neck. Unlike Garrus’s gentle teasing, Nihlus’s passion roared against her barriers—a man too long in the desert starving for water. It begged her to let him sweep her away in it . . . to let it consume her.

Dear God, Janey. It will. The firestorm inside him will burn you up. Are you ready for that? Are you ready to burn?

The gentle tingle along her limbs, the pulsing warmth in her belly . . . the delicious sensitivity of her skin . . . all of it retreated, pulling back to leave her chilled and numb.

The hand on her ribs slid upward, a knuckle touching the underside of her breast, and she jerked away from him. “No.” The word tumbled out, confused and terrified, but unsure of its own meaning.

Nihlus drew back, mandibles dropped, his stare confused, but also worried that he’d done something wrong. “Shepard?” He reached out, halting his fingers only centimetres from her arm. “Did I?”

She shook her head, not quite able to pull off any sort of convincing or reassuring smile. “It’s okay. You’re wonderful. I’m just—“

—Fucked up beyond all repair.

Shepard’s earpiece signalled an incoming call. “Shepard?” Liara said, hesitant, her voice soft. “Sorry to bother you, but I’m ready to head out. I just wanted . . . .”

Shepard stepped around Nihlus, her hand lifting to her ear. “Wait, please! We’re less than five
minutes from the ship.” She started walking, grateful for the chance to normalize, get air flowing back into her lungs. Counting her breaths in time with her steps, she tried to settle all the armour no one could see back in place.

_In . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five. Out . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five. Come on, Janey. Breathe it out. Get it all lined back up. Pull yourself back together. Freaking out because a man you want actually wants you back . . . How mental is that? In . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five._

She reined in the panic. “We’ll be right there. Shepard, out.”

“Liara?” he asked, jogging next to her as she sped up.

“Yes, she’s ready to go.” Shepard shook her head, thanking him silently for the professionalism in his tone. She gathered together a few more strays ends, knotting them up. “I know this is what is best for her, and for the war. I know it, and yet . . .”

Nihlus chuckled. “One of your kids is leaving the *domin.*” He sobered, and glanced across at her. “Setting things up the way you are, it’s going to be a very empty *domin* soon enough.”

Shepard just nodded, trying to ignore the dry knocking in her chest that accompanied thoughts of Tali, Shiala, Wrex, and even Legion leaving. She pushed it aside and kept running. She needed to look into Liara’s eyes and see that the researcher was following the path she felt called to, not just doing what she thought others wanted her to do.

Liara, Aethyta, Shiala and a large squad of asari commandos stood just outside the *Normandy.* Shepard grinned, surety settling in her gut as the commandos thrust themselves into her path, shotguns pointed at her belly. “Well, that’s a good sign.”

“It’s all right,” Liara said, a nervous chuckle following the words. “That’s Captain Shepard. Um . . . stand down.” She stepped around her bodyguards, her entire posture apologetic. “Sorry, Shepard.”

Shepard waved the apology off. “Don’t be, I suddenly feel a whole lot better about you leaving the ship.” She looked into the eyes of each commando, the steel that looked back easing the prickle of her inner alarm. Addressing them, she made herself as imposing as she could manage in the slinky little red number, glad for the slight heels. “If any harm comes to Liara T’Soni, you’d all better be dead or start running the very next second.” Remaining fixed on them, she waited until the scattered smirks faded into understanding.

Shepard took Liara’s hands. The gentle, blue grip felt warmer and didn’t tremble like it had before. “You’re sure this is what you want?”

“Yes. You were right about using Mother’s resources.” She smiled. “Consider me your Prothean Research Division. I won’t be more than a call away.” Her grip tightened. “Don’t worry about me, Shepard. Even though it isn’t what I thought I’d be doing with my life, it’s so much more important.”

Shepard pulled the asari into a hug. “I’m not worried about you. Not any more. Good luck, Liara. We’ll always be here if you need anything.” Drawing back, Shepard stepped aside to let Nihlus say goodbye.

The Spectre shook Liara’s hand. “Good luck, Liara, and thank you.”

Aethyta approached Shepard. “Thank you for being there when she needed someone.” She offered Shepard her hand.
Shaking it briskly, the captain said, “Don’t hesitate to call us if you think she needs help. She’s family.”

“And standing right here,” Liara said and sighed, a smile belying any ill humour. “All right. I’ll be in touch as soon as I get settled.” She nodded to her retinue. “Let’s go.”

Shepard nodded. “Good luck.”

“Do I have time to walk her to her ship, Captain?” Shiala asked.

Shepard nodded, then backed up until Nihlus’s arm pressed against the back of hers. “Well, there goes the first one.” She laughed when he gave her a gentle shove, but it died almost instantly as normal broke, letting the fear bleed through.

If they’d just started off better, if Nihlus had flirted back that day instead of reacting as he did . . . would they be hurrying back to her cabin right then to make love before falling asleep in one another’s arms? For a moment, she allowed that picture to form, the warmth of his breath, so quick and deep with desire, the almost frantic need behind his kisses, hands trying to discover every inch of her at once.

No, she shook off that thought as she moved away from Nihlus, registering the Normandy’s presence once more: solid, beautiful, sleek and real at her back. Real and full of people depending on her. A sick, overripe feeling twisted through her gut, and for a moment it took her entire will not to vomit.

And what about Garrus, asleep down in her bed, waiting for her to stop flitting around and just be with him? What about his gentleness, his infinite patience with her insanity, the quiet but real desire behind his touch?

*What the great, living fuck are you doing, Jane Shepard? You’ve lost your mind, and you don’t have time to lose your mind, especially not over such foolishness. Or have your hormones made you forget the Reapers?*

No, a galaxy awaited salvation. She didn’t have time or energy to waste on dating. She didn’t have the luxury of all the hair pulling and thrashing about like some fifteen-year-old deciding who to take to the spring dance. Sweet Jesus.

Dating. Her. What the hell had she been thinking?

Mikhailovich was right. She didn’t deserve a ship or crew like the Normandy. Not if she let herself get so easily distracted. Damn that cranky old bastard for being right. She looked down at her dress, shame burning a crown fire up her neck to scald her cheeks.

“Come on,” she said, her voice low. “Let’s get back to what we should be doing.” She picked at the dress, needing the heavy hand of padded cotton against her skin instead of the gentle brush of silk. “Tomorrow, 0630 in my quarters to plan the Luna mission.”

She caught the distressed flick of Nihlus’s mandibles out the corner of her eye, but pushed on through the outer hatch into decon.

He followed. “Shepard? What just happened?” When she tried to duck away from him, he grabbed a wrist. “No. Don’t just run. Talk to me. Did I go too far? What happened?”

After a moment spent trying to will the hatch open, she turned to face him. “It’s just . . . No, Nihlus, you didn’t do anything wrong. It’s just all way too much for me right now.” Damn those
eyes staring into hers with so much hope and so much confusion. “I need to focus on stopping
Saren. I just spent an entire night out eating at a nice restaurant and walking on a beach when
there’s a galaxy hanging in the balance . . . and . . .”

He drew back. “And Garrus.” The depth and threadiness of his sigh told her how much he’d
allowed himself to hope over the course of the evening.

“Yeah, and Garrus.” She pulled her hand away from him. “I like you, Nihlus. I really do. If I let
myself go down this road, I could fall in love with you . . .

*If you already haven’t.*

“. . . but I . . . Garrus . . .” Her head dropped. “He . . . I . . .” She flailed helplessly a little, trying to
find a way to explain past the terrible lump of fear and sorrow tangling deep in her throat.

He gripped her shoulder. “I understand, Shepard. He’s been your rock from the beginning, helping
you get through the messes I made. I understand.”

She backed up a single step. “I’m trying to save a galaxy . . . we . . . we’re trying to save a galaxy.”
She stared down at the floor, unable to keep talking if she looked him in the eye. Her heart
contracted, a tiny singularity of guilt and regret pulling at it. He reached up, but she ducked away
from his hand. “Trying to figure this thing between the three of us out . . .” She gestured back and
forth between them. “. . . and the war . . . I’m just not ready. It’s too much. I’m sorry, but I can’t
explore this right now. Maybe . . . someday, when I’m not such a mess and life isn’t trying to tear
me into so many pieces.”

“Shep—”

“I’m sorry, but I . . .” She met his eyes for a split second. “It’s Garrus.”

The door opened and she burst through, needing to escape before he spoke and everything she’d
said flew out the airlock . . . and she ended up kissing him again. Fleeing, practically jogging the
length of the CIC and down the stairs, she tried to rein in the panic ping-ponging around inside her,
a last spark trying to find its way to oxygen. Counting off her steps, even rushed, allowed her to
start slotting the pieces back into place.

The dim silence of the crew deck reached down inside of her, stroking the fear with reassuring
fingers. “*It’s all right,*” the ship whispered. “*You’re back where you belong. Calm down. You
over-reacted as always. Just breathe and carry on.*”

Slowing to a walk, she crossed the mess with a little more decorum, the mantles of captain and
Garrus Vakarian’s new girlfriend finding their way back onto her shoulders. She hesitated outside
her door for a moment to catch her breath.

She palmed the control, then stood in the open doorway, staring at the *torin* stretched out along her
bed, facing the wall. In the light streaming through the portal, all his angles and planes stood out in
harsh relief. He really was something.

“You going to stand there all night staring at me, or come in?” he grumbled, his voice heavy with

sleep.

“Is there something wrong with admiring the view?” she asked, the heavy frown lines melting from
her brow and around her eyes at the sound of his voice. That voice . . . in the dark under that
building on Feros keeping the fear at bay with its warmth . . . breaking her out of her memories on
Noveria . . . laughing helplessly next to her above that lava pit on Therum.
Sweet baby Jesus, where would I be without him? How in the name of the freaking Enkindlers’ did some random C-Sec agent with far too much attitude become so important to me in a couple of weeks?

The answer to that question played out in flashes of a hundred moments of quiet support, an offered hand, his infuriating over-protective streak. She stepped inside, but too close for the door to shut.

“Not if you do it with the door closed.” His hand lifted and flapped toward the cot set up by the door. “I’m supposed to be using that, remember? I probably should be. I think this mattress has dislocated my shoulder.”

You’ve been a selfish ass, Shepard. Land, treat the torin the way he deserves to be treated, and focus on your bloody war.

Shepard let the door close and walked over to her closet, pulling the dress over her head as she went. “I’ve gotten used to having a tough old, pointy heating unit at night.” She hung up the dress, and slipped her t-shirt over her head before removing her bra. “You’re forbidden to use the cot.”

“Glad I can be of service,” he grumbled. “Are you decent, yet?”

“Just a second. Sheesh, so impatient.” She slid on her shorts. “Okay, you can roll over now.” She organized her shoes and grabbed her kit. “Be back as soon as I’ve got all this crap off my face.”

Shepard jogged through the almost silent ship on bare feet. She could still hear the waves caressing the sand, still feel the warm breeze tickling its fingers over her legs and arms, still feel Nihlus pressed up against her, the sound of his breathing in time with the surf.

Seriously, Janey? The second you left Garrus? You’re pathetic.

She ducked into the head and strod to the sink, staring at her reflection, her lipstick smeared and rubbed away. Dammit, she’d said goodbye to Liara looking like she’d been making out with half of Nos Astra. Roughly, she scrubbed it and the rest of the night away, putting everything back in order, lining it all back up with each swipe of the cloth. Ten minutes later, skin glowing a fiery pink, she towelled off and headed back to her quarters.

The silver gleam of Garrus’s eyes greeted her when she walked back into her quarters. He’d turned over and leaned up on an elbow, the blankets folded back invitingly.

She chuckled. “You smooth ol’ dog, you.” After tucking her kit back into her closet, she walked over and sat facing the head of the bed, her knee drawn up. She reached up and caressed his cheek for a moment, just savouring the familiar roughness of his hide under her fingers, the myrrh and cloves scent of his cleanser, the affection in his eyes.

“So, how did your date go?” he asked, his sub-vocals rich and rumbling heavily as he closed his eyes and leaned into her hand.

The movement set off the burn in her chest again. She was such an idiot to have not just grabbed hold of him and put everything else out of her head. Her hand slid down to rest just inside the cowl of his robe. “You know, Garrus, I love how perceptive you are . . . how intuitive and intelligent,” she said, stroking the backs of her fingers along the ridge of his neck. “But sometimes, you’re a dumbass.”

Garrus scowled at her. “Why? What do you mean?”

“It was a good date. Nihlus and I had a good time. We talked, ate, went for a walk along the beach
and talked some more. We even kissed, but I belong here, in my stupid, old PJs, curled up next to you.” She placed her hand against his cheek again, her thumb following the line of his mouth. “Stop trying to force Nihlus and I together. Seriously. I’m not here because I’m too inexperienced or too angry to realize that I’m in love with him.”

He stared into her eyes, his just gleams of reflected light in the half-dark. “Why are you here?”

“Because on Therum, you did up my seat belt without making anything of it. Because you’re willing to face the storms to come, and I don’t mean the Reapers.” Nodding toward the lamp, she caressed the upper plate of his mouth and his chin with her fingertips. “Because even though you’re here, and I’m not scared when you are, you always make sure there’s light in the room.” What she saw in his eyes, shining at her brighter than the reflection, made her cheeks heat with shame again, but she pushed it aside. “And because it doesn’t even occur to you that I might be more attracted to you than I am Nihlus, you idiot.

“I’m here because I want to be with you. Remember?” She leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to his upper mouth plate then wagged her head. “That you’re a great kisser for a guy with no lips doesn’t hurt your case either.” She grinned, her mouth still pressed against his.

Curling in tighter against him, she tucked her head under his chin. “I’m tired of being crazy, Garrus. Bouncing back and forth between the two of you . . . it’ll drive me mad, and I won’t be able to fight this war. I need to stay sane enough to do that. Does that make sense?”

He nodded and kissed her brow, nuzzling her softly. “Okay.” A rough, rolling chuckle tickled her skin. “You could just date Alenko. He’s the sanest choice.”

She let out a deep, lamenting sigh. “I can’t. He’s scared of me . . . said he’d rather date Wrex.” She smiled at the laugh that answered that, waiting until the mirth faded from the pocket of space around them before she said, “I don’t know if we’ll make it through Hurricane Shepard, but in the meantime I’m with you.” She shrugged. “If I feel the need to be with Nihlus, I’ll let you know. Until then, I expect my dates to be with you.”

**Lautus** -- Literal: Considering oneself too fashionable or important to associate with people considered less so. Vernacular: Cool, hip.

**Stulti mendur** -- Literal: foolish lies. Vernacular: Bullshit.

**Domin** -- House, but in terms of it being a home.
“Good morning,” Shepard said, greeting the small cluster of crew gathered in her quarters. She activated the holo-emitter in the center of her table, adjusting the view until it showed a hundred square kilometre area of the lunar surface. Several small outposts dotted the landscape around three bunkers in the center. “This is the Alliance Lunar training base.” She grimaced. “I’m sure the Alliance would be thrilled with me sharing these details with all of you, which is why we’re not in the comm room with the recorders.”

“Are you sure, ma’am?” Ashley asked, her scowl expressing all her doubts. “You could end up court-martialed.”

Shepard nodded. “Yeah, I could, but they’ve tossed a huge mess in my lap, and it’s going to take all of us to clean it up.”

She called up the main cluster of bunkers. “Hackett called me the other day because the VI in charge of the live fire battle simulations at this base has gone rogue. Hackett couldn’t confirm that it may have evolved into an AI, but I think that’s what he suspects.” She let out a soft mutter of regret as she zoomed back out to the base view. “AI or not, it has killed a lot of good people. We’re going to need everyone on deck to fight our way in and shut it down.”

She straightened, her hands on her hips. “One major thing in our favour is that it’s an older base, and the hardware isn’t state of the art.”

Kaidan sucked in an understanding breath. “No on-site fabricators.”

“Oh yeah, that would have been a bitch,” Ash agreed. “My last training stint, those mothers put out a new drone every three minutes.”

Shepard nodded. “Here, the base had a compliment of two hundred assault drones, one hundred and twenty rocket drones, and a hundred mechs, so that’s our maximum resistance.” She shook her head and looked up, meeting their eyes. “That’s not to say an AI might not have upgraded or reassigned units, changed minefield layouts and set traps. Even though we’re facing a finite number of units, if the VI is self-aware the playbook has to go out the window. It’s designed to analyze attacks and counter them, and it’s been learning from everyone who came before us. I’ve looked at the logs of those attacks, and all I can say is glory hallelujah that they went in thinking that they were facing a VI.”

She zoomed in on an outpost in the far northwestern corner of the base. “Our other major asset is that it is a training base. Lots of good, solid cover.” She pointed out the armoured barricades and portable shield nodes. “The bunkers are set up like the interior of a pirate or raider base. Most of us have seen our share of those. Use the environment, move in cautiously, take your time. It’s not a race or a timed exercise.”

“Ash, myself, and every Marine on this boat has been through there a hundred times,” Kaidan said.
“They haven’t changed the layout in those rooms for three years.”

Shepard nodded. “Exactly. So have I, although not for a while, and that over-familiarity could get us killed. That’s why I’m assigning a non-Alliance team member to each squad. Put them on point, and let them keep all of you on your toes. Brother Sparky, you’ll have Nihlus on your team, and Ash, you’ll be taking old man Urdnot. Both of them have the instincts and skills to see what the three of us might dismiss.” She waited for them both to agree before moving on.

“Okay, that stuff is steps 5-10. Our first hurdle is going to be getting past the exterior defenses.” She looked up to where Tali and Legion stood next to one another on the opposite side of the table. “That’s where the two of you come in. Out here, at this outpost, there is an override that will neutralize the sentries and patrols . . ..” She grinned, crooked and sly. “You know, once you hack your way into the shed and blow it to hell.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tali replied, her smile evident in her voice.

“There’s a minefield. Its previous dimensions are shown here. I’ll send you the information and the frequency for the mines to your omnis with your mission data but don’t trust it . . . an AI would be able to change all of it.” She zoomed into a tighter view of that sector. “You’re . . . we’re all . . . going to be met by platoon strength resistance. Fifty-fifty drones and mechs out on the perimeters, more drones in the interiors. Do not allow any experience you’ve had with LOKI mechs make you complacent. These are not security mechs.”

She winced inwardly as she switched to the hologram of the mechs, a vague shame whispering through the back of her head. “Traitor,” it whispered. “You’ve been dancing along the line from the beginning, Shepard, but this . . . this takes the first step over.” She cleared her throat, and gave her head a quick shake, chasing that thought away. The mission was for the good of the Alliance. They’d survive a little leaked training intel.

She dragged herself back to the briefing. “These training mechs are quick, well-balanced, able to roll and take cover, have advanced targeting software, and if they’re being run by an AI they’ll react and adapt quickly.” Switching to the drone schematic, she pushed away from the table, straightening. “We’ll be facing two types of drones as well. Assault and rocket. They’re not overpowered by any means, but again, quick.”

“It doesn’t take much more than two hits from the rocket drones to kill you,” Kaidan said.

Shepard nodded and changed the hologram back to the overview of the lunar surface. “Tali and Legion, you’ll take the Mako along with Jenkins. We’ll drop you a klick back from the minefield. Go in, blow the entire shed where the controls are housed.” She highlighted their target.

“Sparky, Ash, our teams are going to assault the installations at the other three perimeter outposts. Just disembark, dig in and try to distract some of the patrol units from Tali and Legion. The VI probably won’t commit many units to protecting our positions, because there isn’t anything truly important at any of them. There is, however, an APC at each one. Take out the resistance and grab a ride.”

“If they’re functional,” Ash said. “The VI may have disabled them in the previous assaults.”

Shepard shrugged. “It may have, but the other teams didn’t even attempt to take out the external forces, so we might get lucky. If not, we’ll have to risk the Normandy to take out the missile turrets on the roofs of the three bunkers and then Joker can pick us up and give us a lift.” She paused. “Questions up to this point?” When no one said anything, she nodded. “Good. Okay, we’ll rendezvous outside the range of the missile turrets and go in together, all three APCs, to take out
the missile turrets on our bunker. Once those are down . . . Sparky . . . bunker one. Ashley . . . bunker two. I’ll take Garrus and two Marines into the last bunker.

“The previous teams tried to take out one at a time, hoping that they could weaken the defenses, but the opposite happened. The VI boosted the defenses and increased the number of units from room to room, bunker to bunker. We’ll go in at maximum strength, split into three teams and just take it damned slow. This is not a barn storming.” She looked into each set of eyes staring back at her, waiting to see agreement there before moving on.

Over the next half hour, they hashed out their plan, buttoning everything up as tight as could be hoped for. As Nihlus had told her weeks before: plans were great until about a minute after they hit the ground.

One minute . . .

One minute after Tali and Legion hit the ground in the Mako—five minutes after Shepard’s team jumped down out of the Normandy—a plume of flame and black smoke billowed a hundred metres into the air above their position.

Air stopped flowing into Shepard’s lungs for three seconds, even though her finger didn’t stop squeezing the trigger, bullets peppering a rocket drone trying to deke around her cover on the left.

“Shepard!”

“I saw it!” she yelled back without looking toward Garrus’s position. “Keep them off me for a few seconds!” She lifted her hand to the side of her helmet and opened a channel. “Shepard to Team A. Tali, Legion, Jenkins . . . come in.” Only static answered. She glanced over her cover, but Garrus and the Marines had the drones well under control.

“Come on, people. Someone answer me. What’s going on over there?” Shepard shouted over the link. She popped up, sweeping the area again. Why weren’t there any mechs? They’d been attacked immediately by twenty drones, but each of the outposts should have had a contingent of mechs as well.

“Tali! Come on, someone give me some good news from over there.” Her brain began to spin, coming up with a new plan to take out the shed if Team A had failed. She vaguely registered the sound of Droney dying and opened her omnitool, respawning it even as she flipped through the options to take out the shed.

She glanced over at the outpost’s Mako. It looked undamaged. They’d have to finish off the drones and head over themselves . . . deal with whatever they found and get it done.

“Shepard! Mech at your nine o’clock. Four metres out,” Garrus bellowed.

She glanced to her left and sure enough a mech marched toward her, shots from its SMG pinging off the other side of her barricade. “Where the fuck did that come from?” she shouted back.

“They just appeared. Ten of them. Must have been cloaked.”

Shepard hit the closest with an overload, tearing down its shields, then fired four volleys of round into it. “All teams, look out for cloaked mechs. They’ve been upgraded.”

“I don’t think they’re Alliance mechs at all,” Ash yelled back, the sounds of gunfire loud in the background. “They’re tough as hell, but sabotage seems to make them hurt.”
“Roger that.” Shepard queued it up then leaned out, Roger taking out the thing’s glowing optics before she unleashed the sabotage and it went down, squealing a mechanical death warble.

“Team A to Shepard,” Tali’s voice came through, thready, but most definitely alive. “The Mako was destroyed by enemy fire, but we got out and are in cover.” The line went to static for a few seconds as Shepard moved on to a new target. Seven mechs closed on them and fast. They had time to take maybe another one each before the mechs overwhelmed their cover.

“You were right, Shepard,” Tali said, the channel connecting again. “The VI changed everything up. There are landmines all through the area. We have a couple dozen drones on us, and reinforcements moving in on us from all sides. Units just appeared on the scope. ETA twelve minutes. Jenkins has an idea to get us across the minefield once we get these drones down. It’s a little crazy, but we don’t have time to come up with anything else.”

Shepard pressed her palm to her brow, smoothing out the furrows as she packed down her relief. “Do what you need to. I trust you to get the job done, Tali. Good luck.”

“Yes, ma’am. Tali’Zorah, out.”

“Shepard, you’re going to have to move,” Garrus called. “They’re all converging on you.”

“Shit.” She glanced out. “I’ve been identified as command.” She traded Roger for Ingrid, taking some fire as she lined up a headshot that took down the closest mech. “Cover me, I’m going to move to the barricade ten metres to my seven o’clock.”

“Roger that.” The turian’s sniper rifle let out a deep boom, and a mech’s head disintegrated.

Taking a handful of quick, deep breaths, Shepard coiled, springing out from behind the cover, her boots digging deep furrows in the loose footing. Praise the Enkindlers for the gravity compensator in her armour. Bouncing across the moon was no way to fight or move with any speed. Even so, the mechs’ gunfire whittled her shields down faster than she could move. She dug in, straining every muscle fibre, her heart banging hard and fast against her ribs. A long mission still loomed ahead, not leaving the option for taking even a handful of bullets.

Then the barrage stopped. Barely resisting the urge to look back, she tweaked her compensator and dove for the barricade. Ducking her head, she rolled over the top of it, reset to standard grav, then popped up, Ingrid ready and eager in her hand.

She saw the reason for the cessation of fire in the form of Garrus fighting backward toward her position. “Get behind the barricade, dammit,” she hollered. “Sweet baby Jesus, C-Sec. How many times do I have to tell you not to do that?” She took out two mechs with two headshots, overheating Ingrid, but it cut down the fire enough for Garrus to make it to cover.

“Drones are down,” Gladstone called. “Three mechs remaining.”

“.Shepard,” Joker called, adding his voice to the chorus. “Permission to use GARDIANS to give Team A some air support? They’ve got a lot of ground units converging on their position.”

“Permission granted. Just a couple of passes and stay well away from any installations. Buy them some time.” She and Garrus took out another mech.

“Roger that, ma’am. Normandy, out.”

Exactly two minutes and forty-five seconds later, according to Shepard’s HUD, the last mech went down. “Let’s get that Grizzly fired up, Brother C-Sec.” As she strode toward the APC, she opened
“Team B, report. How are you doing, Sparky?”

“Cleared out here, Captain. Couple of minor wounds. Mako is running. We’re ready to go.”

“Good work. Meet you there.” She switched to Ashley’s frequency. “Team C, how are you doing?”

“On our way to the rendezvous, Captain. No casualties, but Pakti rebroke his hand,” the chief reported.

“Oh, does he need medevac?”

Ashley grumbled. “He says he doesn’t. It’s splinted, and it’s his non-dominant hand. He could pull drag and keep an eye on our backs.”

“Okay, I’ll leave it to your judgement, but tell him he has to deal with the wrath of Shepard if he gets himself killed. Good work, Ash. Shepard, out.” She climbed in the back of the Mako, taking a seat on the bench in the back.

“Not driving, Shepard?” Garrus asked as he took a seat at the canon and started up the electronics.

“No. I’m sure Gladstone can get us to the bunkers without driving us off anything too steep.” She buckled herself in and opened a channel to the Normandy. “Joker, report. How are things going with Team A?”

“They’re pinned down, but we’ve bought them twenty minutes. Do you want us to make a pass at that shed?”

“No. I don’t want to risk the Normandy. Who knows what the AI has up it’s sleeve. A powerful generator and computer core like that . . . could put out an EMP that drops her right out of the sky. We’ll signal you once we’ve got everything wrapped up. Shepard, out.”

One more call to make. Her heart sped up a little as she opened Tali’s frequency. “Team A, report in.”

“We’re just about through the defensive units, Captain,” Tali replied, her voice laced with pain and fatigue. “We think we’ve got a way to clear a path through the mines. Hopefully, this outpost will be a smoking crater in the next five minutes.”

“Good work, Team A. Report in when you’re mission is complete.”

“Yes, ma’am. Tali’Zorah, out.”

Shepard sank into her seat a little. Why could nothing ever just be simple?

One minute . . .

One minute into their assault on the bunker, Garrus brought up a fist, halting them, then pointed to a small cluster of blinking lights attached to the side of a crate.

Shepard cursed under her breath. Damn, she hated being right. Traps. “Can you disarm it?” she whispered.

He shrugged, then got down on the floor and opened his omnitool and scanned the device.

“Shepard to Teams B and C, we have traps. Small devices at floor level.” She crouched down,
nudging Garrus gently as he reached out toward the trap. “Careful. It’s probably got proximity or motion detectors,” she warned him. Her heart beat fast and light, her hands tingling, every nerve alive even as she winced, awaiting the boom.

“Then get back. And stop jabbing me while I’m messing with dubious electronic devices.” He glanced back. “Here, make yourself useful and have a look at these scans.”

Shepard opened the file when her omnitool beeped, scanning the tech inside the small box. “It’s not a bomb. No accelerants or triggers, no boom anywhere.” She peered closer. “It’s also not Alliance. All their components are proprietary—Alliance marks on every piece. This is completely clean.” She stepped around him. “It definitely has a proximity detector though. Probably triggers something further in. Joy.”

His omnitool sprouted a small knife that he slipped in behind the device, popping it free of the crate. “Well, they know we’re here now.” He got to his feet and looked it over then passed it back to her. “Do we proceed?” He nodded at the glowing force field blocking the door on the far side of the room. “Maybe they trigger the barriers?”

Shepard popped the back off, searched out the circuit to the power source and disabled it before shoving it into a pocket. “Let’s go. Whatever it is, we’ll find out eventually.” She looked up to find him watching her, or at least facing her direction. It was hard to tell with the blacked out face plate of his helmet. Still, the reaction in her gut said that he was watching her. “What?”

He chuckled. “I forget you’re an engineer.” Turning back toward the exit, he shrugged. “It’s sort of sexy.”

“Oh for pity’s sake, C-Sec, we’re working.” Despite her grumble, a wide, stupid grin snuck up on her. At least until she heard Gladstone snigger. She spun on him, a fiercely pointed finger stopping a centimetre from his face plate. “Stow it, laughing boy, or someone’s going to get hurt real bad. Focus.”

He cleared his throat, quailing as all humour fled before her wrath. “Sorry, ma’am.”

It took six overloads coupled with sabotages aimed at the shield emitters around the door frame to get the barrier down. Shepard scanned the tech with her omnitool. “Blessed Enkindlers, someone upgraded the crap out of these.”

“Are they the same as the device?” Garrus asked, his back to her as he watched the short corridor to the next room.

Shepard shook her head, a growing sense of disquiet gnawing its way into her gut. Still, her inner alarm remained twitchy but silent at the base of her skull. “No, this is all Alliance. I think the AI upgraded this after the last attack. Slow us down enough to bottleneck us.” She keyed up a tool, the micro-fabricator creating a small arc device. “We’re going to have to sabotage them badly to make sure they don’t just spring right back up behind us. Get the emitters on the other side. Just fry the living shit out of them.” Cutting and soldering, she made sure that the emitters on her side of the door would need to be replaced in order to work. Finished, she sent a text warning to the other two teams to follow suit.

“Okay, move slowly,” she said, stepping over the threshold. “We’ll scan as we go. I do not want to get trapped in here when we open the door on the other side.”

They found two more sets of emitters along the corridor. Shepard shook her head, slow knots tying themselves into every inch of her gut. No VI would go through such lengths to protect itself. A
virtual intelligence answered the problems posed in the scenario according to its programmed choices, but it possessed no creativity, no will to survive. Those emitters screamed self-preservation.

*We’re fighting our way in here to kill a brand new life.*

She packed that whisper down tight, swallowing the sick, bile taste of guilt. New life or no, people had died and more could die. *Her* people could die if they didn’t get the thing shut down. Looking up the corridor to where Garrus worked on the last set of emitters, she steeled herself. She’d charted her course.

Lifting a hand to her radio, she checked in with the other two teams. Neither had progressed as far as they had, but were taking their time to disable the traps as they went. Both also reported no contact with drones or mechs.

“Team A to Shepard,” Tali’s very welcome voice called in Shepard’s ear. “The exterior defenses are down. Scans show all mechs, drones, and automated defenses disabled outside the bunkers. You don’t have to worry about a rear assault.”

Shepard grinned. “Excellent work, Team A. Join us in the third bunker at your earliest convenience.”

“We’re already on our way. ETA: two minutes. Team A, out.”

Shepard let out a breath she felt like she’d been holding since she saw the Mako destroyed. One less thing to worry about. Why then did her alarm spike a little higher with every passing second? Cracking her neck, she rolled her shoulders and stretched her jaw. Focus. She needed to relax and focus on what lay on the other side of the next door.

“The bulk of the attack will come in this next room.” She nodded. “Can that hidden room scanner of yours tell us if there’s a welcome wagon waiting directly on the other side?”

He nodded and keyed it up. “Nothing. Appears to be a small alcove with access to the main room on either side.”

She nodded, the battle high starting to hit her blood. Enough creeping around doing fiddly work. As adrenaline hit her bloodstream, her entire body began to chant in time with her heartbeat. Time to put a whole lot of bullets into things. “The second we step around that wall, we’re open to take fire from pretty much the entire room.” As she spoke, an alternative presented itself, and she grinned. “How good are you at climbing?”

Not waiting for an answer, she turned to Gladstone and Chase. “You two go around, to the right, take cover and get their attention. We’ll go up and see if we can’t surprise them.” When they answered to the affirmative, Shepard set her shoulders, let the adrenaline’s sweet music sing through her blood, and signalled Garrus to open the door.

One minute . . . .

One minute after the last echo of gunfire died, Shepard pushed herself up off the stack of crates, reaching up to grab hold of one of the beams along the ceiling. Stalking along the edge, she used her bird’s eye view to make sure they’d cleared the room.

“All clear up here,” Garrus called from the next wall of crates over. He chuffed, the sound coming
out like a rifle shot. “Although, if those cloaked mechs are in here . . .”

Shepard nodded and clambered down. “I didn’t see any visible shimmers or anything, but we didn’t spot them at all outside either. Just keep sharp.” She started across the room, her eyes and Roger sweeping back and forth without resting. The drones and mechs hadn’t given them an easy fight to take the room, coming at them from every direction, but still, not the sort of fight she anticipated. Part of her hoped that they owed the ease of victory to the AI not being an AI after all. The other part squirmed in the grip of ice-cold claws sinking into her spine. The whole mission felt as though someone kept throwing just enough bait in front of them to keep them moving.

Shepard shook off the dread, muttering, “It’s not like we have any choice.”

*Focus on the fight, Janey. Get in there, get it done, and keep moving. Your people are just as tired as you are.*

“Chase and Gladstone, take positions at four and eight. Watch our backs. C-Sec, my ten. Five metre spread.” When they moved into position, she signalled them forward, keeping their advance as silent as possible. Several times they stopped, Shepard sending two of them to check an alcove in the crate maze, or cover behind a bank of computers. They arrived at the far door unmolested.

“Okay, let’s get this barrier down and get this over with.” She didn’t need to tell anyone where to be, Garrus stepping up next to her to start tearing down and taking apart the barrier emitters, the other two watching the room. Just like every other corridor, they found two sets of inactive emitters dividing the space into thirds. One last gold/red barrier waited behind the door at the end. On the other side, a cross corridor led to the two rooms where the VI’s conduits awaited destruction.

Shepard started fusing the circuitry, the slight hiss and crackle of the sparks from their arc devices the only sounds bouncing around inside her helmet, but then, gradually enough that she mistook it for her own heartbeat at first, another sound whispered into her consciousness. A steady drumming grew louder and louder, the floor trembling in time to its rhythm.

The whir and whine of servos and mechanical joints joined in, strings layering under the percussion.

“Mechs incoming,” Chase called. “Lots of them. They’re uncloaking all through the room. How didn’t we run into them?”


Fear galvanized Shepard, shoring up weary joints and lacing steel cables through muscle. “Close up.” She deactivated her omnitool and stepped over the threshold. Closed doors blocked both ends of the hall. The one to her right contained the core.

“Garrus, you and Gladstone take the room to the left. Destroy those conduits. Chase, come on. We’ll go right, take out the core.” Shepard glanced behind them in the split second before she turned the corner into the cross-corridor. Mechs marched toward them, spilling out of the spaces between crates, their advance halfway across the room. Metal feet beat against the floor in double time, their impact setting the entire structure trembling. SMGs lifted in perfect synchronization, the first bullets zipping through the space Shepard had occupied the moment before.

“We’re being herded,” Garrus shouted.

“I know. Just take the conduits out. Once the computer goes down, the mechs won’t be a problem.”
Palming the door control, Shepard sent out a prayer to anyone who might be listening, asking that they wouldn’t slam straight into a barrier.

Chase rebounded off the glowing barricade, slamming back into Shepard.

“Just once!” Shepard cried, cursing as she keyed in an overload, taking out the first emitter, then bringing up a sabotage right behind it. Only two were down when the first mechs turned the corner and started firing. “Would it kill the universe to make things easy just once for fuck’s sake?”

“Team A to Shepard,” Tali called. “We’re in the main room, coming up fast behind those mechs. Hopefully we can pull a few off you.”

“Use the team frequency, Tali,” Shepard called, overloading and sabotaging the third emitter. “Chase, keep them off me the best you can.” Shepard shields sparked as she turned, shrugging Roger into her hand to fire while she waited for the cooldown.

“Your omnitool shields, Shepard!” Garrus reminded her.

Shepard waited until her armour shields failed, then stuck Roger between her knees, activated Garrus’s overclocked shields on her omnitool, and set in to take out another emitter.

One of the mechs in the front firing line suddenly turned on its fellows, seeding chaos into the ranks. Praise be to the sweet baby Jesus for team members with hacking skills. That mech bought Shepard enough time to take out the fourth emitter before the rest concentrated fire on her again.

Her overclocked shields began to send failure warnings, but a quick check showed her armour shields recharging. Then, to Shepard’s right, Chase went down. Grabbing the woman’s armour, Shepard dragged her out of fire, protecting Chase with her own shields. Another two mechs turned their guns from Shepard to fire on their own.

“Come on. Come on, comeon, comeon,” she muttered, overloading the fifth emitter. Then Tali appeared beside her.

“I’ll get the last one, Captain.” Deft, quick fingers took out the emitter, the barricade falling. “I’ll hold the door,” the quarian called.

Shepard dragged Chase out of the line of fire, bringing Roger around to aim at the first conduit. Four bullets and it went up in a shower of sparks. One after the other, smooth as clockwork, the conduits went down. Shepard ran to the core. “Are the conduits down in that room?” she called into the radio.

“Yes, ma’am,” Gladstone answered.

Shepard opened fire on the computer core, bullets tearing through all four wings and the main column. Even after she heard the mechs in the corridor stop firing, she kept going until she reduced the damned thing to a smoking ruin.

“Damn.” She sagged against the console at her back, every muscle in her body aching with exhaustion. “Teams report in. Everyone okay out there?”

Her radio let out a sharp peel of sound that stabbed through her head like two gauge wire rammed in one ear and yanked out the other. Folding in half, she clapped her hands against the sides of her helmet, but then the sound died. “Fuck, what the hell was that?” Cautiously, she opened a channel again. “Did anyone else just have their ears taken out?”
No answer.

“Shepard to any team member.” She pushed herself up and stepped around the ruined core, heading for the door. Tali and Legion held Chase in a chair carry between them and were hurried toward the exit. “Anyone hear me?”

No answer.

“Crap, that thing fried my radio.” She stopped a couple metres inside the door and took a quick scan of the air quality. All good. Proper pressure, composition . . . no poison or dangerous gasses. She popped the seals on her helmet and lifted it off. “Hey. Did the rest of you lose radio just now?”

She strode toward the door, slamming into a shifting blue barrier that sprang up across the portal as she tried to cross the threshold. Reeling back, she stumbled, searing arcs of electricity skipping along her armour as she tumbled onto one knee, a hand braced against the floor. The shocks faded, and she looked up, staring at the strange, almost water-like barrier.

“What the hell?” She staggered back to her feet, spinning around as she heard something whir to life. For a long moment, she didn’t see anything, but then a chime sounded and a drone appeared, a spinning and whirling ball of light and force fields, just like her own. Along the far wall, a line of mechs dropped their cloaks, their weapons raised and firing as they stepped forward.

“Oh crap.” Shepard ran backward, diving into cover behind a crate just inside the door. “Ummm . . . people, I appear to be in some fairly serious shit here.”

One minute . . .
Chapter Summary

Luna . . . yep, somedays it just does NOT pay to get out of bed.

“Shepard? Are you all right?”

Shepard scrambled up, her back to the crate, bullets playing deadly music as they sank into the thick polymer of her cover. Behind her she heard Garrus overloading the barrier, the roasted ozone stench of the thing letting her know it wouldn’t go down without a fight.

“For now.” She took a couple of deep breaths to calm her shaking. They did nothing to ease the sick twisting in her guts. Sealed in. She forced that thought away the best she could, then launched Droner and peered up over the barrier to assess the situation. Eight mechs and three drones moved in on her position, but not as quickly as she would’ve thought. When faced with a single enemy combatant, cut off from rescue but only by a few minutes . . . logic said swarm and overwhelm. Instead, they hung back, the mechs spreading out in a slowly closing semi-circle. Only the drones advanced with any sort of speed, two of them distracted by Droner. She took the last out with an overload and let out a relieved sigh.

Drones: no problem.

She brought Ingrid up, sighted down the mech on her far left, and fired. It staggered, but didn’t go down. A direct headshot should have flattened it. Her teeth clenched as frustration and a thick thread of fear wormed its way through her. What the hell were those things? The fear wrapped itself around her throat, squeezing with the inexorable grip of a boa constrictor. She opened her omnitool to scan it, but it deflected the scan completely. She scowled down at her omnitool. Failing her. Her tools were all failing her.

Alone, trapped . . . sweet Jesus . . . trapped. She popped up, her shields complaining as she took fire, trying to find another way out. There had to be a way out. She needed to get out.

Stop it! Get down and grab some damned control, Janey.

“Shepard!” Garrus yelled, his voice muffled by the barrier, but enough to break through the walls of her cage. “What are you doing? Get behind cover!”

She ducked back down. Unless they got the barrier down, she had no way out. And she couldn’t die, not with so much of the fight left.

Use your head, Janey. Test them. Every mech, every device has a weakness.

“How’s it going with that barrier, C-Sec?” she called over her shoulder.

“It’s not going down. I don’t know what’s powering this thing, but it’s nothing I can take down with my overload or sabotage. Targismar!” His sniper rifle coughed once and then again. Assault rifle bullets played a symphony across its surface.

“Wow, you better not kiss your mama with that mouth, C-Sec,” she said, forcing a laugh, but it just closed the room down around her, panic’s sharp edge cutting into her again. She overloaded another drone, changing out Ingrid for Roger to go after the mech. After sabotaging it, she hit it
with at least fifty rounds, popping in and out of cover to avoid fire from the rest. While she fired, she watched for any hint of weakness. The only thing she saw was a tiny opalescent shimmer each time a bullet impacted the thing’s shields. “What the fuck is the deal here?”

It walked passed a table, its shields melting away a corner of the plastic top that intruded upon their envelope.

“Oh crap.” The snake wrapped itself around her neck, hissing in pleasure at the rabbit-quick thump of her pulse against its coils. “Come on, Shepard. Think.” Then . . . understanding. The shimmer was her bullets vaporizing upon impact. An incendiary shield. No wonder it didn’t go down.

“The mechs have incendiary shields, C-Sec,” she shouted. “Any ideas?”

“I get this fucking barrier down and get you out of there?” He slammed a fist against the barrier then pulled back and cleared his throat. He raked his talons over his fringe. “Sorry, Shepard. Not helping.” He rumbled deep in his throat, and swiped at the upper plate of his mouth with the back of his hand. “Cryo?”

She grinned, a cool breath of relief whispering through her. It might just work if the shield made their chassis run hot. “Worth a shot.” Unclipping two grenades from her belt, she set them for magnetic grapple and cryo detonation. Holding her breath, she sent out a vague prayer and lobbed one straight at the mech’s chest, detonating the charge as soon as it hit. Jubilation and relief combined into a heady brew as slivers of frost sliced up the metal plating on its body, the metal cracking in the split second before the whole thing blew apart. Pieces rained down on her, tendrils of smoke drifting up from where they landed on the deck plating.

“Yes! You’re a genius, C-Sec.”

A chime sounded. Shepard popped up over her cover to see a new enemy drone wink into being. An overload winked it right back out. A smile drifted across her lips. Felt good to attack something and just kill it. Proof of at least basic competency.

She looked down at her belt. Five grenades left, seven mechs. She tossed the second grenade. The mech dropped into a roll, but not quickly enough. Another one down, but the snake whispered, as it slid its coils over her skin. The mechs were learning.

“No time to get complacent. Need to keep surprising them.”

Leaning back against the crate, thighs shaking and burning with the strain of remaining crouched for so long, Shepard flipped through possibilities. The next time, the mech would anticipate and move before she could detonate. She might be able to fake them out once, but it would wreak havoc with her accuracy.

She grabbed a chunk of metal and stood, throwing the garbage at the nearest mech. When it rolled to evade the fake grenade, she tracked it, hitting it dead on the side of the head with the real thing. It blew just as it regained its feet. Three down. “There you go, Shepard,” she muttered to herself. “You’re never trapped. Not any more.”

She heard Droney go down and respawned it just in time for the fabricator to spit another one out as well. She remained focused on the remaining mechs, letting the drones deal with one another. As one, the mechs stepped forward, walking slowly, but she had maybe a minute before they overran her position. Still, the fear withdrew, leaving her calm, her muscles regaining some strength. The room, her thoughts, and what she needed to do all crystallized in the quiet left behind.
“Tell me that barrier is down!”

“We’re going to use one of the demolition charges to blow it,” Tali told her. “You’ll want to move to cover at the far end of the room.”

“Roger that.” She glanced up. The left side of the room presented her best chance to get by the mech advance, but maybe . . . if she could move quickly enough . . . . Yes. Surety calmed her hands, and she hung Roger on her back. If she could claim to have an element, it would be certain death situations.

*Like the proverbial pig in the mud, Janey.*

She pulled two more grenades, set them and then charged out of cover, bolting straight for the furthest two mechs on the right. A wild grin crept across her face as she saw her opening. A table and chairs forced the mechs to separate, circling around either side. Hollering a wordless challenge, she leaped up onto the table, dropping the grenades onto the top of their heads before springing into a forward somersault. She hit the ground behind them hands first, tucking into a roll that brought her straight back up on her feet.

“Thank you, Mrs. Johnson and ninth grade phys. ed.”

Two strides carried her to the computer core, the grenades’ blast waves giving her a helpful little shove into cover as they blew the mechs apart, peppering her back with shrapnel. She covered her head and waited for the debris to stop raining down, peering out from under her hands when it did.

Shepard scrambled to her feet and leaned out to survey the room. She pushed aside relief that her gambit had worked and started trying to figure out how best to take out the last three.

Then the far side of the room erupted into fire and smoke, chunks of prefab and rock blasting across to smash into the core and hammer huge dents into the wall. A twisted piece of the door frame parted Shepard’s hair and sank more than a foot into the metal and bedrock behind her.

“Holy living fuck, people!” she shouted, her heart hammering in her throat as she looked up at the piece of metal pressed against her face. “The words I think you were looking for are ‘fire in the hole’.” A deep tremor settled into Shepard’s hands, but she clenched them into fists a couple of times, then shook them out.

*Survive seven of the scariest mechs of all time just to be taken out by my own people. Not cool!*

A quick inventory of her body revealed all parts intact and no more aches and pains than she’d had the moment before. A survey of the room showed only one mech remaining, the other two cut down by flying debris. Gathering the shards of her shattered nerves around her, she built them into a diamond shell. One left and then she could go the hell home.

“Sorry, Shepard,” Tali called over the clatter of settling rubble. “My knowledge of demolitions is theory. Quarians don’t usually blow things up.”

Ignoring Tali, she drew herself up as tall as she could, erecting armour, chinking pieces into place in time with her breath. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five. Gradually the chaos and swirling mess of emotions and thoughts sweeping through her calmed. “Better. Warrior inside and out. Now, take this fucking thing out, Shepard.”

Squaring her shoulders, she settled her armour in place then slapped her omnitool, bringing up Garrus’s fantastic shields of doom. A fierce smile slashed across her face as they buzzed to life around her, the charge strong enough to lift the hair on the back of her neck. “Sorry Garrus, but it’s
time for the sexy hotness of death.” She shrugged Roger back into her hand, loading him for cryo rounds. Taking the mech’s bullets in stride, she just clenched her jaw and closed on the damned thing.

Quite a lot of damage from the explosion showed on the mech’s chassis, buoying her confidence. “Come on, you mother, go down.” Volley after volley, overloads, sabotage, she gritted her teeth, and whittled away at it, praying its shields died before she did.

In a flash of hellish red aura, the mech’s shields fell, widening Shepard’s smile into a grimace. Glancing down to check her footing, she spotted her last grenade. How she forgotten that? Snatching it off her belt, she thumbed the controls to set it.

“All right you fucker,” she growled. Sprinting forward, she leaped over the remains of the blasted out table, the grenade aimed for a cranny just above the mech’s hip. Perfect aim jammed the device in with all the force of her charge, spinning her a little as she charged past.

Then a metal vice-like grip clamped down on her wrist, wrenching her backwards. Before she even recognized that it had grabbed her, the mech dropped into a roll. Ligaments shredding, her shoulder joint let go with a terrible crunch. Instinct kicked in as her body recognized the impending loss of its limb even though her brain shorted out, adrenaline pouring into her blood to numb the pain. Popping her shoulder even further, she stepped up onto a fallen chair and threw herself into a back flip. The movement wrenched her wrist free of the mech’s grip and she dove for cover, the exploding grenade flinging her right over it and into a wall.

“Shepard!” Garrus and Tali called out at the same time.

She dragged herself up onto a hip and then across to take cover behind the crate, dead arm scraping through the debris and thick layer of dust on the floor. The mech lay in pieces around the room, but the drones just kept coming. Forcing herself up off the floor an inch at a time, she leaned against the crate and took a foggy inventory. One good arm, fried shields . . .. She looked down at her dead arm. Omnitool doing a great impersonation of a complete write off.

A sudden surge of nausea sent her rolling onto her stomach as what little remained of breakfast that morning made an encore appearance. Pain spiked out from her shoulder, each new shard of agony prompting another heave.

“You’ve got to get control of the pain, Janey. You’re going to go into shock. Wrap it up. Package it all up tight. You’ve done it before. Concentrate. Those drones aren’t going to wait for you to stop puking.

“Shepard, are you all right?” Garrus called again, his voice taut and sub-vocals flat, panic slipping through the layers of practiced C-Sec and turian stoicism. “Come on, answer me.” Gunfire followed his words, telling her why the drones hadn’t killed her yet.

She breathed through the dry heaves, coating over the pain with layer after layer of thick, cool cement, walling it away. It was an old trick . . . a very old trick, but it served its purpose and then pain faded enough that the vomiting eased.

Rolling over, she wiped her mouth on her gauntlet. “Damned thing almost pulled my arm off, give me a fucking break, C-Sec.” She sat up, the room dipping and swaying around her. “Why aren’t you in here? We’re supposed to get trapped in these situations together.” She looked over at the doorway and answered her own question. Their demolition charge had brought down a good ton of rock along with the barrier. “It’s tradition.” She wobbled, the wall cracking, letting her shoulder’s screaming through. “I don’t feel so good.”
“You still have three drones closing on you.” His arm reached through the cleared space at the
top, overloading one.

Taking several deep breaths, Shepard slathered more cement over the crack and forced herself up
onto her knees. Resting Roger on the top of the crate, she sprayed fire over the line of drones,
praying that a few of her bullets hit the damned fabricator. She lasted twenty seconds before she
sank down on her heels to lean against the crate. Her leg muscles shook so hard with fatigue and
shock she knew she had moments before they dumped her on the floor and left her there.

Peering around the edge of the crate, she watched Garrus take out another couple of the drones,
shooting over Tali and Legion’s heads as they shoved at the rubble, trying to clear enough to get
inside. She scanned the room, focusing on the far wall as the swirling balls of light and force fields
blinking out. A shimmer thickened the air in the far right hand corner.

“Shepard, back corner. Your right,” Garrus called.

“Yep, I see it. Concentrate your fire there.” She bullied herself up onto her knees as her good arm
lifted Roger back into place.

“Please, let this end it,” she whispered as her finger squeezed the trigger. Using rapid bursts of
three rounds, she peppered the corner with bullets. The shimmer became more pronounced under
direct fire, but the damned thing’s shields held. “It’s got redundant emitters, like the door,” she
called back over her shoulder.

An idea sparked. Rotating emitters drained a hell of a lot of power, way too much to be practical
anywhere but a land base. Rotating emitters and constantly spawning and controlling three drones
. . . that had to be sucking up the juice at a prodigious rate.

“Keep the bloody drones off me for a second.” Ducking down, Shepard set Roger on the floor.
Grinding her teeth together, she grabbed the wrist of her dead arm, lifting it up to rest on her knee.
A piercing scream ripped past her clenched jaw as the shards of her shoulder rasped against one
another, crunching ominously as it rotated. Shoving back the pain, she tried to open her omnitool.
Definitely dead.

“Shepard!” Garrus called. “Drones trying to flank you from both sides. Legion, take out the one
on the left.” Their fire increased.

“Garrus, scan that corner, watch for power fluctuations as it spawns the drones.”

Leaving her arm resting on her thigh, Shepard snatched her rifle off the ground, opening fire just
as the first of the drones made it around the right side of her crate. It went down with a
complaining sizzle, but another followed right behind it. A small barrage of bullets that must have
overheated Garrus’s rifle brought the deadly little hologram down.

“You’re right, Shepard. The shield emitters reroute to the fabricator. We should be able to take it
out.” His rifle drowned out the end of his sentence as he opened fire once more.

“We’ve got you, you bastard,” she growled. “Tali, are you and Legion still there?”

“We are,” the quarian said, deep, rapid breaths that lacing through the words. Wounded, or just
exhausted? Shepard pushed that aside.

“Excellent. Incoming data for an overload to your omnis. It’s going to take all of us to pull that
thing’s shield down.” She settled Roger into the crook of her arm. “Lets try to take out all three
drones at the same time. Then, the moment the power level shifts, hit it with your overloads..”
“Tali ready.”

“Legion in position, Shepard-Captain.”

“Garrus in position.”

“Okay, let’s end this. Garrus, the furthest right, Tali and Legion, the center one. I’ll take the last.” She stood and opened fire, the drones sizzling and sparking under the barrage. Hers let out a death whine and blinked out a split second after the other two. “Now!”

In a light show worthy of Armistice Day, all three overloads hit at once. The device exploded, the shockwave slamming into Shepard like a massive fist, driving all the air from her body in a shriek of anguish. It threw her back three metres. She crashed into the floor and slid another metre on her ass before slamming into a wall. A thin shrill of pain bludgeoned its way up her throat despite her lack of air, and for a moment the room faded to an even murkier grey, lightning strikes of absolute black streaking across her vision.

Groaning, she raised her head from the prefab floor just long enough to ensure the damned thing was dead, then collapsed. Every muscle in her body trembled and complained, fatigue and pain settling in, deep and implacable as the adrenaline began to leach from her blood.

“I need a nap,” she mumbled, letting her eyes close.

“Shepard!” The scrape and scramble of a large body being shoved through a small entrance preceded the hollow, metal drum beat of running feet. Garrus hit the floor next to her. “Spirits, you just don’t know how to duck, do you? I think Wrex might be right about how much krogan you’ve got in you.”

She opened her eyes and let out a weak, bitter laugh. “Yeah.” Looking past him to Legion and Tali, Shepard clenched her teeth and forced herself to sit up. Her shoulder throbbed, the pain ebbing as it swelled inside her armour, lack of circulation dulling the bayonets to fists. “You two grab that drone fabricator and one of those mechs. They aren’t Alliance, and they’re far more advanced than anything I’ve seen.”

“Very good, Captain,” a familiar voice called. “You don’t disappoint. Your mind and your fighting skills are as keen as I’ve heard.”

Daggers of black ice slid under Shepard’s skin. “Help me up.” Grabbing hold of Garrus, she used him to scramble up to her feet and turned to face a badly broken up, but recognizable holographic form. “You?”

After a moment of staring at Armistan Banes’s flickering image, she pushed away from Garrus, staggering forward a step. The Cerberus operative’s hologram stood a couple of metres in front of the computer that had spawned the drones. The polished suit, pretentious air, and cigarette remained unchanged since their last conversation, and she wondered if he somehow just dry cleaned himself. Maybe no one real existed behind the holo-face at all.

“Armistan Banes?” Garrus asked.

Shepard nodded. “Banes? This was you?” Try as she might to force all the frozen darkness into her voice, she knew it came out weak and slapped from shock. Disbelief warred with the proof right before her eyes. “How? You can’t be here. Did you do this?”

He swept into a low bow. “Not the VI, of course. That was merely a fortuitous malfunction of life. Hurrah for humanity that you’re so very efficient in your killing.”
She gestured toward the mechs and drone emitter. “How the hell did you get these in here? And why?” She took a step, but the knee shuddered, threatening to dump her on the floor. Everything suddenly just turned on its head, making no sense. “What the hell, Banes?” She threw her hand up to gesture to her shoulder. “I’ll warn you. If you’re trying to kill me, it’s not easy.”

“As I can quite plainly see.” He chuckled and took a long drag on his cigarette. “I assure you, we aren’t trying to kill you, Captain. Think of this little exercise as . . .” He made a show of thinking that ended with a caricature of enlightenment. The proverbial light bulb. “. . . data collection. You’re an anomaly, Captain, one that my employer wants to know absolutely everything about.”

She sighed and wrapped her good arm around her stomach. “Tell him to come and speak to me in person. I’ll show him exactly how much I appreciate being run around and tortured like some sort of lab rat.”

Banes shrugged, the gesture so casual and flippant that Shepard took a step toward the hologram, fully willing to put a fist through it just for emphasis. Fury boiled in her guts, sour and acidic, bubbling up into her throat.

Banes stepped toward her. “You live a dangerous life, Shepard. I suggest you don’t spend too much energy worrying about my employer. So, he ran you through a little test.” He took a drag off the cigarette, his shoulders lifting along with the inhale. “You came through alive in a most impressive fashion. Get over it, chalk it up to science, and move on.”

“Science,” Shepard deadpanned. “Is that why you’re here? Scoop up whatever remains of the VI and pat yourselves on the back for your invention?” She scoffed, flipping her good hand at him in a dismissive wave. “Good luck with that, Banes. Just keep the hell away from me, or as soon as I end Saren, I’ll start a whole new hunt.”

Banes let out a long-suffering sigh. “So small minded. I honestly expected better from you, Captain. You appeared to show some capacity for creativity.” He paced a little, flicking the end of his cigarette in a steady rhythm. “What most people fail to comprehend about science, Captain, is how laughably small the percentage of true invention is. John of Salisbury said it far more poetically than Newton, ‘We are like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants. We see more, and things that are more distant, than they did, not because our sight is superior or because we are taller than they, but because they raise us up, and by their great stature add to ours.’” The hologram paced a few steps and back. “Invention is not people in white smocks hunched over microscopes; it is following trails to find treasures unseen by others. It’s about setting up cause and effect to coincide with perfect timing.”

Shepard shifted to her other hip. “Really? Sweet baby Jesus, you do love the sound of your own voice, don’t you, Banes?” Exhaustion dripped through her cells, epoxy setting her in place. It felt as though a week had passed since they landed on Luna. “Great villain monologue, though. Kudos. Right now, I just want to know if you sabotaged the VI, killing dozens of good men and women?”

The hologram fizzled for a moment as Banes laughed. “No. We found out about it the same moment you did. We’re merely here to investigate the possibilities for discovery.” He shrugged, a mocking, ugly gesture. “Well, and to get a good look at the infamous Captain Jane Shepard in action. Thank you for a very entertaining demonstration, Shepard. We’ll speak again soon, I feel certain.” His image blinked and folded in on itself, disappearing.

Shepard straightened and staggered into the computer core a couple of feet to her right. Catching herself, she leaned against the solid wing, trying to will energy into her muscles. Without Banes there to focus her anger, even that washed away, leaving her shaking, cold, and wishing for
medigel.

Only a little further, Janey. The mission is over, just make it back to the ship.

Garrus wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her tight in against his side. “Normandy, we need a medevac in bunker three.” He glanced back at Tali. “You and Legion have this?”

The quarian looked up from the bolt she was sawing through and gave him a jaunty if sloppy salute. “We’ll have this and a couple mechs on board within thirty minutes. Hopefully we can find a couple with different terminal damage.”

“Call Ashley’s team to back them up, just in case,” Shepard said, forcing the words out, her tongue too thick and slow, her ability to think swept away by the pain.

Shepard let Garrus do most of the work involved in keeping her upright as they waited for a stretcher.

“How are you doing?” he asked, his voice tender.

“I feel as though I hired on as the assistant to a near-sighted knife thrower in some nightmarish carnival, Garrus. Thanks for asking.”

He chuckled and nuzzled her temple. “Dr. Chakwas will get you sorted.” He reached up, opening a channel. “Nihlus, Shepard has been wounded. I’m taking her back to the Normandy.”

The next moment, Shepard’s earpiece signalled an incoming transmission from Nihlus. “Are you all right?”

She lifted her good hand to her opposite ear. “Yeah, fine. Just played Rock ‘em, Sock ‘em Robots with a mech that demonstrated a surprising gift for hand to hand. Wrap things up here. I’ll be out of med bay by the time you get back to the ship.”

Shepard awoke to a quiet, dim med bay. Pillows cradled her head and bad shoulder, supporting the regen cage. Shifting ever so slightly, she tested her body out. Sore, but tolerable. Either the painkillers hadn’t worn off, or she’d slept through the worst of it. That misconception lasted until she tried to throw the blanket off. A small pack of invisible varren burst through a hole in the universe and sank their teeth into her flesh, heads whipping back and forth as they fought over the choicest parts.

Gasping, she decided to stay as still as possible. “How long have I been here?” she asked, spotting the doctor sitting at her desk. Looking around, she realized she was the only occupant. Dread burst in her gut like a tiny nova. “Chase. Is Chase okay?”

“Take it easy,” Dr. Chakwas said, pushing up out of her chair. She walked over, the ever-present omnitool flaring to life. “Things are healing well, but pay attention to the pain. It’s there for a reason, Shepard, and no, that reason is not to dare you to endure as much of it as you can.”

“Chase, Doctor. How is she?” Anger pushed back against the dread.

The doctor held out a hand she seemed to think would keep Shepard from leaping out of bed and doing something crazy. Similarly, she kept her voice soft and low, almost uncharacteristically sympathetic. “We transferred her to the medical facility at Alliance headquarters in Vancouver. A bullet shattered a lumbar vertebrae and damaged her spinal cord. She’s paralyzed, but with
treatment, she’s expected to recover very well. Now, relax. Soldiers get injured in the course of duty. It is a reality that I am all too familiar with. She is getting the best treatment humanity has to offer, and her family is with her.”

She offered the hand to help Shepard sit up. “You, on the other hand, have been here for two days. I had to do some very delicate surgery to save your arm, but it is mending nicely.”

“And the rest of the team? Was anyone else injured?” Shepard pulled herself up gingerly, moving every body part as if it were made of spun sugar.

The doctor helped steady her on the edge of the bed. “Tali’Zorah suffered a few scratches and bumps, but other than a fever that has nearly resolved itself, and a very overbearing father, she’s fine. Urdnot Wrex took a rocket to the chest, but his armour and plating took most of the damage. Apparently, the wound will improve his sexual appeal.” She shrugged. “Everyone else came back intact.” Her hand rose to her ear. “Officer Vakarian, your charge is awake and ready to return to her quarters.”

“Charge?” Shepard slipped down off the bed but just leaned heavily against it, waiting to see if her legs would hold her before striking out. “I swear I’m going to build a brig. Everyone who gets sassy with me goes in. Bread and water. Thirty days.” Worry about Chase and Tali darkened her humor, souring it enough that she winced. Dr. Chakwas didn’t deserve her bitchiness.

“Sign me up, I have a shelf of medical journals waiting to be read.” The doctor’s mouth twitched at the corners, threatening to break into a full-blown smile. She regained control of the insurrection with the help of distraction as the med bay door opened.

Garrus stepped through looking every bit the cop performing a prisoner transfer. “Vakarian reporting to take custody of the patient, Doctor,” he said, his voice brisk and official.

Chakwas stood stiffly at parade rest. “I surrender Captain Shepard to your custody, Officer. She’s a crafty one. Don’t let her talk you into letting her out of bed until we arrive at the Citadel. Understood?” She gave him a curt nod, one corner of her mouth twitching again.

“Yes, ma’am.” A turian salute sealed the deal, then Garrus turned to face Shepard, holding an arm out toward the door. “After you, Captain.”

“Brig!” Shepard called out loud enough that it echoed off the walls. “Someone build me a damned brig!” She walked around the end of the bed, her one hand clinging to it just in case her knees went ahead with their threats to dump her on the floor with her ass in the air. A fitting punishment for the hours of endless fighting.

Garrus only let her suffer for a few steps before he moved in and wrapped a strong, gentle arm around her. “Little wobbly?” When she nodded, he squeezed her. “We’ll get you sorted in time to dock on the Citadel.”

She slipped her arm around his waist, leaning into him as they stepped out the door. “We better. I have errands and a date with my boyfriend tomorrow.” When they made it to her quarters, she sank gratefully onto the end of her bed. “Remind me to thank Armistan Banes and his employer for those mechs. I was doing so well with the whole not getting injured thing, too. Someone set the no workplace injuries sign back to zero.”

Garrus cleared his throat. “I had to go down to Alliance headquarters and dropped by to see Addison. She’s in really good spirits and her doctors say she’s responding very well.” He smiled and shrugged. “She says she’s going to be back in uniform before the year’s out. You, on the other
hand, I’m going to start wrapping in packing bubbles and just roll you into battle.”

“Hey! Other than scrapes and bruises, I haven’t been hurt since Feros.” Shepard bristled.
“Considering how many people try to kill me on the average day, I think that’s pretty impressive.”
She held out her good arm for him to help her lay down.

“I suppose that’s true,” Garrus grumbled. He placed a couple of pillows to cushion her shoulder then helped her get settled. He pulled up the blankets, tucking her in. “Here,” he said, passing her a large, insulated cup. “I figured you’d be too tired to eat, but Dr. Chakwas wanted you to get some protein into you before you sleep. I mixed protein powder into your chocolate drink.”

Shepard made a face. “That sounds disgusting.” She tried to peer in the small hole.

“Alenko tried it, said it tasted fine.” He nodded for her to drink it. “Go on, we have maybe three days until we’re fighting again. Drink. You need to heal.”

“Fine.” Letting out a long-suffering sigh, she took a sip. Chocolate—hot, sweet, and creamy—flowed over her tongue, prompting a long moan of pleasure. Delicious didn’t even begin to cover how good it was. “Sweet baby Jesus, Garrus . . . what sort of evil alchemy is this?” She took another long draught followed by an even more decadent moan. “What is that other flavour? It’s fruity, but . . .” After several sips, she gave up trying to identify it. “Oh, who cares, I may never eat again and just live off this.”

He grinned at the praise. “Dr. Chakwas gave me a list of the nutrients you needed. Milk, the protein/enzyme powder, and two varieties of berries covered them all.”

“Well, whatever they are, you could patent this, make a small fortune.” Giving him a wink, she nodded toward his spot on the bed. “You going to join me?”

He sat next to her hip. “I should sleep on the cot, Shepard. I don’t want to bounce your shoulder around.” A smile softened his words. “But, on my brief trip to Earth to pick up our Kodiak drop shuttle—I note you didn’t ask why I went to Alliance headquarters—I got a chance to pick something up that I think you’ll appreciate.” He reached into his armour, pulling out a hardcover book bound in leather.

The new shuttle warred with the book for her attention, the book winning handily. She’d been in a thousand shuttles. “Oh, what is that?” She held out her hand, reaching for the book, but he shook his head and pulled it back.

“Drink your supper, and if you’re a very good girl, I’ll read you a story before lights out.” He turned away and strode over to get his cot.

Shepard cackled. “You’re so asking for it when I can pummel you again, Officer Wise-assless, but I meant it about no cot.” She grinned at the sound that came from his sub-vocals. “I’ll sleep against the wall.”

He scowled at her, his brow plates lowering. “Shepard, I don’t want you to wake up stuck.” His mandibles fluttered a little as she watched him struggle to find a gentle way to reference her hatred of being closed in.

“Come here.” She held out her hand. When he didn’t move, she raised her eyebrows. “Don’t get insubordinate with me, Garrus. Come here.” When he obeyed and sat next to her on the bed, she took his hand. “There are things more important than pain and fear.” She sat up and pressed her hand against his cheek. “You are one of those things. I don’t care if you bump my shoulder in the
night. I don’t care if I wake up and have a moment of panic because I need to crawl out. Your presence makes up for all of that. Okay?”

He nodded, but the set of his jaw told her that the discussion would never end. So obstinate.

“So, go get changed, and lets get some sleep.” She gave him a gentle shove. “Go on. I won’t peek, I promise.” Answering his rumble with a bright smile, Shepard cocked an eyebrow. “What? You want me to peek? Why, Officer, you’re a member of my crew. That would be completely inappropriate.”

“Yes, because being your bed warmer and babysitter is so very appropriate. Just lay down. Impossible woman.” He walked over to the cot and began popping the seals on his armour, stacking it beside the cot as he stripped down. “I should shower.”

Shepard lay down, settling herself as comfortably as possible. “But then I’ll be asleep when you’re done. I want my story, mister.” She closed her eyes, giving him some semblance of privacy. “Shower after.”

One minute later, the mattress lowered under his weight as he crawled up to lay next to her. “Very well. You did kick some serious ass. You deserve your story.” He lay half-inclined against the wall, angled so she could rest her head in the curve of his shoulder.

Shepard wriggled in, not minding the twinges from her shoulder. As she’d told him, some things were worth a little pain.

He opened the book. “My human common is a little rough.”

“I don’t care.” She closed her eyes, relaxing into him.

“Okay.” He leaned in to nuzzle her brow, then let out a long breath. “It was about eleven o’clock in the morning, mid October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills.” (1)

Shepard chuckled and nestled in, sleepy and suddenly a little giddy. “The Big Sleep . . ..” She sighed. “You’re the most amazing torin.”

“Are you going to let me read?”

She nodded. “Sorry.”

He cleared his throat a little. “I was wearing my powder-blue suit, with dark blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black bro . . . gu . . . es, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn’t care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars.” (2)

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(1) and (2) are excerpts from The Big Sleep by Raymond Chandler. 1939. Published in the public domain in Canada on 11 January, 2011 by Project Gutenberg Canada ebook #696.

**Targismar** -- The most vile curse in any turian dialect. Has its origins in turian prehistoric rituals involving the disgracing and execution of enemies.
Mass Effect - Future Imperfect Chapter Fifty

Chapter Summary

So, what was in that message sent through the beacons, anyway?

Before Garrus made it to the end of the third page, Shepard lost her battle against her most intractable enemy. Her eyelids surrendered first, but within moments, Garrus’s voice faded into silence, sleep proving the victor.

Deep in the liminal twilight, the horrors from the beacon stretched, waking from a long day of careful and deliberate burial. Reaching out, they tangled themselves up in the history and terror that hitchhiked along with the cipher out of the Thorian’s mind. Together, they created a mire that sucked Shepard down from nightmare to nightmare all night long.

A soft note of song, a wisp of honey-gold, drifted through, weaving a path that guided Shepard between images. Slowing the never-ending loop, the song allowed Shepard to recognize some of the flashes as memories.

“Would you understand?” the song asked, the rachni queen’s eerie whisper echoing through the darkness. “Would you see what has been burned onto your soul?”

Setix 7.3, 89997 of Tapek Menru

Notes of pure colour, ripe with both taste and perfume, drifted through her dream, painting every barren landscape she visited in nostalgic, pastel hues of longing and regret. The song buoyed her up, carrying her over ruined city after ruined city, lying still, all their inhabitants long dead. Nothing left now. At least not on any ground upon which she once marched.

It’s been so long since I heard a rachni sing. Thank you for this gift, although it seems a shame to waste it upon a dead empire. You sing beauty for a people shattered, worlds destroyed, many of them for nearly a century. The Prothean Empire sleeps within this room, singing queen. I and my family are all that remain.

Shepard jerked awake, every particle of her body screaming with the virulent, electric cepra-sting of blood tearing down the collapsed arteries, veins, and capillaries of a dead limb. Shaking her head, then her hands, she climbed out of her nest of blankets and walked to the window. Her fingers burrowed into her armpits, taking refuge against the predawn chill. The early sun had just begun to brush a million shades of vermillion, gold, and champagne over the tops of the clouds, promising a beautiful day. Perhaps, somewhere, a rachni still sang the sweet and melancholy arias of her kind in memory of what had been.

A beautiful day on a world so dead that it lay fifty cycles abandoned, the ground salted and scorched, even the monsters fleeing for kinder shores.

Why then did her heart sit dead and chill, a lump of rock and ice nestled tight against her spine? She glanced at the timekeeper next to her nest. Three hours before her wakeup. The Senarium
wasn’t due to leave on their mission for five setixs. And where had Merol gone? She liked to tease her mate that he loved his sleep even more than he loved her, but he’d risen before she. Reading his traces, she trailed her fingers over the table and door control, discovering no need to fear for his safety. No doubt, he’d proven as unsettled about their mission as she, and went for a walk. A scientist never wearied of exploration, or so he claimed.

She sighed, the tightness in her belly betraying her, sending silken threads of fear and rage . . . and sorrow shooting through her soul, binding it in shackles she could ill afford. Soldiers did grow weary. Oh, so very weary.

Sorrow. She paced across the small chamber to her meditation bowl, folding down to sit on her heels beside it. Sorrow, like a virus, infected everything. She plunged her hands into the water, scrubbing them. She possessed more than enough misery of her own, but that place . . . those ruins lamented as keenly as if they had been fashioned of pure suffering.

She chose to hide within its skeletal remains because such horrors had been visited upon its population that ghosts tread thickly through the ruins, screaming their pain and fury into the clouds. Even the monsters avoided it. The planet kept them safe while they waited, but it proved a hard world upon which to maintain one’s equilibrium. So many layers of terror, despair, and hopelessness clung to every surface that not even gloves helped. If she didn’t wash and meditate every couple of setixs, Merol proclaimed her impossible to live with and sent her to the bowl. Attit, the last living son of their mating cycle refused to set foot off their ship. She couldn’t blame him. He didn’t possess defenses forged during long cycles of coping with the horrific, psychic alluvium that the Reapers spewed over all they touched.

Courage of my antecessors, uphold me, strengthen me for the task ahead. My bones are old. The children from my first and median mating cycles are long dead, even my beautiful Giran gone ahead to light the way. Grant me your courage to face this last task, to plunge the spear into the heart of the monster . . . to help the young fight the battle that we have lost.

Nerves. Yes, nerves explained the cold creeping through her, weakening her to the fear. For nearly forty cycles, like an arrow released from a bow, her life had soared toward one goal, one target. Much hung in the balance. Opportunities for failure lurked out beyond the planned and anticipated. Success relied on her forgetting all that rode upon her actions, clearing her mind and heart to focus on the task.

Her fingers danced across the blissfully blank silence of the water.

So many cycles of running. She allowed the memories of pitch battles, narrow escapes, and dying friends to wash through her and into the bowl. On the last day of her war, of the Senarium’s war, she didn’t need the weight of an entire galaxy of dead hanging from her soul. To succeed, she needed to be more clever, quicker, tougher, and more focused than she had ever been.

She smiled. “That’s saying something for a female my age.”

Would you leave Giran behind as well? Just place her in the shard and walk away?

No, not Giran, eldest of her mating with Merol. Never Giran, so brave and proud, fighting to the last where so many succumbed, her spirit the brightest light in the heavens.

The door opened, and she smiled without opening her eyes. “You too?”

The familiar, solid presence of her mate knelt on the opposite side of the bowl, his fingers splashing softly in the water as he washed his hands. “Went for a walk,” he said, then let out a long
breath. “I had orchestrated a plan to rejoin you under the blankets, stirring you from your sleep with soft words and softer touches.” He sighed, but she could hear his smile bleeding through. “However, I’m sure meditation will prove more advantageous to mission success.”

She smiled and flicked water at him. “Then hush and meditate.” Instead, his hands closed around hers, and she opened her eyes. “This isn’t meditation.”

He nodded, golden eyes staring into hers. “We fly into the talons and jaws of the enemy in a few setixs. It would be very selfish for me to want to spend them in the arms of the mother of my last children.”

She met his gaze, allowing gratitude for many cycles of love and companionship to warm her regard. Meditation would prove more useful to their mission than passion. A settled, focused mind could be the difference between those being the last moments they spend alone together or living out the cycles remaining to them. A soft, understanding smile touched her lips, and she squeezed his fingers. For a moment, the soldier waged war with the mate of forty cycles, the mate winning. Regardless of preparation or skill, the cold fact remained that those moments could well be their last together. One did not get the gift of clinging to long-held, pretty illusions when fighting Reapers.

“Yes, it would,” she answered at last, “but seeing as we are the last two living souls on this planet, I believe a little selfishness will escape reproach.” She stood, pulling Merol up, and led him to the nest of blankets in the corner.

**Setix 19.5, 89997 of Tapek Menru**

“.2 setix to the relay.” Shepard spun her chair around in the small cockpit and pulled out a panel on the console next to her. She scanned the technology wired into it for the hundredth time. Each of the previous four missions, she’d checked it compulsively. Each time, it operated perfectly, tricking the relays into identifying their tiny frigate as a Reaper destroyer. Still, her innate distrust of anything spawned from those nightmares expected it to betray them any moment.

“It is still perfectly integrated, scrubbed, and calibrated,” Merol said, letting out a long-suffering sigh that trilled in a most delicious way across her shoulders and down her spine. His fingers stroked down the back of her neck, his touch calming her nerves as it always did.

She pressed into it for a moment, then straightened. “Very well. I will attempt to stop worrying.” She turned to the jump computer and keyed in the transit mass and destination. “We’re ready for relay intersect.”

“A single Reaper is entering scanning range, not yet moving to intercept, but it is headed for the relay. A straggler?” Merol reached over and gripped her shoulder inside the pauldron of her armour. “It is time, haksaya kubenar. Time to make sure that four people aren’t sitting in our position at the end of the next cycle. The last four citizens of a shattered empire.”

She reached up and pressed her hand over his. “For Giran.”

“For our beautiful girl, and for them all,” he agreed, pulling back.

“Approaching the relay. Locked on.” Shepard opened a channel to engineering. “We are preparing to jump. Secure your safety harnesses. I do not know what we will face on the other side of the relay.”
“Understood, Commander,” Attit replied, his deep voice a comfort. “Dampening fields are active and functioning at full capacity. Emission sinks performing at optimal.”

“Very good.” Shepard checked and rechecked the jump information as they closed in on the relay, aware that she used the activity to mask her uncertainty. Uncertainty . . . she’d lived her cycles bonded to it closer than any mate. It lay beside her in bed as a child, waiting and watching for her parents to return to the bunker. It coached her through her training and thrust her to the highest rank and honours the Prothean Empire bestowed. It toweled the sweat from her neck while she brought all six of her children into the universe, and it held her hand as she buried five. Now, it warned her to be wary. Very, very wary.

She opened the channel to Peduk. “Report, Second Commander. Weapons systems?”

“The ship’s core is primed and ready for detonation should our defenses not prove sufficient,” the soldier, the last surviving member of Shepard’s unit, said. She sounded nervous. On their approach to the Citadel, Shepard reminded herself to make sure Peduk took time to meditate. “Plasma rifles charged and ready once we land, Commander.”

“Thank you. Attaining relay acceleration in six, five, four, three, two, one.”

“Courage of our antecessors, uphold us,” Merol whispered, his voice trembling, but to such a small degree that Shepard knew only she would recognize it. “Strengthen us for the task ahead. We cannot fail, or all those who have sacrificed so much will call their blood poorly spent.”

Shepard drew in a deep breath, her chest aching, so great was the love she felt as her mate set his courage into the flood. Her Merol might be a scientist rather than a soldier, but his heart rivaled those of even the great commanders. No, it bested them, for at the core of Harrap, Maldok, and Javik, passion had long ago turned to dust, leaving nothing but death and vengeance behind. That Merol could be the last and care so much . . . it both warmed her and illuminated how many pieces of her own soul the war had carved away.

She reached for the stealth controls. “Are we registering any Reaper signatures on the scanners?” Shepard checked the dampeners to find them functioning perfectly, just as Attit reported. If the scanners read clear, she could activate the stealth, and all any Reapers would detect was an empty ship, floating through space.

“Scanners are clear. The vanguard must be docked with the Citadel.” Merol reported. He leaned back in his seat and smiled at her. “Now to drift with the wreckage.”

Her answering smile felt tight, more like baring her teeth, and she pulsed the thrusters a little to turn the bow toward the Citadel. Keeping the rhythm sporadic, she imitated the death throes of a wreck very much like those floating throughout the nebula. Victims of a last, great battle fought more than a quarter century before.

So many brave souls dead, their courage and strength reduced to a jest, a cold, heartless joke. Her heart cried out for vengeance, but the exquisite pain strengthened her resolve, sending molten metal flowing through her veins to ignite the fire at her core. What had felt like a lump of frozen rock that morning, roared awake, beating hard and steady. Her people would find justice, even if only through the many generations to come.

Pieces of a massive ship appeared in the ports, a ship all too familiar in its lines. Shepard jumped up and leaned over the console, straining to get closer, to see it more clearly through the nebular dust. “The Terror,” she whispered. The fury turned rabid. Eight cycles she’d served the greatest fleet commander in the prothean navy as his second-in-command of The Terror, the largest and
most powerful dreadnought in the navy. Dozens of battles against every sort of Reaper from oculus to capital ship, *The Terror* never met with defeat. So many friends . . .

_They died twenty-five cycles ago in a battle that you already knew resulted in their deaths._

Still, rage ate at her, burning up all reason and caution. She sat, her hands hovering over the controls, shaking with the desire to throw off the cowardly ruse and fly into the jaws of death fighting. Was it not better to meet her antecessors charging the enemy, fierce and proud, rather than slinking about like a common thief? She was Commander Tashac Jacar, the highest ranking officer remaining alive if the rumours of Javik’s demise proved true.

“*Senarium* log, Chief Scientist Merol Niral, on this 89997th day of the long defeat.”

Her mate’s voice eased back the fire consuming Shepard. Slowly, like fog settling to the ground, her hands drifted from the controls to rest in her lap.

“Where once we numbered over one hundred and fifty, the *Senarium* now consists of four. Our massive lab facilities reduced to one small ship. Betrayal and sacrifice have cost us everything, but of the five great keys to dark space, only one—the Conduit—remains to be captured and hidden. It is the greatest of the five, allowing the Citadel to be locked now that the Reapers have retreated back to the void. If our mission meets with success, the Vanguard will be unable to usher in the next extinction. Perhaps it will give the young races a chance to defeat the monsters. All we can do is hope.”

Shepard closed her eyes as she listened to her mate speak to the computer, the lilting music of his voice . . . the true hope in his words . . . calming and recentering her. How extraordinary that at the culmination of a century of warfare, he should welcome the end with hope, that most rare and precious of things.

“I grew up on stories of the Citadel,” Merol continued. “The shining beacon at the heart of our great empire. In those halcyon days, I dreamed of walking amidst the gardens and fountains admiring the beauty.” He sighed, the dry, disappointed bitterness clenching a fist around her heart.

She understood. She had shared those same dreams, clinging to a paradise only to arrive and find nothing left but a corpse.

“We shall have to leave the rediscovery of the great station’s splendour to the young races,” Merol continued. She heard his chair squeak as he stood, then his hand closed over hers.

“Come and sit with me, mother of my last children,” he said, his voice soft.

Shepard opened her eyes. “I must watch the . . .”

He gripped her other hand and pulled her up out of her seat. “We are moving a few paces, not leaving the ship. The scanners are visible from there.”

“You realize this is insubordination?” she demanded, trying to maintain an edge to her tone.

He sat on the stairs leading out of the cockpit, easing her down to sit between his legs, leaning her back against his torso. “Better.” He brushed the peak of his brow along the edge of her kepala. “I still retain a perfect memory of the first time I saw you. The project coordinator escorted you into the lab and work just stopped. Three experiments perished in flames that day because my people . . . I . . . could not look away from the exquisite storm that had blown into our presence.”

She smiled, recalling her first sight of the charismatic, young head scientist. “When she noticed
your eyes upon me, the coordinator leaned over and warned me to be wary of my virtue where you were concerned.” A soft chuckle followed the memory.

Merol slid his arms around her. “I am grateful that you have always known your own mind. You are the steel that keeps me standing, *haksaya kubenar.*”

“As you are the heart that warms and stirs my blood, *cikabeknai.*” Shepard leaned back into him, slipping into a light meditation as she watched the hulks of her shattered empire float past. If that day brought their end, she would face it with strength and gratitude, the other half—the truer half —of her soul no more than an arm’s length away.

**Setix 21.2, 89997 of Tapek Menru**

The Citadel loomed over and around them, the entire station dark and still from that distance. Shepard and Merol moved back to their seats, an eerie silence settling over them. Like the shade of a dead giant, the shadow of one of the wards crept over them, blocking the pale light of the sun. Its arms reached out, pulling them into its chill embrace, welcoming them to the end of everything.

Superstitious awe and terror skittered over Shepard’s skin like insects, tiny jaws biting every time something appeared to move. And everything appeared to move as light shifted and debris passed in ever shifting layers that cast menacing shadows, each shadow promising to contain unmentionable horrors.

Forcing herself to ignore the irrational fear gnawing away at her courage, Shepard recited a short, silent prayer for strength. Fortunately, the concentration needed to navigate the hazards grew in direct proportion to the macabre atmosphere as they drifted toward the presidium ring and into the superstructure. Between guiding her ship and her prayer, she wrestled her fear back, binding it in chains formed of iron will.

On each and every mission, horror accompanied them, flying along at their wing and peering over their shoulders. Thus reason claimed it foolish to allow room for fear. Their last mission would prove no better or worse than the ones that came before.

Early in their research, the *Senarium* discovered that four greater relays existed in addition to the Citadel, each in a different quadrant of the galaxy, each frequency-locked to a key that opened it to dark space. Over the past five cycles, Shepard’s team had hunted down and stolen the four keys from their relays, hiding them throughout the galaxy. Once they secreted away the keys, the remaining members of the *Senarium* went into hiding, awaiting the great exodus once the Reapers completed the extinction.

Now the Conduit—the greatest of the keys—called them on, its singular energy signature leading them through the skin of the station to follow its arteries and veins to its heart. Once they reached that black and terrible organ, they would stab it with a blade so great and deep that it reached fifty thousand cycles into the future to shatter the next extinction even before it began.

“Reading the Conduit one hundred thirty metres on a heading of 44.85.2,” Merol reported, his voice sounding remarkably unshaken.

“I will not be able to finesse the ship through that opening in the bulkhead,” Shepard said, glancing at her screens, then standing to look out the ports at their surroundings. “I will land, and the four of
us will continue on foot.”

As she concentrated on setting the frigate down in the narrow space, Merol called Attit and Peduk to outfit themselves.

After signing off, he remained in his seat, muttering over the scanners for several moments before he turned to her and said, “Tashac, I am reading an energy source ahead. It is of a scale beyond anything in my experience.” Merol’s words carried with them a gravity that she trusted without question.

“We shall take every possible precaution,” she said, setting the computer to keep the ship ready for immediate departure then encoding the locks on the ramp to new passwords. She harboured no desire to return to the ship with the Conduit only to discover monsters overrunning their only means of escape. It did not take decades of betrayal at the hands of indoctrinated agents to teach one extraordinary prudence.

Attit and Peduk awaited she and Merol at the ramp, both presenting crisp salutes. She returned them, then accepted her arms from Attit’s hands. He trusted no one else to care for her weapons and armour—not even her—taking pride in ensuring that his commander went into battle with the best equipment possible.

“Thank you, Attit.” She hung her smaller side arm from her waist and shouldered her rifle.

He held out her helmet. “Commander, sensors read no enemy ground units in the area, just Caretakers.”

“Very good,” Shepard replied. “I will position myself on point. Merol, Peduk following. Attit, be sure that we are not overwhelmed from behind. We shall move as ghosts amongst the shadows. Do not open fire upon the enemy unless they attack. This place is a massive tomb overrun by Reaper ground units. Our best hope lies in escaping detection.”

“As you say, Commander,” her son replied.

She studied his strong, sure countenance, feeling the poignant combination of pride and regret that only a parent experiences upon realizing that their offspring has grown to eclipse them. The moment his stature allowed him to hold a rifle, her son left behind what small portion of childhood remained to a babe born into the last cycles of the war, embracing the martial life with passion and dedication. On the day he began his eleventh cycle, Attit ceased calling her mother, that relationship still present, but overshadowed by commander and soldier, his love for her demonstrated in unflinching loyalty and outstanding performance of his duties.

Shepard shook her head, a curt nod accompanying her switch flipping from Tashac Jacar to Commander Jacar. “For the empire.”

“For the empire,” the others replied, stepping aside and standing at attention, saluting as she passed.

The ramp lowered, revealing a scene unlike anything Shepard had ever witnessed, every glimpse reaching a new level of horror that battered at her calm. The long, narrow space teemed with Caretakers, the little green insectile beings crawling over and amidst thousands . . . no, tens of thousands of bodies. Some of the creatures removed large items of clothing like helmets and armour, while others dragged bodies to cylindrical containers slotted along the walls. Once sealed inside the cylinders, the bodies disintegrated into a gray effluvium that flowed along pipes that followed the walls along their intended path.
Shepard shuddered and pushed on. Whatever use the Caretakers or Reapers had for the melted down bodies, the probability of it impacting their mission remained small. Standing around staring, however, could prove catastrophic.

“Move out,” she commanded, keeping her voice hushed despite her helmet’s speaker being turned off.

“They’re all Rivaran,” Peduk whispered. Her musical, lilting voice came through reedy and thin, fabric worn threadbare.

Shepard glanced at the soldier, the last member of the squad assigned to her five cycles earlier, and nodded toward the path ahead. “Calm yourself, and focus on the mission.”

“Why are they just pulling out the Rivarans?” the soldier continued. Peduk crouched her rifle in the angle of her shoulder, the barrel sweeping a wide arc as she spun, starting at every sound.

Shepard ignored her, picking her way around the bodies, as Peduk pointed out, the Caretakers only pulled the pale, translucent-skinned bodies of Rivarans out of the massive number piled there. The Rivaran corpses had not decayed nearly as much as the others, sprawled mostly on top of the pile, their large, pink eyes unclouded, their gills firm. It seemed strange to her that the peaceful, scholarly race should not have been amongst the first harvested. Or perhaps, their distaste for fighting pushed them down the list as they presented so little threat to the Reapers’ plans. They certainly had not presented a challenge when the empire conquered and subjugated their world.

She moved on. Dead was dead, and every species capable of spaceflight in the galaxy had been extinguished. Did it matter in what order they met their demise? Twenty metres ahead, the room ended in a large set of doors that remained open over a metre simply because of the amount of detritus caught up between them.

“A scrap of good fortune,” Merol said.

“The enemy would not have missed that door opening,” Attit agreed.

“We just have to climb over the dead to pass through,” Peduk said, whining in a manner that Shepard had not witnessed from her since her days as a cadet.

Although always a little more flighty and easily spooked than most, Peduk never failed to comport herself with honour and strength in the performance of her duties. Shepard studied the soldier, looking for even the smallest anomaly. Nothing sent up any alarms. Perhaps Peduk had merely reached the end of her tolerance for the long cycles of fighting and seclusion. She and Attit displayed no attraction for one another, and as she did not have a blood position in the family, Shepard knew that Peduk faced a far more lonely path than the rest of them. Still, the soldier had always remained solid under fire, a true prothean.

“Peduk, if you cannot gain control of your emotions, go back aboard the ship. I will not allow you to endanger the future because you are unable to face the realities of the present.” Shepard gripped the cowl of Peduk’s armour with one hand, giving her a single, hard shake. “Your empire and the future of your galaxy requires you to control your emotions. Comport yourself accordingly, soldier.”

Displaying enough control and grace to flush at being chastised like a raw recruit, Peduk nodded sharply as she replied, “Yes, Commander.”

Shepard turned away, leaving it to Attit to ensure that Peduk did as commanded. Clambering over
the rotting bodies and other refuse, the commander climbed through the space between the two doors. On the other side, she discovered a second sight unknown to her experience. A massive chamber pierced the heart of the Citadel, hidden within the great station’s tower. She could not guess at how high it soared nor how far down it plunged, for a strangely shaped black wall bisected the space, blocking both from view. Pipes and tubes, all carrying the grey slurry, crawled along the walls of the chamber like a nest of snakes, eventually feeding into the wall in the center.

The black of that wall drew her in, hypnotising her with its gravity; a singularity greedily pulling everything, even light into its embrace. Merol touched her arm, breaking the darkness’s grip on her and enabling her to tear her eyes away.

By the spirits of the antecessors, how had she let herself be distracted like that? Surely, her training and discipline should be able to resist the indoctrinating allure of Reaper technology long enough to complete her mission. She shook out her hands, rolled her shoulders, and turned back toward the Conduit, the snakes from the walls slipping under her skin, whispering for her to just give in and look back.

She beat back the terror that tried to bludgeon her heart, reducing it to something very like the gray paste. She needed to get out of there, to complete the mission and retreat back to where the universe, although barren and morose, made sense.

Sticking to the outer wall of the chamber, Shepard moved forward, still seeing no sign of any of the Reapers’ soulless minions. A hundred cycles of terrible experimentation resulted in an endless array of abominations and horrors, each worse than those that came before, but where were they? Perhaps with the Reapers returned to dark space, the bodies had finally fallen, never to stir again. If so, she prayed that finally being allowed the dignity of death would grant their souls peace.

The wall moved. Shepard froze, all four eyes flicking toward the movement. A harsh klaxon buzz of sound built around them until the entire chamber shook with it. The sound, as familiar and chill as her nightmares, burrowed into her, its tentacles trying to latch onto her soul and rip it from her body.

Not a wall, a Reaper. One so large it could only be the Vanguard. Shepard’s heart stopped. Over the decades she had come face to face with many different Reaper units, even taking down several destroyers using ground based missiles installations. But the Vanguard . . . even the name provoked an abhorrence deep enough to strip the heart from her . . . if she were not prothean. If she were not Commander Tashac Jacar, honoured with the duty to save the coming empires. All of them.

For a moment that lasted all the ages of the universe, Shepard stared up at the monster, unable to comprehend exactly what she saw, her mind racing, trying to fit the pieces together. It hung inside the Citadel’s superstructure, massive cables and conduits leading into its body like umbilical cords waiting to be cut. Comprehension dawned. A womb. They stood inside a womb, the Reaper before them twitching in its dreams like her children had once dreamed inside her.

That thought prompted a wave of nausea as her understanding deepened. The gray material . . . the bodies . . . all those people being turned into the monstrosity about to be unleashed, to wait through the long millennia for the correct time to start a brand new extinction. What horror for the bookish Rivaran who loved poetry and music and art above all else to be turned into death incarnate.

“We’re witnessing the birth of a god,” Peduk whispered, her voice high and shrill with a superstitious panic Shepard understood all too well.
**Tapek Menru** -- Literal translation: The long defeat. The calendar was started from the date the Citadel was captured by the Reapers but not officially named until 10000 Tapek Menru. On the ten thousandth day of the war, Prothean leaders declared it a stalling action designed to buy scientists time to find a way for the Prothean Empire to both survive the war and send aid forward into the next extinction. The calendar is measured in days.

**Cepra** -- A large insect (8-10 cm in length) native to the world upon which the Prothean people originated. It’s sting was so painful and venomous, death by cepra-sting was a form of execution reserved for traitors.

**Setix** -- Prothean unit of time equivalent to referencing an hour. A day is comprised of 36 *setixs* broken into six sub-units.

**Haksaya kubenar** -- A term of endearment, literally translates as my strong, true heart.

**Cikabeknai** -- The reciprocal term of endearment for the above. Literally translates to brave love.

**Kepala** -- The ridges of carapace that cover the top of a Prothean’s head.
Shepard dreams of Tashac Jacar and the Prothean's last plan to help the younger races.

Setix 21.2, 89997 of Tapek Menru con’t

“The birth of a god,” Peduk repeated. The soldier’s hissed whisper raked superstitious claws down Shepard’s back. “A sovereign to bring all life to its knees.”

Shepard gave the soldier a push toward an exit in the far wall. “It’s a Reaper. We have seen them before. Keep moving.” Shepard held the words up like a shield, holding her own fear at bay. “Stay out of sight. Move from cover to cover. Attit, rearguard, watch that nothing follows.”

He saluted. “Yes, Commander. Rearguard, aye.” Shepard smiled to herself, the warmth and trust in her son’s eyes, the blazing torch of respect burning in their depths, bolstering her courage and resolve. She thumped him on the shoulder as she passed, an acceptable outlet for the maternal pride tying knots in her throat.

Taking point, she strode around the outside of the chamber, using the only weapons in her arsenal capable of combating the sheer evil radiating from the unborn Reaper—action and aggression. Unlike most of her peers, she never considered the Reapers evil despite the apparent evil of their actions. Instead, she thought of them as monsters too vast to understand, monsters driven by needs or an agenda beyond comprehension. Like giants treading upon ants infesting their garden, she’d believed some sort of territorial imperative at work.

And then that chamber and the abomination being birthed there.

That horror, fashioned from the bodies of sapient beings—A shudder that started in her gut and burst outward like a solar flare cut that thought off at the root. She knew, having stared upon it and having stood in its shadow, she had borne witness to an evil so great that it proved an anathema to the force of life itself. Even after forty cycles of fighting the Reapers in every form imaginable nothing had prepared her for the truth housed within that chamber.

Was the reproduction of the monsters common knowledge throughout the empire? Had she . . . and, judging by the pallor of his skin, Merol been left uninformed? A low growl rumbled in her throat. No doubt the leadership knew and classified the information dangerous to morale. Ah, the crippling folly of the bureaucrats.

Shepard stepped out through a massive archway, breathing a sigh of relief as she left the chamber and looked down a long ramp. Just over a hundred metres to the Conduit and then they could escape that thing’s presence. Shepard took point as her small squad stepped out onto the downward slope. Piles of bodies mouldered everywhere, but still she saw no sign of ground units. Like small rodents venturing out into a raptor’s hunting ground, she hurried them on. Truly, their only hope of success lay in being swift and avoiding detection as long as possible.

“We cannot be here,” Peduk whispered as their descent levelled. The soldier jumped and started, spinning to keep her rifle pointing everywhere at once, jabbing the barrel toward shadowy enemies
that Shepard couldn’t see. Freezing in place so suddenly that she startled Shepard, Peduk met the commander’s eyes. “That thing. Did you see that thing? It is not enough for them to kill us, they steal our bodies, turning us into abominations.” Looking up as if entreating answers of the stars, Peduk spun a slow circle. “Everyone, everywhere stolen and turned into the enemy.” She made a retching sound.

Shepard pulled her sidearm, aiming it at the panicking soldier’s head. “Peduk, calm yourself. You are placing the mission in jeopardy.” Gut churning at the monstrosity of pointing her weapon at one of her own, Shepard flicked off the safety. Ice cold steel held her aim solid and sure. As much as her soul might ache to kill the young female, Commander Jacar suffered no threat to mission success. “I grant you a six-count to regain control of your faculties, or I will shoot you. One . . . two . . . three . . .

The soldier gulped a handful of times, visibly shoring herself up against the fear. Before Shepard reached four, Peduk nodded. “Yes, Commander Jacar. My apologies.”

“Apologies do not gloss over failure with success. We approach the end of the struggle, Peduk. Do better.” Shepard traded her sidearm for her particle rifle, climbing the ramp that led back out of the fabricated canyon. The dead bodies thinned out, disappearing by the time she reached the top and the ramp levelled into a wide, round platform.

A series of columns rose, step-like, from the center of the platform, culminating twenty metres above her head in a form so black and exuding such menace that her eyes refused to look at it for longer than a fraction of a second. Still, she knew that up there, a terrible mockery of floral form latched tentacle-like petals around a stamen of blinking lights and bio-mechanical interfaces. The Conduit.

Tendrils of pure darkness lashed the space around it, ethereal fingers of despair and hopelessness striking out, lashing them with whispers, the inevitable music of the indoctrination signal. Shepard strode across the platform, giving the Conduit’s column a wide berth. During the recovery of the first key—the Fulcrum—a single brush of a tendril reduced three of her team to ash while driving four others into an indoctrinated frenzy.

Walking to the edge of the platform, Shepard looked out over the entirety of the Citadel, its presidium and wards dark but for a few, scattered lights blinking weakly in the half light. Its purpose nearly fulfilled, the galaxy’s largest trap closed down, awaiting rediscovery tens of thousands of cycles after all traces of the dead disappeared into dust.

Strange that despite hiding out on dead planet after dead planet, constantly reminding herself of the truth as she wandered amongst the dead, she had never truly felt like the last of sapient life. Perhaps the reality of so much death, such absolute destruction, proved too large and horrible for even a prothean mind to comprehend and accept.

Standing there with the Conduit at her back, and the empty Citadel laid out before her, Shepard felt the truth like cement hardening in her gut. Every planet where high civilization once thrived—grand battles waged; edifices magnificent and ridiculous built to tower over the land; great works of art, music, and literature created—nothing remained, all traces destroyed. Only monstrosities remained, soulless and empty. Without their masters, even they would fall, joining the dust.

Snapping her shoulders back, Shepard spun away from the dead and back to her duty, striding toward a lone control console a few metres behind her. Deciphering the console in a couple of seconds, she keyed the controls to retract the platforms, lowering the Conduit from its seat. The moment the great key detached from the interfaces, the deadly emanations ceased, but she knew
that even then the artifact remained far from harmless. Reaper technology did not need power flowing through it to indoctrinate.

As it lowered to floor level, she reached into the pack on her belt, taking out three containment barrier emitters. Activating them, she calibrated them to counter its unique frequency before tossing one to both Merol and Attit.

With the smooth confidence of practice, the three of them encircled the Conduit, magnetizing the emitters before throwing them to latch onto the black, oil-slick-on-water metal of the thing.

“Raising containment barrier in three, two, one,” Shepard said. She let out a shallow breath as the shield blinked to life, shrouding the thing’s indoctrination field. She nodded for Merol to run his scans, making sure the Conduit was safe to move, then pulled her rifle and strode back to the top of the ramp. Time to move. More than time to move in truth.

Faint sounds, warbling cries, roars, and growls, drifted through the dead air, warning her that their actions had not gone without notice.

“We are not going to remain alone up here for long,” she called, waving Attit forward into a defensive position.

“Containment barrier is solid,” Merol reported. “Preparing anti-grav field.” Her mate muttered to himself a little as he worked, an old habit that comforted her, easing fear’s claws from her spine. But then he shouted, his voice sharp enough to cut, “Peduk, stay back. You know better than to wander too close. Go guard the ramp.”

Shepard threw a knife-edged glance at Peduk as the soldier stepped up beside her. The claws buried themselves in her spine once more, bringing her rifle around to point at the female. “Peduk, are you all right?”

“Yes, Commander. Apologies. I do not understand why this place is rolling me so far off balance.” Peduk rolled her shoulders and neck. “I shall wrestle it under control.”

Shepard nodded, her gun moving away as Peduk’s tone of voice failed to trigger her alarm, lacking the dull, lost in thought quality she recognized all too well. Shepard nodded toward the ramp. “Peduk, proceed halfway down the ramp, and keep your senses sharp.” She glanced down at her scanner, no movement registering within a three hundred metre radius. Still, the sounds of a great many nightmares echoed through the dead air, closing in on their position.

“Ready to move out,” Merol called.

Shepard didn’t look back. “Attit, rearguard.” Striding out, trusting both her mate and son to cover their positions and duties, she focused on getting the Conduit past the Vanguard. Would the key wake the dreaming Reaper? Did it already feel their presence? So many unknowns, and her only recourse lay in moving forward, moving quickly, and hoping for the best. Trusting to chance and fortune never sat comfortably. Both proved far too fickle to make good allies.

The first ground units attacked just before they reached the archway back into the Vanguard’s chamber. Three prothean abominations leaped down from above, throwing Merol to the ground.

With the enemy engaged at last, Shepard’s fear disappeared into a fierce ruthlessness. Her biotics could harm Merol, so she shoved her rifle into the side of the thing’s head and held the trigger until the particle beam erupted from the far side. Issuing a challenging roar, she kicked the body off the side of the ramp. Attit and Peduk took down another while Shepard dragged her mate up onto his
feet and shoved him through the archway.

“Peduk! Disengage and take point. Get Merol and the Conduit to the ship.” She grabbed the collar of Peduk’s armour and pulled her out of the line of fire as a massive amalgam of three species, one of them turned into a massive arm cannon, opened fire. As soon as she got Peduk clear, Shepard lashed out with her biotics, snatching the horror from the walkway and flinging it over the edge.

Every nightmare faced over the course of forty cycles of warfare made an appearance, leaping, swooping, and climbing into battle with weapons, teeth, claws, and biotics. Fighting backwards, it took Shepard and Attit several minutes to make it through the archway. Once through, she let out a sharp hiss of relief and sprinted for the far door, allowing the equipment and crates to cover their retreat.

Halfway across the room, Shepard paused to thin the ranks of their pursuers, sending Attit on to watch his father’s back and assist in maneuvering the Conduit through the door.

“We’re through,” Merol called on the radio. “No enemy units between the door and the ship.”

“Understo—”

The chamber erupted into a buzzing klaxon-roar so loud that it dropped Shepard to her knees. She covered her head with her arms as the entire room trembled.

The roar died, replaced by the steady thunder and hiss of pressurized seals releasing. Scrambling back up onto her feet, Shepard looked up at the Reaper. Racing down the length of its form, the tubes broke free, pulling back against the wall. After staring at it for a moment, stunned and shaken, comprehension dawned, horror following close on its heels.

The Vanguard was being born.

“Tashac!” Merol called, his shout nearly drowned out by the Reaper. “Come! We have arrived at the ship but need your codes to enter.”

Shepard tried to listen, to force her feet to obey, but she stood, frozen and immobile, staring up at the nightmarish construct. All thought and will and purpose disappeared from her mind as it stared directly back at her. No, not at her, into her. It felt as though the Reaper slipped along her neural pathways, burning them up as it sought out the heart of her. It spoke, unformed words like the mutters and mumbles of a dreamer. Even without sense or meaning, the terrible machine voice tore through her, shredding any remaining control she held over her fear.

“Tashac! Come! We need you.”

Merol’s voice broke the Reaper’s grip, tearing her feet from the floor and sending her running for the door. Swift and sure, Shepard leaped over the dead, climbing the pile jammed in the doorway in three jumps. Moving with a dancer’s grace, she navigated the strewn corpses and Caretakers.

Another klaxon sounded, the umbilicals continuing to release, moving down through kilometres of station, and the Reaper began to stir in the tight confines of its chamber as she reached the ship. Frantic, but sure, fingers entered the codes. Stepping away from the ramp as it descended, Shepard turned to face the ground units that appeared in the open door. Instinct and training, her old friends, stepped up, steadying her aim, making her fast and deadly.

Attit and Peduk stood by her side, their rifles cutting down the enemy before they could get through the door.
“The Conduit is aboard,” Merol’s voice called in Shepard’s ear.

“Go,” Peduk yelled. “I will keep them from overwhelming us.”

Shepard ran up the ramp, Attit following directly on her heels. When she heard the hollow ring of Peduk’s boots on metal, she hit the controls, cycling the ramp closed even as the soldier climbed. Popping the seals on her helmet, Shepard ripped it off and threw it aside. They needed to get to the relay before the Vanguard broke free of the Citadel.

“Mother!”

Attit’s cry exploded through Shepard’s heart, the missile pulverizing the organ before blowing through her chest wall. Without turning back, without hearing his body hit the floor, she knew that her last son was dead. The punch of breath pushing out the title he never used told her everything in a flash of horrified understanding.

Grief-stricken and wild, her biotics flared to life around her, only Merol’s presence forcing the power down into her hands rather than lashing out everywhere at once. Her hands burned like stars, leaving blind trails across her vision as she spun on the killer. Unleashing her power in a burst strong enough to blast a vehicle aside, she struck Peduk full in the chest. The sickening, wet crunch of bone shattering and impacting organs provoked no remorse or grief, only righteous fury. The soldier flew the length of the crew corridor to slam into the bulkhead, the terminal crack of shattered spine echoing off the metal walls.

Shepard ran to her son, sliding the last metre on her knees. She cradled his head in the crook of her elbow, her other hand fluttering over the long, curved hilt erupting from the seam between two plates of Attit’s armour. Peduk had buried the blade deep within his body, piercing his heart with an assassin’s precision. His eyes stared into hers without seeing, his spirit, so bright and fierce, already departed to join the antecessors.

Wrapping a desperate grip around the pain, Shepard leaned down, caressing the peak of her brow against her son’s cheek and kepala. She tried to speak the words of blessing, but they choked her, wrapping around her larynx. Her last child . . . the light blinking out on one more piece of her soul, soon to leave her as dark and dead as the Citadel.

The ship shuddered as the buzzing roar ripped through the Citadel again, warning them that the monstrosity hanging amidst those tubes and wires stirred, its dreams evolving into thought as it awakened, ready to be born.

“Go,” Merol said, the lack of music in his tone hitting her like a blow to the gut, expelling what little air remained to her. He gave her a gentle push. “I will lie our son in his bed until this ugliness is past. Go.”

She nodded and laid Attit on the deck plating. Standing, she took a step toward the cockpit, then turned back. Rage burned bright once more, incinerating her sorrow, and furious strides carried her down the ship at a quick step. Peduk’s eyes flickered, rolling up to focus a stare of pain and fear on Shepard as the commander loomed over her.

“Four of us remaining,” Shepard growled as she grabbed the back of Peduk’s armour, dragging the broken soldier to the ramp. “Four and you get too close. After so many missions, after all your training, you panic and step into an indoctrination field.”

Thick, warbling gasps of sound issued from Peduk’s lips, but they formed no words, and even if they had, Shepard would just as soon have deafened herself than listen to them. She hit the control
to lower the ramp, descending as it moved. Half way down, she stopped, grabbed hold of one of the hydraulics to steady herself, and heaved, throwing the indoctrinated soldier’s body the rest of the way off the ship.

“Die with your masters, traitor,” Shepard said, hatred as thick and black as tar oozing from the jagged shards of her heart. “May your spirit dwell in the darkness and pain of your betrayal forever.” Virulent and alive, the rancor boiled within her, bubbling up to spew from her lips like vomit, pouring down the front of her and filling her airways until she felt as though she would drown in it. Peduk rolled down the last metre of the ramp, landing in a heap facing up, her eyes latching onto Shepard. The commander held that stare as the ramp closed, only turning away once it sealed.

Wooden, Shepard marched to the cockpit and threw herself into her seat. The ship shuddered as the Reaper screamed in its birthing throes. “We require a new route out of the structure,” she called to Merol when entered the bridge. “We must assume that Peduk betrayed our route to her masters.”

Merol nodded and set to work at his console while she brought the thrusters online and lifted off. Spinning the ship one hundred and eighty degrees, she sent it darting forward at its best possible speed. No doubt the Vanguard’s womb led directly out to space. Their only chance lay in emerging at an unexpected location and bolting for the relay.

The nimble little frigate darted through the massive beams and girders of the station’s insides, eventually finding its way out into abandoned traffic tunnels.

“If we remain in these tunnels, we can travel the entire length of this ward before we are forced to exit.” Merol’s fingers flew over the computer console and screens. “The Reaper is emerging from the base of the presidium ring beneath the tower.”

Shepard nodded, adjusting the course to take them another tunnel closer to the surface. “The Reaper is capable of much greater speed than we are. Hopefully the dampers and emission sinks keep us hidden until we activate the relay.” Despite their stealth technology having kept them hidden from Reaper sensors for more than five cycles, she took no risks, guiding them along a slightly longer route, compensating for the distance by pushing the speed past anything she considered sane or safe.

“Merol, you will have to activate the relay as soon as we are within range. Synchronize with my computer. I will avoid taking us onto a direct path for the rings until the very last remaining moment.” She nodded toward the light of the nebula showing ahead. “We are about to emerge from the station.”

“The Reaper is clear as well and moving toward the relay. We are already within range of its primary weapon.”

Shepard nodded without looking away from her controls. Making sure the massive red laser did not render the Prothean Empire extinct before they reached the relay required all of her focus.

“The Reaper is firing.” The laser seared through the nebula more than five hundred kilometres to port. “Stealth systems appear to be working.” From the corner of her eye, Shepard saw the relay interface open as Merol said, “Starting the activation sequence now.”

“I will circle around and approach from behind the relay, bringing us in on the far side.” She sent the fleet little frigate soaring off the approach vector, keeping their movements unpredictable. Time after time, the Reaper fired, none of the shots coming close, but they did not need to. Eventually, their ship would have to intercept the rings, a much smaller, predictable target.
“Try to discern a firing pattern,” she commanded. “A mean time between shots . . . anything to help.”

“Lock on to the relay in six, five, four, three, two, one.”

When Merol reached the count of one, Shepard set the vector, dropping down to approach velocity. The Vanguard’s laser scorched through the space less than a kilometre off their bow, setting off the ship’s alarms, but then the relay arced, grabbing their little vessel and shooting it off through space.

**Setix 10.0 89998 of Tapek Menru**

Ilos. Shepard’s lips pressed thin in a weary but relieved smile as the planet appeared in the forward port, the scanners reporting no Reaper presence in the system.

Cycles had passed since she last visited the silent graveyard of the Inusannon. The site’s security and secrecy proved far too important to risk anything more than visits of absolute necessity. Remote even for the Prothean Empire, Ilos would wait out the millennia, hiding the Conduit and an entire science division in its underground bunkers.

A flash of green appeared on Shepard’s screen. “Identify,” the holographic interface commanded.

“Hello, Vigil. Commander Tashac Jacar and Merol Natil aboard Senarium frigate four. Cargo, Attit Jacar, deceased, and Reaper technology catalogued as the Conduit.”

“Identities and cargo confirmed. Welcome back to Ilos, Commander Jacar. Please release navigational control to prepare for landing. You will be able to disembark in approximately two setixs.”

Shepard did as the VI asked, relinquishing control. All her interfaces blinked out and the shields closed over all the ports. Only Vigil knew their course and destination, ensuring it could never be betrayed to the enemy. Finally able to lean back in her chair and relax a little, she turned to look at her mate. Merol met her gaze for a moment then held out his hand.

Grief closed in around her as his fingers gripped hers. The Conduit was safe, but the cost . . .

Merol tugged on her hand, coaxing her from her seat then pulling her into his lap. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her in silence. They had never needed words, their souls open and laid bare to one another. Only those who kept secrets needed words.

**Setix 14.1 89998 of Tapek Menru**

Merol carried Attit through the complex, following Vigil’s directions, the VI opening doors and finally an elevator to allow them passage. The lift swept down through layers of ruins, some reclaimed from the jungle, most still covered in vines and wide-leafed plants growing out of the cracks. Lights, glowing panels set into the walls, beamed through open slats in the side of the car, giving her the impression of descending a great depth. After many levels, the elevator opened into a tunnel.

“If you follow the path, you should locate an aesthetically pleasing location to lay your son’s body to rest,” Vigil explained in its carefully modulated tones.
Shepard slipped an arm around Merol as her mate turned down the tunnel, carrying Attit with
tireless ease. She focused on him, feeling his sorrow and anger as keenly as her own, using them to
push aside the many demands she wished to make of Vigil. A proper time and place to get her
answers and finalize the affairs of the empire would appear. As comforting as she would find it to
vanish into the role of commander, for the moment, she needed to bear the grief of mother and
mate.

The tunnel led out into what appeared to have been a formal garden back when people inhabited
the city. Statues lined the high walls, their forms disturbing in a way that never ceased to be less
discomfiting with time and exposure. She supposed they represented the Inusannon, a race she
could not consider beautiful, but it was not their form that bothered her. What reached into her and
set her teeth on edge was the sorrow and pathos, the defeat that emanated from them.

Protheans fought. From the moment they battled their way out of the womb, protheans considered
the obstacles and challenges presented by life as opportunities to beat their world and destiny into
submission. Those statues with their bent heads and downcast eyes felt like philosophical
 antimatter, as if the slightest brush against one would cause an annihilation event.

Shepard turned her back on the statues, looking up through layers of stepped walls and
overhanging foliage. She loved Ilos, despite its tragedy . . . and its statues. Every single bit of fauna
on the planet, other than the research team, had been dead for 50,000 cycles. Not even a lonely
insect droned through the foliage. For a soldier, fighting and struggling for more than forty cycles,
the peace of the place . . . the complete silence . . . came as close to paradise as she could hope for.

“You were correct, Vigil,” she said, turning a slow circle. “This garden is perfect.” She brushed
Merol’s cheek with the backs of her fingers. “What do you think?”

Merol nodded, but remained silent. As Attit’s mother, the person who brought him forth into life,
the responsibility for his final disposition fell to her. She stepped past her mate, following the lines
and paths of the garden to a small, secluded nook between a series of columns. The sunlight
streamed down through an open ceiling while vines grew riot, forming walls of teeming,
flowering, sweet-smelling life.

“She placed Attit’s body in the center of the space and knelt next to his son’s head. “Rest easy,
strong warrior. Your bravery and sacrifice have earned you an honoured place among the
antecessors.“ He brushed the peak of his brow along Attit’s cheek. “No male has ever felt more
gratitude to have helped bring a son into the galaxy. I wish so many things could have been
different . . . that you could have been born into a time of victory, but those are selfish wishes, for
you were born into the time in which you were most needed. You have saved us and the future
many times. Now take your rest. You will be remembered with love and pride.”

Shepard knelt on the opposite side of her son and bent to touch her brow to his. “As I brought you
into life, I release you from it, my last child.” She clenched her teeth, swallowing against the
emptiness. “If a portion of a mother’s honour is reflected from her children, I shall shine brighter
even than a supernova. You and your siblings have been the greatest honour and joy of my life.
Rest easy, beautiful, brave warrior. Take your place among the antecessors. As I gave you life, I
release you.”

She remained bent over him for long moments, too long to be seemly, but in that moment, her brow
touching that of her last child’s, her people—anyone who would judge her weak for her attachments—gone, she could not manage to care about appearances.

“Tashac.” Merol’s voice, as always, pulled her back. “Our duties are not yet complete.”

“Goodbye,” she whispered then straightened. Standing, she turned away from the empty vessel that had once carried her last son. Merol was correct. Grief could wait for the Conduit to be locked away. It could wait to leave behind their messages for the future. It could wait. Grief could always wait.

**Setix 15.3 89998 of Tapek Menru**

Shepard palmed the door control, pausing to imprint herself on the lock. “How long ago did the research team go into the pods, Vigil?” She stepped into the small, dark room at the very bottom of the base.

“Fifteen days ago, Commander Jacar.”

“And the base is working as expected? All systems performing at optimal?” She stepped back out of the way, allowing Merol to guide the Conduit in the door.

“It is, Commander. Once the Conduit is secured, you may record your final imprints at your leisure.”

“We will.” She walked back to the door. “What measures are in place to keep this room secure?”

“The elevator and door will only open if presented with both your imprint and that of Dr. Natil. Both imprints must be free of indoctrination. Unauthorized personnel will not be able to proceed past the elevator door in the main complex if the base is breached.”

Shepard smiled, not as relieved as she would have hoped for. It sounded solid. It sounded as though the Conduit should be safe forever, particularly once she and Merol succumbed to time. Still, part of her mind kept spinning, trying to find a hole to explain her lack of confidence.

She opened her mouth, a question about the power grid forcing its way to the fore, but then Merol stepped away from the Conduit.

“I’m finished,” he said. “Are you ready to go?”

She looked into his eyes for a moment, then nodded, sensing that he meant more than being finished securing the Conduit. She held her question, returning to the elevator.

“Is there somewhere we could rest, Vigil?” Shepard asked. “Some food? This day seems to have started more than a week ago. Once we eat and rest, we can work on closing out our reports and recording our messages.”

“Your quarters were prepared and stocked in anticipation of your arrival,” the VI replied. “I will direct the elevator to take you to that wing of the facility.”

**Setix 16.4, 1 of Kirash Par**
Their rest and recuperation lasted three days. Shepard wandered the base, talking with the VI, leaving her last report in bits and pieces, some spoken, most through direct tactile interface. Merol haunted the labs, checking and rechecking that the containment barrier around the Conduit would hold, keeping the deadly artifact hidden and harmless to the researchers sleeping many levels above it.

At last, on the third day, they rose late, prepared the frigate for space, and then descended through the base to Vigil’s main console.

“Commander Jacar, welcome. Please step forward and leave your message,” the VI intoned.

Shepard walked forward, leaving Merol a few paces back. Still, once she stood before Vigil, she just stared at the holographic image. After all those cycles . . . an end. At last. Perhaps she and Merol could find somewhere quiet to just breathe for a little before succumbing to old age. She reached out, fingers caressing Vigil’s controls like an old friend’s hand. Funny, to think of a computer program with a face as a friend. Product of the times, perhaps. So few real companions left. A single tear slipped over her cheek as Attit and Giran’s faces breezed through her mind, her most recent losses.

One real companion left.

“My name is Commander Tashac Jacar, head of the Senarium. My people are gone. Everything they were has turned to dust, but for this message. Whomever you are, take the gift my people bought with their lives and their sorrow. Take it and make certain that your cycle ends the Reapers and their masters forever. I have done my part. It cost me more than half my soul, but the Conduit, the Principal, the Nexus, the Fulcrum, and the Crux are all safely hidden. If our luck holds, the Reaper vanguard will never locate them to open the five great relays to dark space.”

She glanced back at Merol for a moment before continuing, the undying support in his beautiful, golden stare shoring up her failing strength. “If you are watching this recording, the Reapers are rising. If you must, destroy the great keys, but if you are of the sort of mind and spirit to have made it this far, I offer you another option. Use them. Discover what the masters are hiding out there beyond the rim of what is known. Bring them down to shatter with a force so great that it will resound throughout time.” She smiled, a thin, savage tear across her face. “Even across the millennia, I will feel your victory and rejoice when it avenges everyone I ever loved.”

Withdrawing her hand, Shepard stepped back. “Thank you, Vigil. Take care of our friends here. May they find their way out into a brand new galaxy.

“Live in courage and strength, Commander.”

She nodded. “I shall. Once we are clear of the elevator, you may put the base to sleep and power down. Rest well through the ages . . . my friend.”

“Good-bye, Tashac. May your courage guide your fortune.”

She inclined her head a little and backed away three steps before turning toward Merol.

He stared at her, disbelief trying to force its way through the horror of the past two days. “Where do we go? We are alone in the galaxy.”

“No.” Shepard strode over and took both of his hands in hers, their emotions for one another, their despair, pain, and relief all tangling into a mess she ached to release into the waters. “We’re free. There are still the primitive races. What if we took our tiny ship to the blue planet, that one where
“The elder element sings so beautifully?” She pulled him around, starting up the long ramp to the
elevator, her arm wrapped tightly around him.

“The one where we found Nexus?” He nodded. “The blue primitives are very attractive.”

Chuckling, she shook her head. “Talking like that, I’d think you a youth at the beginning of your
first mating cycle.”

His arm slipped around her. “No. I am an old prothean, my mating days come and gone, and I am
well content with the mother of my last children.” He looked down at the cement. “Giran and Attit
are at peace. Perhaps we can find some for ourselves in the mountains of the elderment planet.”

Shepard brushed the peak of her brow against his as she stopped at the elevator door, tenderness
adding a poignant layer to her pathos. Looking up at the pods, she whispered. “Keep it hidden.
Above all else, my friends, honour the price we paid and keep it hidden well.” Turning away from
the last hope for her species’ survival, she nodded for Merol to touch the elevator pad.

“Overview recording—Merol Natil—complete.”

When her mate stepped into the elevator, Shepard pressed her hand against the elevator control,
leaving behind her last imprint.

Elevator and security rerouting to automated systems. Vigil powering down.”

* * * * *

Shepard jumped straight out of bed onto her feet. “Must keep it hidden. Keep it safe.” Her knees
gave out, but she spun and caught herself, palms hitting the mattress. Eyes open, but unseeing, she
watched the past fade into mist, Merol and her children slipping away as the last note of the rachni
queen’s song faded.

“My family,” she whispered, stumbling down the side of the bed. “No, don’t leave me.” She
clutched at the memories, desperate to hold onto them, but they slipped through her fingers like
sand.

“Shepard?” Rustling in the dim light. “Are you okay? What’s going on?” Garrus’s voice tugged at
her, a gentle tether easing her back to reality. “Did you have a nightmare?”

She shook her head, a strangled sob gasping from her throat before she could crush it. “Parts of it
were definitely nightmare,” she whispered, turning slowly. “Attit . . ..” Straightening, she turned a
slow circle, her eyes searching the dim room as the silent walls of Ilos disappeared, replaced by the
Normandy’s bulkheads. Finally, her gaze found Garrus, the familiar concern and affection in his
stare helping settle her back into her own skin. “I had a dream, Garrus. I dreamed a whole life.”

The boom of long, heavy strides raced across the mess, pounding against the deck plating with an
urgency that pulled her to the door. She palmed the control and it opened on Nihlus, standing there,
shirtless, chest heaving, hand raised to knock.

Her heart pounded out nearly a minute’s worth of beats as she just stared at the Spectre, seeing in
his eyes the reflection of the loved ones so recently lost. How? How could see Merol looking back
at her through Nihlus’s stare?

“It’s still hidden,” they said at the same time. “They still keep it safe.”
Nihlus stepped forward, lifting her off the ground into a tight embrace, his brow brushing gently against her temple the way Merol . . . A grip of equal parts love and grief clamped around her chest, squeezing tight. She wrapped her arms around Nihlus’s neck, turning her face into him, holding tight to a beloved mate who had never been hers.

“You dreamed it as well,” she whispered. “You were Merol.”

He nodded. “And you were Tashac. I can see her in your eyes, but how?”

Shepard eased back down to stand on her own feet, her hands reaching up to cradle his face. “I don’t know. I heard rachni song. Maybe the queen?” She smiled, but it quickly melted away. The Citadel . . . Peduk’s betrayal, the weight of her beautiful son dead in her arms . . . all of it still so real. “Were you there for all of it? Attit . . .”

“Yes. The last days of the war. The Citadel . . . Ilos . . . everything.” He ran a hand over her hair, a sad sort of sigh accompanying the gesture. “Seems strange for you to have hair.”

Shepard nodded, her hands slipping down to his chest, still unable to completely pull away from the bond she’d felt in the dream. The mates had shared a tie of such amazing strength . . . a love and trust like she couldn’t have even imagined existed. Gone but for what lived inside her head and Nihlus’s. “And two eyes. God, it felt like . . ..”

“. . . an entire lifetime,” he finished.

She saw the dream pull back, Nihlus’s gaze shuttering as Garrus shifted on the bed, a reminder to them both that Tashac and Merol, as real and immediate as they felt, had died somewhere far away, a very long time before.

Nihlus backed up a couple of steps, releasing her, and looked over her head to nod at Garrus. “Sorry for the rude awakening.”

Shepard glanced over her shoulder as she said, “I’d already stumbled around enough to wake the dead.”

“What happened?” Garrus asked, swinging out from under the blankets. He stood, walking a couple of steps toward them, looking so awkward and confused that it pulled Shepard the rest of the way out of the dream.

Oh god, she’d been climbing all over Nihlus. She backed away from the Spectre and reached out to take Garrus’s hand in hers. “I think the rachni queen helped Nihlus and I sort out the information we got from the beacon and the cipher. We shared a dream of the last days of the Prothean-Reaper war.” Looking back at Nihlus, a wide smile spread across her face. “I’ll explain it all to you later, but most importantly . . . we know what the Conduit is and where to find it.”

**Tapek Menru** -- Literal translation: The long defeat. The calendar was started from the date the Citadel was captured by the Reapers but not officially named until 10000 Tapek Menru. On the ten thousandth day of the war, Prothean leaders declared it a stalling action designed to buy scientists time to find a way for the Prothean Empire to both survive the war and send aid forward into the next extinction. The calendar is measured in days.

**Cepra** -- A large insect (8-10 cm in length) native to the world upon which the Prothean people originated. It’s sting was so painful and venomous, death by cepra-sting was a form of execution.
reserved for traitors.

**Setix** -- Prothean unit of time equivalent to referencing an hour. A day is comprised of 36 *setixs* broken into six sub-units.

**Haksaya kubenar** -- A term of endearment, literally translates as my strong, true heart.

**Cikabeknai** -- The reciprocal term of endearment for the above. Literally translates to brave love.

**Kepala** -- The ridges of carapace that cover the top of a Prothean’s head.

**Kirash Par** -- New cycle or new life. Time of year for rebirth and renewal. It also denotes the calendar for the 50000 cycle period following the long defeat.

**Elder Element** -- Also referred to as elderment. The Prothean common name for element zero. It was considered magical in their ancient times because it “sang” to their perception through touch.
“Ambassador.” Shepard squared her shoulders, standing at parade rest before the hologram of Donnel Udina. Residual excitement from the night before tingled along her spine, allowing her to meet his sneer with a genuine smile, if not one actually meant for him. Now that they had finally edged ahead of Saren, she could hold her temper long enough to get things organized. Truly, she should never let him get to her at all. Ever. The man amounted to a paper cut-out that should just blow into her life and then right back out. That image widened her smile.

“What do you want, Shepard? I’m a busy man.” He crossed his arms, the sneer turning to belligerence. “Do you have any proof that Saren attacked Eden Prime?”

She nodded. “Yes, sir. This call is to request an audience with the council. We have irrefutable evidence of his involvement in several crimes, including Eden Prime.”

The ambassador straightened, the sneer uncurling into an incredulous smirk. “You have evidence?”

“Yes, sir, and we’ve tracked him to his base. The Normandy is en route for the Citadel. We’re docking in three hours, so will be available whenever they have time to meet with us.” She didn’t move, didn’t even twitch an eyebrow as she watched his expressions shift, the weasel trying to find a way to make himself the hero even before he knew what they had. Lifting a hand to her mouth, she cleared her throat to squash a laugh before it could form. Let him take all the credit he wanted. Maybe the council would end up putting a hit on him.

That thought made her tingle all the way to her finger and toenails. She grabbed the inside of her bottom lip between her teeth to control the manic grin trying to beat its way onto her mouth.

Damn it, man, just tell me that you’ll let me know when it’s all arranged before I chew all the way through my face.

“I’ll contact you when I have a time, Captain.” His face twisted and for a moment, she thought him on the cusp of blowing his breakfast. “Good work.” His hologram vanished before his praise burned its way from her ears to the shock processing center in her brain.

“Holy shit.” She turned toward the door. “Somewhere, the four horsemen are riding the crest of a wave straight out of hell. Blessed Enkindlers preserve us.” The sound of the door opening saved her from examining the possible galaxy-shattering consequences of Udina telling her she’d done a good job.

“Shepard-Captain,” Legion called. “You wished to speak to us?”

Turning to face the geth, she smiled and waved for the platform to enter the room. “I do.” She gestured for Legion to sit, but didn’t push the matter when it remained standing. “You’re looking
much more even these days,” she said, pointing toward the repaired half of its chest.

“Creator Tali’Zorah explained our error. We do not wish to complicate our interactions with organics. The alteration was necessary.” It stood evenly on both feet, regarding her with almost no movement or expression.

“How did your mission with Tali go? Were you able to work well together?” Shepard leaned toward the geth, forearms on her knees.

The unit inclined its head. “Creator Tali’Zorah demonstrated competence and a strong ability to assess situations and adapt.”

Shepard chuckled and nodded, her head bobbing a little. “She said much the same about working with you.” Pausing, she took a deep breath. “I want to team the two of you up with Rael’Zorah to infiltrate Saren’s base on Virmire and rescue the quarian pilgrims. I would like the team to be three geth and three quarians. I’ve already sent a message to Tali, and she’s making arrangements for a quarian Marine to join us. Is there any way that two other geth units could participate?”

Legion’s head flaps danced in several waves, his hands and head moving in a remarkable simulation of a person pondering out a difficult question. “You wish to set precedent for cooperation and trust between the creators and the geth?”

Shepard pressed her lips together, a crease pinching between her eyebrows. “Yeah, I do.” She shrugged, just a quick pop of her shoulders. “Do you see a better way to bring your two sides together? If geth can help rescue hundreds of quarians . . . if quarians can work with geth in a spirit of peace . . . maybe we can start to make some real steps. Maybe it doesn’t all have to end in war.”

After another thirty seconds or so of his contemplative activity, Legion inclined its head. “Although this unit is unique, Prime platforms are command and control units, therefore have a degree of autonomous utility. However, a geth ship within broadcast or tightbeam range would facilitate greatest utility.”

Shepard considered that for a moment. “Okay. Prime units are dicey, a ship even more so, but see what you can arrange. We’ll present the idea to Rael’Zorah tomorrow morning and make final preparations based on how he reacts. No doubt it will involve yelling.”

“Do you require anything further, Shepard-Captain?”

She shook her head, but then sat up, raising a hand to stop it as it turned to leave. “No wait. I do have a question. How did the three of you get across that minefield on Luna?” She stood and took a step toward the geth.

“Jenkins-Corporal suggested welding together wheels blown off the armoured vehicle into units of two and rolling them ahead of our advance,” Legion replied. “The improvised apparatus cleared a path sufficient for passage.”

Shepard gave him a lopsided grin and a slight nod. “Smart cookies, the whole lot of you. That will be all, Legion. Well, except that, it’s been a pleasure getting to know you at least a little. And thank you for helping save both my team and myself over the last few missions. I’m glad to have shot you.”

The geth’s head flaps all rose and fluttered in an exaggerated wave at that. “Trust furthers mutual goals,” it replied simply.

“Yes, it sure does.” She tilted her head toward the door. “Dismissed. See you tomorrow at 0900.”
“Affirmative.”

Tali caught up with Shepard as the captain stopped to check in with Pressly, ensuring that he had all his ducks lined up to get them resupplied during their short stay on the Citadel.

“I just saw Legion,” the young quarian said, falling in next to Shepard as the Captain strode for the stairs down to the crew deck. “He said you asked about bringing in geth.”

Shepard nodded. “I did. He said Primes would be the most autonomous, and I’d certainly welcome the extra firepower, but I’m worried about your father.” She snapped a salute to the guard at the door, then stopped, ushering Tali ahead of her. “How badly is he going to freak out when we talk about bringing geth along?”

“I’ve already brought it up with him, and warned Kal that he’d be working with geth if he accepted the mission. Kal will be fine, I think, once he meets Legion.” Tali trotted down the stairs, stopping at the elevator door. “Father expressed concerns.” She giggled, Shepard assumed because of the understatement involved. “But when I showed him my suit records from Luna, and he saw how Legion saved us more than once, it seemed to help.”

Shepard palmed the elevator control then turned to give Tali her full attention. “Kal? I assume that is the Marine who will be joining us?” The familiar, relaxed way Tali spoke of the new quarian went a long way to easing the gnawing in Shepard’s guts.

“Yes.” Tali wrung her hands a little. “His name is Kal’Reegar, and he’s one of the most experienced Marines in the flotilla.”

“You know him well?” Shepard glanced at the elevator as it arrived, the door opening. “You trust him?”

“With my life. He is father’s favourite choice to make sure I stay out of trouble when necessary.” She shrugged. “But he’s both reasonable and practical. A good balance for father’s volatility.”

“Excellent. I look forward to meeting him.” Shepard stepped into the elevator. “Keep your father on a short leash when we get to the Citadel,” she said, smiling to lighten her tone. “He gets himself arrested, I’ll leave him behind.”

Tali chuckled. “I’ll make sure to have credits for bail.” Bouncing a couple of times on her toes, the quarian took off for the gym.

“Shepard!” Wrex bellowed as she stepped out of the elevator. Waving one massive arm, he beckoned her over.

A bright, genuine grin jumped onto her face when he practically charged her, ushering her over to his stash with a massive arm around her shoulders. Seeing the energy fueling every movement, the inspired fire burning behind his eyes, it made the bright webs of connection glow deep inside her. Nihlus’s joke about the house becoming empty rang all too true. She’d broken a long-standing personal directive with the crazy, mismatched members of her team. In a couple of months, she’d come to love them all, and now most of them would be leaving her.

“You’re such an idiot,” she grumbled under her breath.

She yelped as Wrex welcomed her to his corner of the cargo bay with a slap on the shoulder that sent her reeling into a crate. As she shoved herself back onto her feet, she looked around at all the crates. They took up a good quarter of the space. “What are your plans for all this stuff, Wrex? I’d let you keep it here, but the way we collect strays and equipment, I don’t know how long we’ll be
able to spare the room.”

“Someone is meeting us at the dock to take it all back to Tuchanka. She’ll keep it hidden until I can get back there and make sure everything gets sent where it needs to go.” He harrumphed and boosted his armor higher on his shoulders. “I want every clan to get what is theirs. I won’t tolerate clans going to war over great-aunt Charza’s gold-plated shotgun.”

She grinned, tilting her head as one of her eyebrows migrated for her hairline. “Gold-plated shotgun? This is something that exists?”

He slapped the top of the closest crate, her ears ringing as the bang echoed. “That thing caused four clan wars before it vanished.” A throaty cough of laughter rolled from his wide, toothy mouth. “I’d show you, but I’ve seen the way you attach to guns, Shepard. I’d hate to have to kill you to get it back.”

“Aw, come on. Think how hot I’d look toting a gold-plated gun.” She struck an impressive pose with an imaginary shotgun, head tilted up, the hero staring out into the stars. “You know you can see it, Wrex.”

“I can, Shepard, and it scares me.” He slapped her on the shoulder again, nearly dropping her to the floor.

Snatching at his armour, Shepard staggered upright and stepped in close, the grin fading from her face. Lowering her voice, she asked, “So, this person is someone you trust?”

He nodded, his entire body bristling, enlarging in a way that told her that he didn’t just trust her, she meant a great deal to him. Whomever she was, he’d defend her to the death. With Wrex, that amounted to the only endorsement Shepard needed.

“I trust her with the future of my people, Shepard. She’s a shaman of the female clan.” As he spoke, his voice rose in volume and strength until it rang off the bulkheads. “Her life is keeping the females connected to what it means to be krogan, connected to Tuchanka, so that when our people rise again, it’s from a foundation of wisdom and strength.” He stopped and glanced around as if realizing that everyone could hear him and all that passion amounted to something to be embarrassed about.

Shepard braced a hand against his upper arm. “Sounds like you’ll make the perfect team. Please, make sure to introduce us.” She gave him a shove that didn’t even rock him. “Damn, I need to work out.” A quick wink met his throaty chuckle then she struck out for Ashley’s corner.

The chief looked up as Shepard approached. “Morning, ma’am.” She grinned. “Been hearing some freaky scuttlebutt this morning.”

Shepard leaned against the chief’s work bench and crossed her arms. “You know better than to listen to scuttlebutt, Ash.” Leaning in, she gave the chief a sly, secretive smile. “The truth is so much stranger. The rachni queen helped Nihlus and I sort out the beacon vision. I relived the last few days of the Prothean-Reaper war through the eyes of this remarkable Prothean, Commander Tashac Jacar.” She let out a soft cough of laughter. “Wow, that felt a lot like bragging.”

Williams stared at her for a moment, then shook her head. “Every day I wake up a little more certain that I took a debilitating head injury on Eden Prime and am in a coma in a hospital somewhere.”

Waggling her head side to side a little, Shepard shrugged. “Also a possibility.”
Ashley put down the rifle she was working on. “Actually, ma’am, there was something I wanted to talk to you about.” She turned to face Shepard, leaning her hip against the workbench as well. “Cerberus sneaking those advanced mechs into the base on Luna . . .” She let out a grumbling sigh. “I’ve been watching Legion, Tali, and Garrus take those things apart, and they scare me, ma’am.” She turned to look at the tables where pieces of the mechs lay spread out. “We have no idea what Cerberus is up to, and if they’re capable of tech like that . . . if they’re able to create an AI out of what they found in the training base . . .” She shrugged. “Who knows what else they’re capable of.”

Gratitude hit Shepard square in the chest, nearly disarming her. For all she doubted the ideas of fate or a higher power that orchestrated the universe, could random chance really be credited with bringing that group of unique people together? “You think we should be keeping a closer eye on them?” she asked at last.

“Yes, ma’am.” Ash nodded, straightening to military-starched formality. “They’re dangerous as hell, and we have no idea what their agenda or allegiance is. We need to get people in there and soon, before the Alliance realizes how dangerous Cerberus really is and screws up planting their own moles.”

Shepard nodded, a half smile pulling back one side of her mouth. “You volunteering, Williams?”

Ash jerked back as if Shepard had slapped her. “Me?” After a moment of staring, her jaw hanging slack, Ash’s face crumpled into a thoughtful scowl. “Me.”

Shepard shifted a little, returning to the same relaxed angle against the bench. “Well, you have a history with a credible reason to resent aliens, while being one of the most loyal Alliance soldiers I’ve ever met.” She stood, wanting to merely plant the seed and let Ash decide what to do with it. “There’s no one I would trust more to do it.” She squeezed Ashley’s shoulder. “We all have choices to make and risks to assume to fight this battle. Maybe this is yours.”

Ashley nodded, but Shepard could see that her attention had focused inward. “Yes, ma’am.”
Getting soft, Shepard.

His brow plates raised, the stare sharpening to the point where she wondered if he suspected the nature of her plan. “Why aren’t you taking it?”

“I am taking it. Don’t worry, Nihlus, I won’t be going anywhere without an escort until you guys meet me right back here in a couple of hours.” She winked, and gave him a gentle push toward the elevator. “Go on. Let’s get our work done so we can relax. We’re right back on the rollercoaster in the morning.”

Garrus lingered as the others got in the lift. “Shepard . . .”

“Stop being a worry-wart and watch those three for me.”

He stepped closer and leaned down, his back turned to the others as if walling them off. “What about the Council?”

“I’ll meet with Udina and then decide. Don’t worry, and get moving. You promised me a proper date.” She grinned and reached up to brush his cheek.

“Shepard!” Wrex’s bellow rang out like the answer to prayer.

“Go on,” she prompted, walking Garrus the two steps to the elevator. “I’ll have Wrex stick with me until I get to my meeting.” She squeezed his hand. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

Watching him leave, she grinned and shook her head, frustration and gratitude duking it out in her chest. Trying to order Garrus out of his over-protectiveness was like trying to order the seasons to realign. One day, she suspected her tolerance would reach a breaking point where he either had to give it up, or they’d end up in a dual to the death. If that turned out to be the case, she liked her odds.

Once the doors closed, Shepard spun and strode over to where Wrex waited. Beside him stood a figure almost completely shrouded within multiple layers of clothes. A large flat hat structure covered the top of the individual’s head while their entire face, except a pair of large amber eyes, hid behind a veil.

Smiling, Shepard nodded to the newcomer, then looked to Wrex.

The battlemaster stepped forward. “Shepard, this is the Shaman of the female Clan Urdnot,” Wrex said, holding a hand out to indicate the shrouded figure. “Shaman, this is Captain Shepard.”

Shepard offered her hand, not at all surprised by the strength behind the shaman’s grip. Despite being almost invisible behind her wardrobe, she looked every inch a krogan. “I’m very pleased to meet you,” she said, flashing a bright smile. “Wrex is an important part of my team, and it’s wonderful to meet someone important to him.”

Wrex cleared his throat and buffeted Shepard hard enough to stagger her.

“I mean, of course,” she sputtered, trying to catch her balance fast enough to preserve a little dignity, “important to his plans for the krogan people.”

The shaman gave a single, regal dip of her head as she released Shepard’s hand. “Thank you for helping recover these priceless pieces of krogan history, Captain.” The female’s voice reached down inside Shepard, warm and eloquent, stately and strong. “Wrex has told me of your expectations of the krogan people.” She drew herself up, not quite reaching Wrex’s stature thanks
to lacking his massive hump, but no less impressive.

“I . . .” Shepard wasn’t sure what she intended to say, the word tumbling out as if to apologize or make an excuse, but then the female cut the air with a hand, and it no longer mattered. If any doubts about the wisdom of encouraging Wrex’s unification plans had wormed their way through Shepard’s thoughts, the shaman’s voice and that gesture—the sheer strength of will that shone through a single hand movement—dissolved the doubts into bright glimmers of hope.

“We will see these things done, Captain. The krogan have never been entrusted with tasks that required them to do more than discharge large numbers of bullets into an enemy. Your trust . . .” Those huge, gorgeous eyes blinked, a gesture just as controlled as the rest. “Your belief in our people will prove to be well founded. Your trust is an unprecedented honour.”

At that moment, her pulse pounding hard in her throat, warmth radiating under her skin, Shepard felt herself honoured. She opened her mouth to speak again, but again the shaman beat her to the punch.

“We will allow you to attend to your business, Captain,” she said. “I find myself eager to meet the rachni queen.” She held out her hand, shaking Shepard’s with that same, vice-like grip. “I hope the future provides us the opportunity to get to know one another better.”

“So do I.” Shepard grinned then shot a wink at Wrex. “Help me keep my word and ride the elevator down with me?”

When he nodded, she headed over to hit the control, allowing him and his amazing, formidable partner a moment. He strode in to stand next to her a few seconds later. “The shaman and me . . . we’re not . . .” He huffed for a moment. “. . . anything more than . . .”

Tickled by his discomfort, Shepard grinned. “Not more than what, Wrex?”

He slapped her on the back, sending her reeling into the door. “Stop that!” She dusted her armour off. “You’re going to break something I need.” After a moment, she shrugged. “I like her, though. She’s tough. A good match for your stubborn, old grouchiness.”

He let out a harrumph. “She makes me seem like a cuddly, old lap varren. And that’s before she gets angry.”

Shepard nodded. “That’s because under all that ‘grrr argh’, you’re a big, squishy, old softy.” Luckily, the doors opened as she heard his hand coming. Slipping out, she turned back and grinned. “The truth hurts, don’t it, big guy? Glory hallelujah.” When he moved to follow her out of the lift, she shook her head. “It’s okay. I’m not leaving C-Sec Academy. Head on up and get your business sorted.”

A withering scowl answered that, but she just waved and turned away, scanning the crowd, and a crowd it was. C-Sec officers and civilians came and went through a handful of entrances and down hallways leading off in every direction. She glanced at her chrono, praying to the god of punctuality that she wouldn’t start the day by making a bad impression.

No, she still had a few minutes to find her target, so set out, weaving through the crowd. God, she hated the Citadel. Well, the Citadel and most anywhere more than three people showed up at the same time. Being short particularly sucked, people walking into her and banging her in the head with their elbows, especially the turians.

“Shepard!”
She spun, her heart hammering as it jumped into her throat. “Sweet baby Jesus, Garrus! You scared the crap out of me.” The exclamation came out harsh and exasperated, but mostly because of the sudden rush of guilt that accompanied his appearance. He’d almost found her out. “I thought you were supposed to be looking after Ash and Sparky.”

He strode over, parting the crowd with enviable ease. “We’re waiting for a cab.” His hand lifted to cradle her jaw. “Come with us. We can endure Udina for a few minutes.”

She stared into his eyes for a handful of heartbeats, then let out a long sigh. “Garrus, you’re going to mother-hen me to death. Go, look after them and trust me. I have no plans to go running around the Citadel alone.” She leaned up to brush a kiss against his mandible. “You and I are going to have to chat about this idea you’ve got stuck in your brain that I’m too reckless and stupid to take care of myself. I’m a grown woman and your commanding officer, so go, act like it. You can be the boyfriend later.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He nodded and backed away. “In a couple of hours.”

Shepard let out a long, slow breath and glanced at her chrono again. Rapidly approaching being late, she remained in place, watching until he got in the cab with the others and took off. “Don’t make it easy to ditch you or anything,” she muttered, turning back into the crowd.

By the time she saw familiar colony markings above C-Sec issued armour, claustrophobia had her hands balled into fists, the need to run pounding in her chest and between her eyes, her heart racing like a rabbit being chased by wolves.

“Here goes nothing,” she sighed, making a beeline across the lobby. Strong, back straight, smile welcoming, she forced her way through the early morning throng. Her target made her go all the way to him. She pressed her lips tight, squashing the cheeky smile that told him she knew what he was doing, and just held out her hand. It trembled a little, betraying the matching flutter in her belly.

The turian stared at her hand for a long moment before reaching out and taking it. His grip firm, he held on, staring into her eyes as if searching for something. When he let go, she couldn’t tell if he’d found it or not, and the nervous flutter turned into her fire-breathing acrobat troupe.

“Hello, sir, I’m Captain Jane Shepard,” she said, pleased that the words came out confident. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He nodded toward a corridor off to her right and held out an arm to usher her that way. “I wish I could say the same, Captain. You’ll forgive me if I reserve judgement on that.” He set out, maintaining an inviting pace.

She smiled and bowed her head a little. “Of course.” She walked at his side, glad she didn’t need to chase him. It gave her a little hope for her mission.

He led her past a waiting area and then down another corridor. The surroundings passed her by in a series of vague impressions—wall colour, lots of people in blue uniforms—as she studied the turian walking at her side. Despite his carefully cultivated and formidable aura of command, something about him sent the acrobats out for coffee, allowing her nerves to settle.

“My son looks well,” he said.

Shepard’s smile widened, a grateful flush warming her cheeks as he opened the conversation. “Yes, sir. He’s healthy and fit.”
Herros Vakarian stopped at an office door and held out a hand, inviting her to precede him. She did, her gaze slipping over the standard office decor without pausing until she spotted a holo on a shelf. Unable to hold back a chuckle at the gangly teenage turian pictured with his parents and sister, she walked over to look at it.

“Please, take a seat,” he said, calling her back.

When she turned to accept his invitation, she saw him watching her with a careful, calculating stare. She walked over, perching on the edge of a chair facing the desk. Air stopped going in and out of her lungs for a moment, the room spinning slowly around her as reality crashed in on her. Only one solution had presented itself to the problem of getting council permission to attack Virmire. Only one door opened before her that gave her hope for saving Nihlus and her crew.

Now, you just need to be brave enough to step through it, Janey. Hopefully the torin on the other side of that desk will help you cross the threshold.

She gestured toward the picture. “Beautiful family,” she said, feeling more than a little awkward. Oh God, was that what it amounted to? Her being there? She needed a dad to hold her hand, even if it was someone else’s dad?

His eyes narrowed a little, but he nodded and sat. “Yes, they are.” He laid his forearms on his desk, his brow plates lowering. “Thank you for messaging me to keep me updated on how Garrus is faring, although, I’m surprised that you’d make the effort considering what you must have heard about me.”

Shepard shook her head and met his gaze with an open one. “What I’ve heard about you, sir, speaks to a father who loves and wants the best for his son, even though you don’t always see things eye to eye.” She let out a long sigh. Yep, she wanted a dad. “It’s also what brings me here. Garrus trusts and respects you with a confidence that I’m hoping I can count on.”

The elder Vakarian frowned and leaned back, his forearm braced against the arm of his chair. “Very well, Captain. Why don’t you start at the beginning?”

Shepard held out the datapad, but froze before it got close enough for him to take it. The moment of truth. The first step. A little further and she’d be set on her path. Fear and regret formed a small thunderhead in her chest, but she packed it down. The council, Saren . . . the universe had left only one door open. She cracked her neck and leaned forward the rest of the way, passing the datapad over.

“As you know,” she said, her voice burrowing its way out, gaining strength as she spoke, “we’ve been investigating Saren. What we’ve discovered has been . . . terrifying to say the least. The information on that datapad is everything we’ve discovered. All our evidence, interviews with key witnesses to Saren’s activities, all my logs and mission reports. I’m hoping that after you review them, you’ll be able to help me.”

He nodded and activated the datapad, but held her stare instead of looking at it. “Why, Captain?”

Shepard frowned and shifted in her chair, that stare pinning her like a bug on a board. “Sir?”

“Why are you coming to me with this?” His head tilted to the other side, but the stare didn’t ease up at all, demanding honesty.

A long sigh deflated her a little, the truth coming hard as she forced herself to hear it out loud. “Because I’m about to show my hand, sir, which means that I’ll probably be dead by this time next
...which means I’ll probably be dead by this time next week. . .

Fifty thousand kilos of bricks and rock made out of hopes and plans that would never come to pass crashed down on her, crushing all air and feeling and emotion from her in a soft ‘oof’ of sound. Death loomed over every soldier. At the beginning of her career, she regarded it as a teasing lover that cajoled and dared her to dance as close as she could. As she grew more seasoned . . . She chuffed silently. Oh, who was she kidding? After Elysium . . . death settled into a silent companion. She no longer courted it, but felt it there like an old friend willing to welcome her home.

Shepard watched Garrus’s father read, her eyes wandering over the similarities and differences. Salty tears burned as she saw the torin that Garrus would become one day. The gentle gravity, the passion for what was right undimmed, the honour honed more keenly for having seen the lack of it . . . that all-seeing stare deeper, more intense, and yet more forgiving for the experience of years lived . . . pain suffered and healed. God, she wanted to know that torin, to look into his eyes and see her reflection there.

Blinking quickly, she averted her gaze, staring out the window as she breathed through the pain of the fist clenched around her heart. All those years she’d teased death, tweaking its nose at every turn, but it kept its back turned, not ready for her. Now it opened its arms wide, ready to catch her, and panic screamed in the back of her mind, the urge to run twitching along her nerves like a tick.

And all because you think you might actually have fallen. That’s a huge step for you, Janey, but you know that life was never anything meant for you. All possibility of the adoring husband, kids . . . cat and dog sleeping by the fire . . . it all vanished in the forest on Mindoir. Your life has been building to this and nothing but this. It’s not a tragedy, not if you can save the rest of them . . . give them all shots at that future.

“You can’t go to the council,” Garrus’s father said, breaking through the voice in her head, interrupting the sorrow and panic enough for her to actually settle into her chair.

She opened her mouth to protest . . . to insist that he believe, but he shook his head, silencing her. She bristled for a fight, but then saw that all suspicion had disappeared from his stare, replaced by concern.

He held up a hand, palm facing her, asking for her forbearance. “I’m sure you don’t intend to accuse the council of anything, but they’ll know, Shepard. You tell them about Saren, you demand they do something about him, they’ll know that you’re aware how deeply they’re involved.” His brow plates arched, and he leaned forward, forearms braced against the edge of his desk. “And you’re right, you’ll be dead within the week.”

Shepard nodded, seeing all of her own regrets reflected back at her from his eyes and expression. They appeared poignant rather than tragic in reflection, and she took a deep, steadying breath. “It can’t be helped, sir. Without the council declaring Saren a rogue agent, I’ll never be able to take out his base on Virmire. At least, not without turning my crew, the quarians, the geth . . . and possibly even the Alliance into terrorists. I don’t have a choice here. If I don’t run him to ground, eventually he’ll find one of the keys and open the floodgates of armageddon.”
The elder Vakarian nodded, straightening a little as if infected by her resolve. “You’ve been making some strange allies.” He set the datapad down. “Krogan, geth, and rachni.”

Shepard melted down into the chair as he accepted what she’d shown him. It felt liberating, the millstone hanging around her neck lightening as she shared the burden, at least a little. No one could scrub her half of the horror of what had been done to the Prothean Empire from her head, no one could alter her fate but someone she could trust, someone with the power to make sure the fight continued . . . it helped.

“I’ve been amassing funds as well, as you saw. If something does happen to me, it will all be transferred over to Garrus’s control. He’s going to need help. Nihlus will be some help, of course, but if he’s not dead as well, he just doesn’t have any sort of pull. I’m trying to set things up so that what victories we pull together, the credit goes to people with credibility.”

Shepard laughed, but it came out exhausted and resigned. “I’ve got this planned to survive me, but . . . .”

“My son loves you.” The hushed words hung in the air, a vaguely worded plea for her survival.

“He fusses over me.” She chuckled. “He’s a good torin. Annoyingly over-protective, but a very good torin. Luckiest day of my life, that day I walked into Dr. Michel’s clinic.” A tight-lipped smile accompanied her shrug. “He’s going to need you.”

Letting out a sigh that sounded remarkably like a growl, he nodded. “I will be there for him . . ..” His mandibles fluttered. “. . . and for you as you need me.”

A wide, genuine smile spread across her lips. Like son; like father. She took a deep breath and checked her chrono. “Thank you, sir. In fact, I could use an escort to the council chambers. I made a promise that I wouldn’t go anywhere alone.” Gratitude filled her, sunshine pouring through a break in heavy clouds, making the rain sparkle like falling diamonds. To be believed by someone outside her crew, someone of influence and part of the system . . . it amounted to a mind-boggling gift. A gift that made sure her people would have what they needed to beat the Reapers.

She’d taken the first step, and knowing that no matter what, her people would be okay made it a little bit easier to take the second.

He stood and held out his hand toward the door. “I’ll take you wherever you need to go.”

Chapter End Notes

AO3 is now caught up with my writing, so will be updating 3 times a week max now. I have to get Act One done before August 3rd so that the beginning of Act Two coming out as part of the MEBB14 doesn't spoiler the end. :(
Chapter Summary

Mass Effect - Future Imperfect Chapter Fifty Three

Shepard tried to convince Garrus’s father to let her get on the elevator at the council tower alone, but in true Vakarian fashion, he refused. Even though she appreciated having someone watching her back, the thought of tangling him up in her mess registered even higher on the abhorrent scale than bringing Nihlus or Garrus into it. So, she jammed herself up against the doors, her back to him, and put on a show of looking more than a little paranoid to be stuck in an elevator with a turian.

“I should stay with you, at least until the stairs. I’m frequently in the chamber. No one will think twice about it,” he whispered.

“No.” She shuffled a little further away from him. “Please, wait somewhere down below. I couldn’t bear to look into Garrus’s eyes and tell him I’d gotten you killed.”

“But . . .” He started to step forward, and she spun to face him, backing into the corner.

And the best performance of ‘trapped in a slow-moving elevator with a pervert’ goes to . . .

“Please. Let me protect the few people I can. I knew I was walking this klick on my own, sir. I’m okay.” She put up a hand to fend him off and whispered, “You know, my performance might be a little more convincing if you weren’t standing two meters away.”

He closed on her, not touching her, but pushing good and tight into her space. “And if something happens to you, how do I explain to my son that I just walked away?”

She gave him a tight smile, ducking her head to avoid the camera. “They aren’t going to do anything yet. They’ll let me go to Virmire and put on a show of cleaning up the mess. Thank you for offering, though. I can see where your son gets his overprotective streak.”

She winked and then jumped as the doors opened, backing out as though she’d been slapped. “Excuse me?” she bellowed, loud enough that it even made her wince. “I should report you for even suggesting such a thing, Officer. I don’t know what ‘climbing the big tower’ is, but I assure you, I’m not interested.”

The shock on his face almost cracked her indignant mask, but she just bit her lip and kept backing up.

Herros recouped and shook his head, mandibles flicking as he suppressed a smile. “Very nice. I hope the executor doesn’t get his hands on this vid.” His gaze softened. “I can see why Garrus likes you. He’s always had a weak spot for crazy.” He sobered and backed away from the door. “Good luck, Captain.”

She turned and marched up to the door into the council chamber, but stopped before hitting the control. Pressing the heel of her hand over her heart, she closed her eyes, counting her breaths.
You can do this. Warrior inside and out. For everyone.

Then Tashac Jacar stepped forward, her ghost even more driven to ensure that her empire hadn’t died in vain than she’d been while alive—that all of her children had not died in vain. A fierce, tight twist of Shepard’s gut greeted the agony of Attit’s empty shell lying so heavy and so still in her arms. Pressing her eyes closed even tighter, she could recall the sensation of his first movement within her . . . within Tashac. Her body tingled, warm and delicious shivers radiating through her as her memory skipped back, recalling every caress and ecstasy involved in his creation.

She laughed softly through the dew that misted along her eyelashes. How could she regret not having a family when one lived inside her mind, as real as anything she’d ever experienced? For the memory of those people and for the sake of the ones she loved, she could soar into the sun on her wings of wax. They all mattered so very much more than her fear and regrets.

She opened her eyes, squared her shoulders, and palmed the door control, stepping through into the softly lit beauty of the council chamber. Looking up at the blossoming trees glowing in the lights, she let their serenity seep into her, percolating through every cell until her heart slowed and her nerves calmed. Long, silent strides carried her the length of the chamber, passing rock gardens, fountains, and people of every race. She allowed the conversations around her to register, but didn’t focus on any single one. They amounted to the same things. Who rose, who fell, who to curry favour with, who owed favours. Rumours, gossip, speculation. The usual underpinnings of life and politics.

Udina bristled like an angry cactus at the top of the last set of stairs. “Captain.” He looked behind her, craning his neck. “Where is Spectre Kryik?”

“Not here.” She held up the datapad. “I have all the information the council needs. Shall we? I don’t want to keep them waiting.”

“Wait just a second, Shepard, I need to see your evidence before you present it to anyone.” He held his hand out for the datapad. “If you think I’m just going to let you . . . .”

Shepard turned to walk the last mile down the council’s gangplank, glancing over the side as she wondered if the glass below would hold should Udina throw her off. If the glass didn’t hold, she’d be in for a long drop with a quick stop.

“Captain Shepard,” Tevos said, her voice serene but with a very audible undercurrent of ‘If you’re wasting our time . . . .’ “Ambassador Udina informed us that you have evidence to prove that Saren was behind the attack on Eden Prime?”

Shepard stopped at the edge and looked down. Yep, a long way down. Snapping her head up, she stared at them, letting her knowledge of what they intended to do fill her with molten steel. “Madam Councillor, Ambassador Udina was correct. I have evidence that Saren not only attacked Eden Prime, but that he did so as a first step in gathering the intelligence and resources he needs to bring about the destruction of all advanced sapient life in the galaxy.”

Beside her Udina groaned and bowed his head, his palm impacting his brow with an audible thwack. “Shepard . . . .” The growl that followed her name made her take a step back from the edge and its very fragile-looking glass. “What in the name of . . . .?”

The council members stared at Shepard as if she’d suddenly sprouted another head, but she merely stared back, waiting for them to take the bait.

“Is there a reason that Spectre Kryik isn’t at this meeting, Captain?” Sparatus asked after several
seconds passed, his voice as warm and reassuring as a shark’s grin. “I believe our time will be more productive if we stick to the facts and avoid indulging your flair for the dramatic.”

Shepard looked down, a scowl puckering the skin between her eyebrows, using the moment to gather her confidence. Dramatics indeed: the next few moments needed to feature the best performance of her life. After a breath, she looked up, locking stares with each councillor for a moment. “I no longer believe Spectre Kryik to be reliable. I’m not even certain he is still working toward the best interests of this Council or the people it serves.”

She gave them a moment to absorb that, expecting one of them to speak out, but instead, they just stared at her. Sparatus folded his arms, the only outward sign of impatience on their parts. Encouraged, she forged ahead. “When we investigated Feros, he insisted on leading the second team to Exogeni headquarters, where all the information Saren wanted was catalogued. Conveniently, Saren brought the colony down on my team’s heads while ignoring the other building entirely.”

She winced, hating the sound of the words as they came out . . . her lip curling at the despicable nature of what they meant. Betrayal, on every front. How dare he, after she trusted him with so much? “On Omega, he led a direct assault on the base Saren’s henchmen were using, killing all the Blood Pack involved and destroying any chance we had to follow them back to Saren. When we reached Noveria, he suggested that I drop in the Mako against executive board law while he stayed in Port Hanshan running some sort of covert op.” Breaking off with a helpless flip of her hands, she looked up, meeting their stares again.

The worst of Nihlus’s misdeeds waited for last, but how to even say it? After she’d saved his life . . . how could he have . . .? Shepard shook her head and paced a couple of steps one way and then back. “On Tuntau, he and Saren met alone while Saren’s geth kept my team busy. I followed them, but all I heard was something about Saren getting Nihlus to kill me. I opened fire immediately, but Nihlus didn’t fire on Saren until he started getting away, and even then it was so sporadic that I suspected Nihlus of just putting up appearances.”

She shrugged and clenched her jaw, forcing her back straight. “He’s my partner, and I hate suspecting him of anything let alone something as heinous as betraying the council, but one can only turn a blind eye for so long.”

The three keyed information into their consoles and traded looks before Tevos nodded. “Very well, Captain. Present your evidence.”

Shepard sent them the file she’d prepared, then stood at parade rest while they sorted through it. When they listened to the audio file that Tali recorded aboard Sovereign, Tevos looked up.

“I know the other voice on this recording. It’s Matriarch Benezia,” the councillor exclaimed, showing enough surprise that she either didn’t know about Benezia or she needed to give Shepard acting lessons. Maybe Saren didn’t entirely trust the council either.

“She died on Noveria,” Shepard reported. “Killed by rachni just before the antimatter bombardment.”

The councillor’s ageless face creased into a scowl, looking genuinely dismayed by the news. “Did she say anything? Did she tell you why she was working with Saren?”

Shepard answered the question with a sad shake of her head. “I’m sorry, Madam Councillor, she was already dead when we reached the inner laboratory. It looked like she and her people put up one hell of a fight though.”
Still looking grief-stricken, the asari looked back to the information. “So, the OSD you found on Matriarch Benezia confirms that Saren has a base on Virmire where he is breeding krogan and holding hundreds of quarians hostage.” She shook her head and looked up at the salarian councillor.

“This evidence is damning,” Valern said. He looked up at Udina. “Why didn’t you bring us this evidence as it came in, Ambassador? We could have taken action weeks ago, perhaps even prevented the death of one of the galaxy’s wisest and most powerful matriarchs.”

Shepard stepped in front of Udina. “I didn’t send any of it to him, Councillors.” She cast a disgusted sneer over her shoulder at Udina, almost feeling bad for him as his face turned a dark, bruised purple. Almost. “If I was a Spectre, I wouldn’t report to him, so I thought it best to leave it to the council to decide what information they wished to release and to whom.”

“A wise decision, Shepard,” Sparatus said, his tone haughty enough to make Udina sputter. “You’ve done well in your investigation.” He straightened, his face looking pained for the admission. “You might have what it takes to be a Spectre, after all.”

“Yes, an instinct for discretion is not something that can be learned,” Valern agreed. “Fine work, Shepard.”

“Thank you, Councillors, I just did what I hoped was best for the council and the galaxy at large.” As she gave them a slight but humble bow of her head, she could hear Udina on a build-up to detonation behind her. He’d make her pay, but in that moment, she couldn’t care less.

Tevos looked up from her console to stare at her fellow councillors for a moment before turning to Shepard. She nodded, once. “Very well, Captain Shepard, we accept your evidence against Saren. He will be stripped of his Spectre status, and you are cleared to pursue him to his base on Virmire and apprehend him by any means necessary.”

Shepard bowed her head again, honoured by their praise. “Yes, ma’am. Thank you, Councillors. We’ll be heading out in just over twenty hours.”

“Good work, Shepard. You’re dismissed,” Sparatus said. After just a beat, he looked past her to Udina. “Ambassador, please remain. We wish to speak to you further.”

Heart in her throat, half expecting them to call her back and tell her that they saw through every lie and half-truth she’d fed them, Shepard turned on her heel. Meeting Udina’s death glare without flinching, she nodded. “Good day, Ambassador.” If glares came in calibres, Udina’s would have blown a hole through her that cut her in half, but she just strode past him, hurrying to the stairs. She had council business to attend to.

She didn’t breathe until she hit the elevator control and it headed down to the presidium. A long sigh poured out of her, leaving her weak in the knees and slumped against the elevator wall. She’d done it. She’d held onto her guts long enough to get the job done.

* * * * *

“What have you done?” A thunderhead of turian anger roared across the bar. The genteel embassy-worker patrons dashed around tables and leaped out of the way, afraid to be struck by lightning as the tempest stormed past, taking out everything in its path.

Shepard glared at Garrus. “I told you we should have gone to Chora’s Den. He’s scaring the stiffs.”
She turned to lean against the bar, pointedly ignoring Nihlus until he got close enough to stop shouting. “Cranberry juice, please.” She smiled at the bartender, the human glancing back and forth between Nihlus and her as if to ask if she expected the Spectre to be a problem.

Oh yeah. Of a variety that you wouldn’t believe, buddy.

She accepted her juice, thanked the bartender, and turned to look up as Nihlus lurched to a stop, looming over her. A sad sort of sigh, almost regret, whispered from her as she looked into his eyes and shrugged. “I went to the council, presented the evidence, and got us permission to attack Virmire. ‘Cleared to apprehend him using any means necessary,’ Tevos said.” She took slow deep breaths, keeping her body language calm and appeasing.

He wasn’t angry, not really, but even as angry as he thought he was, in a moment or two, Nihlus would figure out why she’d gone alone. She didn’t possess the foggiest clue how he’d react once he did. That her decision would hurt him—would hurt several of her people . . . she couldn’t even look Garrus in the eye yet—formed her only regret. Still, hurt . . . anger . . . whatever else he had to dish out, she’d take, if it meant saving his life.

“Come on, if we’re going to discuss this, it should be elsewhere.” She started toward the door, but Nihlus stepped in her path.

Raking his talons over his fringe, Nihlus towered over her, vibrating like a live high voltage cable. “Spirits, Shepard. Why’d you go alone?” He stormed a few strides one way, then back. “I should have been there. Damn it, you can’t go into situations like that without me.”

“Says the turian Spectre I had to wrestle off the ramp of the Normandy to keep from heading out on his own on Eden Prime.” A gentle smile fluttered over her lips, dying almost as soon as it was born. She shrugged and cracked open the bottle of juice, the sense of betrayal that poked her in the ribs during the meeting evaporating. “You know why I went alone, Nihlus.”

He bristled, mandibles flared with frustration and anger . . . then she saw realization dawn, followed by his eerie, absolute stillness. Long moments passed as the Spectre just stared, not blinking, not even appearing to breathe. Shepard forced herself to hold his gaze, keeping hers kind but firm. She’d stepped out onto her path, the only path she could live with. He needed to come to terms with it.

“No!” he cried, the word half-roar, half keen, the stillness crashing into an avalanche frenetic movement, of not knowing what to do with himself. “No!” She watched the rage disappear into fear and grief behind his eyes. “What did you do, Shepard? Dear spirits. What did you do?”

Shepard cast a sidelong glance at Garrus. He knew she’d gone to the meeting, and she could tell from his expression that he suspected what she’d done, but she hadn’t told him. She met Nihlus’s confused, terrified stare with one she hoped inspired calm. “First of all, lower your voice for pity’s sake. You’re making a scene.” She sighed and ran her hands over the belly of her armour as if she could straighten it. “I told the council that you weren’t there because I can’t trust you.” He flinched as if she’d slapped him, but she pushed on. “I told them I thought there’s a good chance you’re working against me, sympathizing with Saren.”

“Spirits, Shepard . . .” Garrus’s voice drifted out like a dismayed prayer.

Staying focused on Nihlus, Shepard took a deep breath. When she spoke, she kept her voice soft enough to remain between the three of them. “I told them the truth, Nihlus. A lot of things trying to kill me while Saren actively avoids wherever you are . . . it doesn’t look good.” She shrugged, feigning nonchalance.
“No.” He spun away from her, his talons raking his fringe again. “No, no, no. Shepard . . ..” He keened, high and sharp. “How stupid . . .?”

Shepard flinched as nearly half the patrons turned to look at them. How many omnitools were recording them? The fool was going to completely negate everything she’d done. She jumped forward, slamming him in the shoulder with the hardest flat-hand strike she could manage. She grabbed his arm and spun him around, 200-proof fury pouring into her blood. Her voice lowered to a barely audible hiss of a whisper. “Don’t you dare go there. Don’t you fucking dare.” Let everyone see them fight. That much would help, at least.

She focused her stare as hard and sharp as a diamond blade. “I had one fucking shot of getting their blessing to attack Virmire without my entire crew getting put on a hit list. I don’t know who you work for any more, so yeah . . . I saw an opportunity to distance my crew, and I bloody well took it.” She shook her head, all the fear incinerating in the face of certainty. “You bet your skinny ass I took it, and I’ll live with the consequences. So calm the fuck down and have a drink, or go freak out somewhere you aren’t being recorded by half the station.”

He pressed in on her, his voice lowered to match hers, rumbling with enough fury to raise the hair on the back of her neck and make her belly tremble. “I won’t let you do this alone. I won’t let you sacrifice yourself for me. I’ll go to them . . ..”

She swayed a little, the room dipping in time to the rolling in her stomach. The air suddenly felt super-heated, like plasma against her skin. Why had she ever thought he’d react reasonably. He’d destroy it and get all her people killed . . . get Garrus killed.

Garrus erupted between them, grabbing Nihlus by the cowl of his armour, tearing the lighter torin right off his feet. “If you do, I’ll end you, Kryik. Now shut up.” He threw Nihlus back a couple of feet as he dropped him. “There are more than sixty people on that ship, and you’re risking them all right now.” He turned and wrapped an arm around Shepard’s shoulders to escort her to the door.

Shepard pushed him away and turned back to face Nihlus. “You’re a risk to all my people, Spectre. That’s the end of it.” She looked over at Garrus. “Let’s go somewhere quiet.” When he nodded, she turned toward the door, wondering how long it would be before the council heard about the fight. Hopefully she’d managed to turn the conversation enough that it would prove just another schism that helped make them believe he could be brought around to their way of thinking.

Shepard groaned as the door opened while they were still three metres away, her heart falling into her boots when Udina staggered through, obviously already three sheets to the wind. “So close. We almost made it out.” She let out a long groan. “By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.”

Udina must have heard her, because he spun to face her. “Shepard. Decided to throw away the facade and admit that you’re a witch?”

Laughing, Shepard shook her head and let out a noisy breath. “Ambassador, the fact you still have one head, intact limbs, and at least most of your hair speaks to my lack of skill in the arcane arts. When I get your voodoo doll to work, you’ll know.”

Udina wavered a little as he leaned down over Shepard, breathing what smelled like jet fuel in her face. God, sometimes she hated being short. His left index finger jabbed her in the chest. “Do you know how close you are to destroying everything I’ve worked for here? You turned me into a mockery in that chamber today.”

“I did no such thing, Ambassador.” Shepard leaned into him. “I told the truth. As a Spectre
candidate, my loyalty is to the council, not you.” She pushed past him, heading for the door. Glancing at Garrus, she sighed. “What is this? Pick a fight with Shepard in the fancy bar night?”

Udina grabbed her arm and spun her around. “Don’t you turn your back on me, Shepard. I can end your career and turn you into a laughingstock with a single call. I won’t let you destroy humanity’s chance to join the council.”

Shepard laughed, a harsh bark of sound. “Oh, please. Don’t forget, I’ve known you a long time, Udina. I know that you’d sell your mother to the batarians to climb the ladder a rung, but do you know how close you are to sending us all to hell? The Reapers are real, and they’re on their way.”

She dropped her voice to a low, dangerous whisper. “I don’t give a rat’s ass if you want to bend over for the devil, Udina, but I’ll be damned if I’ll let you force the rest of humanity to take it up the ass along with you.”

“Couth, Shepard,” Udina said, his entire face warping into a snarl. “But what else can we expect from a batarian carnal whore?”

Shepard stopped. Just stopped. For thirty seconds, even her heart froze solid. Thought, breath, and function stalled, short circuited by horror. For those thirty seconds a gloating leer transformed Udina’s homely visage into something truly horrific. But as the clock ticked over to thirty-one seconds, Shepard sliced through the air—all edges, points and barbs set to shred him.

Udina staggered back, his eyes wide.

“You honestly want to do this again, Udina? After how badly I pounded you the last time?” She snarled and lunged at him.

Strong arms grabbed her from behind before she could connect, pinning her shoulders back so that she could only swipe at the foot of air in front of her. Struggling, she shot a glare over her shoulder at her captor. “Let me go, Garrus. He just . . . he can’t just . . .”

“If you hit him, you’re giving him exactly what he wants and needs to shut you down, Kahri. He only hit that low because he’s desperate,” Garrus whispered in her ear. “Let it go. You already know what he is, and he’s not worth it.”

Shepard stopped fighting the turian, registering the truth and sense in his words even through her anger. “Fine.”

Udina laughed. “Thank you for containing this animal, Officer Vakarian.” He leaned in again. “Just remember your place, and try not to embarrass humanity any further.” For a moment, he turned away, looking as though he had every intention to leave. But then he spun back around, wavering a little in his inebriation as he swung at her, arm extended.

The ambassador’s fist slammed into Shepard’s face, her jaw letting off a crack loud enough to deafen her for a second. Her teeth screeched together and clamped shut on the side of her tongue. White lights sparkled all around her, brilliant fireflies of pure lightning riding a wave of brain static that rang in her ears and short-circuited her balance, dropping the floor out from under her.

Luckily Garrus still held her pinned against him, his grip keeping her from sprawling on the tile.

“Shepard?” Garrus braced her as she staggered, then helped her back square on her feet. “You okay?” When she nodded, he released her, dusting down the armour on her shoulders before giving her a gentle pat. “He’s all yours.”

Shepard lifted a hand to her jaw, stretching her mouth open to click it back in place, a barbed wire
smile coiling across her face. “Thank you, Brother C-Sec, the light of the Enkindlers is strong in you.” She wriggled her eyebrows at Udina as she stepped into her first punch.

The ambassador’s hand slapped over his bleeding nose and stumbled backwards into the crowd. People shoved him as he slammed into them, and, arms flailing, he spun, gropping an asari as he caught himself. He jumped back, apologizing, but in the space of a heartbeat, bodies, fists, feet, and drinks began to fly.

Shepard remained focused, laser-keen on the ambassador, leaping on him like a rabid varren, but after she landed two, solid blows to his gut, strong hands pulled her off and hustled her toward the door. Dodging blows, they pushed and shoved their way clear of the worst of it.

Nihlus met them halfway across the room, blood trickling in a cobalt line from a crack in his left brow plate. “So much for the civilized crowd,” he said, falling in as Garrus plowed a path to the door and out.

The running drumbeat of footsteps echoed up the stairs from the reception area. C-Sec, no doubt. After a moment of looking for a place to hide, they ducked into Executor Pallin’s office. The door closed just as a good dozen C-Sec officers emerged through the lower door, armed with shock sticks. Shepard let out a sigh of relief mixed with a giddy laugh.

“No such thing as a civilized crowd,” the executor said from behind them, his voice gruff but carrying a heavy sub-layer of amusement. “Is there something I can help you with, or will you be leaving now that you’ve avoided arrest?”

Shepard spun to face him, the soul of innocence. “Hello, sir. Good to see you again.”

“I want Shepard arrested!” Udina’s voice screamed from the hallway. Calm mumbling answered him, but she couldn’t make out what the voice said through the door. “I don’t care!” the ambassador continued. “If you didn’t pass her, she’s still here, somewhere.”

“I can’t say the same,” Pallin replied. After holding her gaze for a moment, he sighed and nodded toward the balcony behind him. “It’s a short drop.”

Shepard grinned and snapped a quick salute even as she sprang forward. “Thank you, sir. Have a good evening.” Without even pausing to check how far down was not too far, she ran to the balcony, grabbed the railing and jumped over, adjusting as she jumped. Hopping down into three more gardens, she made it to street level and looked up. Only Garrus followed.

“Nihlus?” she asked when he jumped down, landing nimbly next to her. A grin so bright that it made her blush spread across her face as she looked up. He’d followed her down, even though it meant leaping off his boss’s balcony.

“Distraction duty. Well, and he’s going to head to the med clinic to get his plate fixed.” Straight and composed, he turned to look her up and down before shaking his head. “Excellent date, Shepard. You sure know how to show a torin a good time.” Despite his grumpy tone, his mandibles spread a little and flicked, giving away his amusement. Gentle fingers gripped her jaw, turning her head a little to inspect the damage. “That hurt?”

She nodded. “Yeah, say what you will about Udina, he knows how to land a sucker-punch.” She reached up and wiggled her jaw back and forth. “At least he didn’t break it.” She grabbed his hand and headed down the walkway, hurrying ahead of him. “Come on, let’s relax for a bit, then we can go home, and you can read me a story.” Skipping sideways a little, she turned to grin at him. “I swear though . . . tonight, you’re going to do the voices.”
His chuckle warmed her straight through to her toes. “Never, Shepard. You will never win that battle.”

When they reached the intersection where the alley to the ward access emerged onto the presidium, Shepard stopped at the top of the short incline down and looked out over the crowds. “Sweet baby Jesus, look at all these people.” She blew out a short puff of air. “You had one shot to save your people, Shepard. Now you’ve got one to try to save yourself. Time for a little crazy. Glory hallelujah.”

“No . . . Shepard . . .”
Chapter Summary

Madness ... and a date. So even more madness? :D

Dropping Garrus’s hand, she took off, racing down the slope into the crowd, an exasperated sigh and three choice curses chasing her. “Lemmings of the galaxy,” she called out, spreading her arms wide as she stopped in the center of the square, “you are all doomed for you do not know the blessed word of the Enkindlers.”

The crowd evaporated around her, all trying to get as far away from the lunatic with the guns as possible. Chasing a salarian a few metres one way, and a turian back the other, she embraced a wild, childish lack of control. Sometimes a deep, gleefully furious part of her just needed to slip off the leash, and to hell with the consequences. Throwing her head back and stretching her arms out to the side, she twirled around and around until she bounced off a skycar and nearly fell on her ass. Dizzy to the point of clapping a hand over her mouth to hold back her breakfast, she leaned over, bracing herself against the vehicle.

Once the dizziness and its accompanying danger of spewing vomit passed, she leaped up and ran toward the crowd. “But you can all be saved!” she hollered. “Yes, you can. All you have to do is pull your . . . .” She pointed and winked at an asari hiding behind her turian partner. “. . . very pretty blue head out of your ass and realize how fragile all of this is.” She looked at the car, and recognizing the C-Sec paint job, raced over to clamber up onto the roof.

Seeing Garrus doing his best to disappear into the environment, she grinned and pointed both index fingers at him. “You, sir, are far too handsome to be able to vanish into that plant. Instead, embrace the light of the Enkindlers and rejoice.”

Turning back to the crowd, she reached out as if trying to hug them all. “Good people, I beg you, listen. The Enkindlers have blessed me with a vision! This place heralded the beginning of their destruction, their arrogance blinding them to their vulnerability.” She spotted four hanar moving in on her from the bridge and spun to face them. “Brother hanar, you know this! You know the light of the Enkindlers. Spread their word so that these poor souls, blind and fumbling in the dark, can know the truth.”

One floated closer than the others. “This one does not believe the Enkindlers would wish their truth to be used to cause alarm for the honourable people passing by. Respectfully, this one does not believe you are representing the Enkindlers’ message with a high degree of accuracy.”
Shepard flung her arms out, embracing the entire Citadel. “They’d want the people to know they are all living on a giant trap, and one day, it’s going to spring closed to kill them all. Glory hallelujah and praise the Enkindlers’ great, glowing backsides.”

“A second one came forward. “This one believes that although your enthusiasm for the word of the Enkindlers is laudable, it may be advisable for you to proceed down off the car and regain control of your faculties.” It reached up with a tentacle as if offering a hand to help her down. “This one respectfully requests that you cease distorting the word and light of the Enkindlers in this manner. They gave the hanar language and gave the galaxy the mass relays. Their legacy is one of generosity not fear.”

“You poor, deluded . . . I can’t come down until everyone understands!” Shepard turned back to the crowd, but tentacles wrapped around both of her wrists. “Hey! Let me go, you manhandling . . . er . . . womanhandling jellies!” Looking up, she locked stares with Garrus and yelled. “C-Sec! Where is a C-Sec officer when you need one? I need a cop, here! Bad touching! Bad touching!”

A C-Sec officer raced across the square toward them. “Hey! Lady, what are you doing standing on my car?” The blond human looked up at her, then at the hanar, then back to Shepard. “What in the name of god is going on here?”

One of the hanar trying to ease Shepard down off the car let out a strange harmonic sigh. “These ones are merely attempting to prevent this human from alarming the good people in the crowd with her falsehoods regarding the Enkindlers.”

“Let her go.” The officer raked his fingers through his crew cut, grumbled and then jabbed a finger at the ground. “And you, down off my car.”

Shepard shot narrow-eyed glares of death at the hanar until they released her and backed away. Once they moved off, she hopped down. “Thank you, Officer . . .?”

“Don’t thank me yet, lady. You were disturbing the peace, and you scuffed the roof of my car, earning yourself a visit to the station.” He gripped her elbow and pulled her out of the way so he could open the top of the car. “Get in.”

For a moment, Shepard thought that Garrus would let her be arrested. She ducked out from under the hand trying to shove her head into the car, twisting as she tried to pull her arm free of the officer’s grip. “Oh no you don’t. You can’t arrest me. I know my rights. I have an evangelical
He snorted. “Oh, really? Show it to me.”

Struggling, she grumbled, “It’s in my other pants.”

“He, Lamont, let me take it from here.” Garrus strode up from behind the car. He stared into Shepard’s eyes and deadpanned, “I have a history with this lunatic. You could take her in, but trust me, she’s not worth the migraine that’ll be beating its way out of your skull after about twenty minutes.” Garrus leaned down over her, his stare deepening into a glare. “I thought I warned you about what would happen if I ever caught you screaming your craziness out here again?”

Shepard widened her eyes and bit her lip to keep from grinning like a maniac. She supposed she should have expected him to punish her. Sighing, she let her shoulders slump and hung her head. “I’m sorry, Officer Vakarian, please . . . don’t drag me into a back alley and shoot me.” Turning pleading eyes to the blond human, Shepard whispered, “Please, don’t let him take me. He’s crazy. He said he’d shoot me.”

Lamont shook his head and held up his hands. “I’ve already had my fill of crazy. Deal with it, Vakarian, and get her away from my car. I just got it detailed.” He backed away a couple of metres before turning and disappearing into the crowd.

“You know,” Garrus said, his voice heavy with growling subvocals, “suddenly, I do sort of want to shoot you.” He pulled her down the presidium, passing the base of the tower and continuing on to where the crowds thinned out.

Shepard cackled, dragging along behind him a little. “Yeah, but just imagine the look on Udina’s face when he sees that vid. That will cheer you up.”

“What about when the council sees it?” He didn’t let up the vice grip on her arm as he guided her off the main thoroughfare and into a park area.

“They’ll bury it until they need to discredit me, and in the meantime, it’ll reassure them that they can easily discredit me if they need to.” She worked her arm loose, rubbing the bruised spot between armour segments. When she felt him looking at her, she shrugged and bumped him with her shoulder. “It’s more effective to make a hero look like a crazy woman than to kill her. I’m not completely suicidal, Garrus.” She nodded back toward the square. “That was about giving the
council an out. The last thing they want is to turn me into a martyr.”

“And what about your credibility with the rest of the galaxy?” he asked, wrapping an arm around her, turning down a narrow path into a sheltered little copse of trees and flower beds. “You establish yourself as a lunatic, no one will ever take anything you say seriously.”

She smiled and shrugged. “No one will ever believe that woman was Captain Jane Shepard, hero of Elysium. Trust me.” She leaned into him, relishing feeling safe for the first time since she’d set her plan in motion. “Even now, they couldn’t tell you the colour of my hair. Half of them are pretty sure I was a hanar. Active amnesia, Garrus. You know. You’ve seen how it works.”

A reluctant grunt of agreement answered that. He led her over to a bench and sat, tugging her down next to him. She pressed in against his side and slipped an arm around his waist, looking up at his face as he stared at the traffic zipping overhead. Working on her own case of active amnesia, she searched past his reaction to her antics to see how he fared dealing with her other adventure that day.

“Sorry about springing my plan on you,” she said, genuine sorrow sneaking in on the heels of the madness. “I just . . ..”

He nodded. “Didn’t want to fight me over it.” Shrugging, he looked down at her. “And you shouldn’t have to . . . either fight me or explain it to me. This is your mission, Shepard.”

Garrus put his arm around her and pulled her tight against his side. “I understand what you did, Kahri. You did what you had to do to save the rest of us.” He turned to nuzzle her temple, his breath warm and gentle against her hair. “But now, I get to do what I have to do. I don’t plan on this relationship being a short-term deal.”

Shepard pulled away far enough to turn and look up into his eyes, gratitude and frustration intertwining. “I won’t let you turn your entire life . . . our entire lives into trying to keep me safe, Garrus. That’s no sort of existence for either of us. I can’t spend my life in a cage of fear . . . at least no more than I do now. And you can’t spend yours chained to me, terrified that something might happen if you leave the room.”

She kissed him, softly but allowing the depth of her affection to bleed through. He turned, leaning into the kiss, deepening it with a passion that surprised her. Lifting her onto his lap, he wrapped one arm around her, the other cradling the back of her head, his breathing deep and rapid.
“I just found you,” he whispered, his mouth brushing her lips, the rough texture of his hide teasing every nerve ending to life. “And I’ve gotten used to having a tiny, soft heating unit in bed next to me.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, fitting herself into all the angles of his armour, and tucked her face into his neck. “I know. I know you care about me and just want to protect me, but I meant it this morning, Garrus. I’m a grown woman, a N7 operative, and a Spectre candidate. I need you to trust and respect me enough to let me look after myself. I’m actually pretty good at it . . . if a little unconventional.” She kissed the groove of his neck, smiling at the steady, quick thump of his pulse. “I care about you, Garrus . . . so much, but one day, the over-protective thing will shatter us.”

A knuckle under her chin lifted her mouth back to his, the kiss deepening until every particle of Shepard’s being burned with it. She arched into him, hands wandering over him far too familiarly for a public place, but then he broke away, touching his brow to hers.

“All right,” he said, panting softly between the words in a way that just stirred the fire smoldering its way through her. “I do trust you, and I respect you more than anyone I’ve ever known.”

“Thank you.” She nuzzled his cheek. “We’ll bring Saren down and disappear to Omega, plan for the Reapers far away from the council’s reach. It’ll all work out, Garrus. Somehow, it will all work out.” She sighed and leaned into him. “So, should we go get some normal people food? Ooo, we could go watch a couple of matches at the Armax arena . . . get some hot dog substitutes and watch other people get shot for a change.”

He shook his head and then lifted her off his lap. “No way, Shepard. I’m not spending our one evening off the ship sitting in a crowd, watching people shoot holograms, and eating vat protein.” He stood and let out a long sigh, turning a slow circle as if orienting himself. After about a minute, he stopped and nodded. “Okay, I’ve got a plan.” A wide grin spread across his face, making her heart ache with the lightness of it. “Call Kaidan and Pressly, let them know you’ll be back aboard an hour before we’re cleared for departure. Barring any emergencies, of course.”

His grin infected her. “We’re staying out all night?”

He just shrugged, that cocky, smartass bob of his head that she loved seeing, and activated his omnitool.

“What are we doing?” She tried to see what he was looking at, but he turned his back and started walking back toward the square.
“We need to catch a cab,” he said and held out his hand.

They caught one out to one of the wards. “Zakera Ward,” Garrus informed her as he brought the cab into park at the base of a tall building. “It has the most diverse population of the wards. Lots of humans mixed in with everyone else.” He opened the car and swung out, looking around in a decidedly familiar way.

Shepard climbed out and looked around at what appeared to be a residential district. A nice park spread over the block across the street, buildings very much like the one in front of them surrounding it. Kids of all varieties played, while parents of all the same varieties called out for Tom to be careful and Sisak to stop picking on his sister.

She turned to look into Garrus’s eyes. “Where are we?”

“At what used to be home.” He held out his hand. “Come on.”

Suddenly nervous, Shepard edged around the car, her heart beating hard and fast, hands trembling. “Umm . . . just so you know, C-Sec, I’ve never gone home with a guy before.” The chuckle she managed to get out sounded more like a terrified moan and made her cheeks burn. If he noticed it, he didn’t let on, just taking her hand and leading her inside.

They rode a surprisingly speedy elevator up ten floors, disembarking to walk down a long hall.

“This is a really nice building,” she commented, checking out the art on the hallway walls and the granite-tiled floors.

Garrus chuckled and shook his head. “And you thought I’d live in what? Some dingy little hole with stained walls, black mold, and a constant drip in the bathroom from the apartment above? Not to mention the dirty clothes, old food wrappers, and energy drink bottles strewn everywhere.”

“Don’t forget the gun oil stains, random rifle parts, and mods laying around.” She grinned and bumped him with her hip. “Nah, I just didn’t know C-Sec grunts made this sort of cash. I might be in the wrong business.”
He shrugged very matter-of-factly. “Well, first of all, I wasn’t a grunt, and second, I worked all the time. Didn’t have any vices or hobbies to waste cash on except my rifle and shooting range fees. Why not have a nice place?”

She squeezed his hand, knowing all about being so married to the job that she didn’t have time for anything else. Before the Normandy, she’d donated almost all of her wages to Martin’s rehab center . . . well, and a handful of stray cat rescue charities that she’d never admit to in a million years.

Garrus stopped outside the door to the end apartment and keyed in his lock code. “It might smell a little musty.”

She let out an exasperated grumble, his apparent nerves helping settle hers. “It’s a real apartment after living on a small frigate for two months, I would’ve probably been able to overlook the dirty clothes and food wrappers as long as there were no bugs.” She shuddered. “Just open the door.”

He looked back at her. “I’ve never brought a woman here before. It’ll be a first for us both.” He opened the door to a very dark space. “Come in. Let me get get some light in here. I had the windows blacked because I worked odd hours.” He chuffed. “You know, compared to the banker’s hours I work now.” A few seconds later, light spilled in through a long wall of windows to reveal a very handsome living room appointed with turian-style furniture. Two low sofas made out of a tough but soft woven fabric faced a massive vid screen set in the center of a wall of shelves. A large, low, beautifully carved table sat between the couches, displaying an impressive array of electronic gadgets.

She entered and looked around. “It’s gorgeous. A little barren, very bachelor-y, but not a dirty pair of undies or pizza box to be found.”

He walked through an arch into the kitchen and headed for the fridge. “About the only thing I can offer you for the moment is an icepack for your face.” He went into the freezer and pulled one out, then opened a drawer to grab a towel to wrap around it. “Here.” Returning to the living room, he guided her to the couch and pressed the ice to her jaw.

Shepard leaned into the cold, relishing the momentary increase in the pain. It would numb. She looked around, her eyes following him, taking in the comfortable way he moved around the space, putting everything in order. “So what’s the plan, big guy? Watch elcor reality vids or hanar soap operas?”

“Damn! You discovered my deep, dark secret . . . the hanar soap operas. I’m months behind; we’ll
have to marathon them.” He opened a door next to the kitchen and disappeared through, calling back, “First, I thought you might want to indulge yourself a bit, considering the fact that the average vorcha can spit with more pressure than the Normandy’s showers.”

She jumped up. “Don’t even... You have a real shower?” She followed him into a bedroom as handsomely appointed as the rest. A large bed covered in a navy duvet sat in the center. “Next you’ll tell me that your bed isn’t made out of sandstone.”

“The bed is very comfortable, but I didn’t think you’d be interested in heading straight there.” He peered around the door frame, looking altogether too pleased with himself.

“Very smooth, wise-assless.” Defying the sudden trembling in her gut, Shepard clamped the ice pack to her face and sat on the edge of the mattress, bouncing a little. “Oh, this is comfy. Very not rock-like.” Avoiding his stare, she looked around, hoping he would move on. He didn’t.

“Come here.” When she just glanced at him before starting an in depth study of the swirl pattern on the carpet, he grumbled. “You don’t have to make everything difficult, Kahri. Just come here.”

A sad frown creased her brow and the corners of her eyes. She pushed herself up and crossed the room to stand in the bathroom doorway, her arm pressed against his. Why did she have to make everything difficult? She’d never cared about anyone the way she cared about him. She trusted him... enough to let him see the real, crazy parts of her that she kept hidden behind false crazy when it came to everyone else. Why couldn’t she just let go of the giant ball of fear that slammed up into her throat at the thought of intimacy?

Garrus took her hands and turned her, pulling her up against him, a faint sigh accompanying the movement. “You never have to wonder or doubt if I want you, Kahri.” He leaned down to nuzzle her ear. “I do, very much. But, I’m not going to pressure you. I won’t ever make a joke that’s intended to be some sort of passive-aggressive hint.” Wrapping his arms around her, he whispered, “Ever. So, relax and take a bath, we’ll order pizza, watch vids or play a video game, and just have a disturbingly normal night.” He pressed his mouth to hers, the kiss chaste and soft.

At least until Shepard wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down into her, returning his kiss with a passion born of gratitude and respect and a giddy sort of astonishment. It almost renewed her faith, having stumbled upon someone so completely remarkable... someone so completely what she needed. For a moment, she gave into the smoldering ache his tongue—nimble and teasing—and his breath—warm and panting with want—set loose in her belly. Her hand slipped down his arm, reaching behind her to grip his talons, guiding them back around front and up to the seals on her chest guard.
Giving her a soft kiss, Garrus eased back, leaving one arm wrapped around her. He smiled down into her eyes for a moment, then jutted his chin toward a fairly large bathtub with water-jets along the sides and bottom. “How does that look to you?”

A shiver of regret whispered through her, but then she nodded, a significant amount of ironic annoyance heating her neck and cheeks. For all she barked at him about trying to protect her, he really did know what was best for her far too much of the time. She looked into his eyes, reaching up to caress his cheek and mandible when she saw that it had cost him to pull away, but also how much more it would’ve cost him to accept her invitation just to have the door slammed in his face.

She glanced over her shoulder at the tub, then passed him the ice pack and pushed him out the door. “That tub looks like you’d better have a robe or shirt or something I can wear when I get out.”

He nodded and backed away. “I’ll leave something on the bed. Take your time. The towels and everything else you could possibly need, other than the soap for your hair are in that cupboard.” After pointing to a large set of double doors next to the shower stall, he turned and headed back into the living room.

Shepard filled the tub with water hot enough to cook seafood, then turned on the jets and eased her way in. Laying back, a moan of sheer, decadent pleasure bubbled from her lips, and she closed her eyes, letting the water beat out the built up stress of the past two months. At some point, she thought she heard his door chime, and sat up, poised to leap out of the tub and grab her guns. A few breathless minutes ticked past before the lack of gunfire eased her back into the water and dozing, blissfully mindless relaxation.

A knuckle rap on the door pulled her out of a gentle sleep to discover the water had begun to edge toward uncomfortably cool. “I set something on the bed for you, and I’m ordering the pizza,” Garrus called. “Unless you’ve drowned in which case I’ll call the rescue service.”

Shepard chuckled and climbed out, wrapping herself in a huge, fluffy towel. “Not drowned.” She opened the door. “See? Completely alive if a little pruny.” She held up her fingers. “Do turians get pruny?”

He laughed and shook his head, taking her hand and lifting her fingers to his mouth to nuzzle them. “Turians aren’t soakers.” His brow plates lowered a little, and he lifted a hand to her shoulder, the pads of his talons playing over the joint and along her collarbone. After a second, he cleared his throat and stepped back, nodding toward a box sitting at the end of the bed. “I hope you like it and it fits. I had to describe your size to the woman at the store.”
Shepard pulled her hand back and stepped around him. “Did you get me pretties?” She grinned and lifted the lid of the box. Inside, she found a dark emerald nightgown and robe made out of a material that looked like silk but felt insanely soft. Pulling it out, she held it up against her. “It looks like it’ll be perfect.” She returned to take his hand, tugging him down to kiss his cheek. “It’s beautiful, Garrus. Thank you.”

“It’s tussat silk.” He shrugged, looking sheepish. “A little bit of Palaven.”

She hurried past him into the bathroom. “I’ll be out in a minute.” She closed the door then towelled herself off and dressed in the amazing material. Compared to her t-shirt and shorts, it felt like a lover's caress over every inch of her skin. The nightgown was a simple sleeveless, a-cut that hung in gentle folds around her knees. Tiny floral buds and spikey leaves had been embroidered around the neck, arms, and hem in a shiny thread the exact colour of the material. Simple, but classy. She smiled and twirled a couple of times to watch the skirt sway. Sweet baby Jesus, but she loved the way he saw her.

She slipped the robe on over top and belted it, running appreciative hands over the wide lapels covered in the same embroidery. Just beautiful.

The door chimed just as Shepard finished piling her armour next to one of the dressers in the bedroom. She laid Ingrid and Roger out on the floor, but took her sidearm and headed out.

“I thought you ran off to join Captain Shepard and a Spectre on some grand crusade, Vakarian,” a jovial, male voice called from the other side. Thick paper rustled. “Couldn't cut it, Rookie? Missed the old grind, the piles of paperwork, and red tape so badly that you had to come back?”

Garrus laughed. “You know me so well, Ridgefield.” He shook his head and leaned against the door frame, his body language relaxed and at ease enough that Shepard stuck her pistol in one of the robe's deep pockets. “No, we're on twenty-four hours leave before heading out in the morning. I thought it might be nice to sleep in a real bed.”

Shepard walked up behind Garrus, using him to cover her state of undress, but peeked out to see past him. The fellow at the door was another C-Sec officer. Tall, thin, and balding, he seemed approachable and friendly, an impression that solidified when he saw her and his face creased into an easy grin.

She lifted her hand in a small wave. “Hello.”
His smile widened. “Well, hi.” He looked up at Garrus and backed away from the door, holding up a hand to stall the introductions. “I can see that you’re busy, so I’ll just get going. You can owe me for the soda, eggs, and toilet paper.” A raucous laugh told Shepard that Garrus’s messages would be filled with a great deal of teasing and speculation the following morning.

Stepping up to the door, Shepard watched the C-Sec officer hurry down the hall.

“Thanks for picking this stuff up for me,” Garrus called after him.

“No problem.” The officer hit the elevator control and turned back. “I can see why you wouldn't want to waste time shopping.” Still chuckling, he backed into the open doors.

“Ridgefield?” She glanced up at Garrus, seeing the affection and amusement in his expression.

“Yeah.” He palmed the door control. “My first partner at C-Sec. Good man.” He passed her one of the bags. “Here, make yourself useful.”

By the time they’d unpacked the drinks, breakfast food, and other sundries, the pizza had arrived.

“I didn't even know they made dextro pizza,” Shepard said, flopping down on the sofa next to him. She flipped open her box, cracked her soda, and wriggled back in against his side, tucking her bare feet up behind her.

“This place makes really great dextro pizza. They make all the human junk food but in dextro versions . . . hamburgers, fries . . . no idea how they compare to levo, but they’re good.” He let out a long, contented breath and leaned back, one arm slipping around her, his hand resting on her hip.

Shepard took a bite of her pizza. “You and Ridgefield are close?” She glanced up at him and burrowed in a little tighter.

“Yeah. Best friends. He was the only one who didn’t tell me I was nuts for signing on with you. He just said it was about time I went out and did something crazy. Said I needed to get out from under my father’s heel.” Chuffing softly, he shook his head. “Funny . . . it felt like that at the time, but now . . . .”
She wriggled out from under his arm and sat crosslegged, facing him. “But now . . . .”

He let out a thoughtful hum and shrugged. “Now, I think *Pari* saw really hard times coming for me if I stayed on that road. I’m pretty sure I don’t want to know how much harder it gets than murdering someone.” After finishing off the piece, he turned, lifting a knee up onto the sofa so he faced her. “You’ve said all the same things to me *Pari* did. I just couldn’t hear him through all the resentment I’d built up over everything. His not being there for me or Solana . . . or even *Mari*. The pressure I thought he was putting on me to follow in his footsteps.” A dry chuckle followed, sounding self-depreciating rather than bitter. “*Mari* told me years ago that the pressure I felt was all in my head. I don’t know. Maybe I have just been an ass for the last decade.”

Shepard reached out and took his hand. “Have you spoken to your mother or sister since you ran off with me?” She looked down at their linked fingers and talons, her thumb caressing the inside of his wrist where the hard plate that encased his forearm ended.

“No. I should.” He slipped his hand out of hers and activated his omnitool, tapping at it for a second. “It’s still really early in Cipritine. Remind me to call them later?”

She smiled and reached for another piece of pizza. “You know it.” Nodding toward the gigantic vid screen, she gave him a wide, guileless stare. “So what’s that for? You’re not really going to force me to catch up on months worth of your hanar soap-operas?”

His mandibles flicked hard. “Well, I could, just to pay you back for your performance in the square earlier, or . . . I do have a pretty amazing gaming system. We could see how well you handle a sword or bow after we finish eating.”

She swung her legs off the sofa. “Why wait? Fire that bad boy up, and I’ll show you . . . . Wait, before I get cocky . . . what are we playing? I suck at racing games. Spend all the time upside down and on fire.” She blushed even having given him the opening.

He laughed, choking on his bite of pizza for a second. “Should I even try to look shocked by that admission?” Thumping on his chest with one hand, he reached for the remote with the other, lurching ahead as she elbowed him. “Hey now, no violence. The truth is the truth.” He turned everything on, then handed her a headset and a controller.

Shepard shoved the last half of her pizza slice into her mouth. “Okay,” she said, trying to talk around it. “What am I about to kick your ass playing?”
“How about *Galaxy of Fantasy*? You can impress me with your monster slaying prowess.” He got up and walked over to a shelf of various games and vids.

“Sure.” Shepard settled into her gear, then washed the last bit of her pizza down with soda. “You know, I am pretty wicked with the two handed weapons.” She frowned, reconsidering. “Although my mage skills are insanely awesome. Bring on the raining fires of doooootttttttttt,” she crowed, a grin spreading over her face. Being there with him . . . hell, being anywhere with Garrus just felt so damned easy.

*You know, that’s because you’ve fal—*

She cut that idea off before it could force its way forward. More than enough strange and unexpected stuff rattled around inside her without adding more. Later. Much, much later, she’d let new complications assert themselves.

They battled their way through mythological monsters for a couple of hours, proving to be a decent team once Shepard stopped randomly attacking him just to watch his character flop around in death throes as his carcass slid down stairs and ramps, or fell off walls and cliffs.

When they started to wind down, Garrus closed the blinds and turned on the lights in the bedroom and bathroom. Finally, as Shepard missed her fourth straight shot at the boss *Beluan* monster, he shut everything down.

“Come on, *Kahri*, we can get into bed, and I can read to you until you fall asleep.” He slipped the headset off her brow and took the controller from her hands.

She leaned back in the couch, her head resting on the low, rolled back, and closed her eyes. “Go call your *Mari* and sister first. I’ll wait here.”
Shepard awoke the next morning aware of two things: the smell of bacon and that she had no idea how she made it from the sofa to the bed the night before.

She remembered lying back on the lovely, squishy cushions. Garrus headed into the bedroom, but didn’t shut the door, so she heard his sister answer the call. His mother joined in a moment later. They began with concerned inquiries about his health, but the moment he assured them he was fine, they moved on to scolding him for being out of touch for so long. Once they got that out of the way, they spoke of small things . . . his mother’s garden, his sister’s continuing success as an instructor at a military academy. In response to his mother’s insistence that he travel home at some point, he promised he would as soon as the mission concluded.

She’d started to doze off, her eyelids heavy enough and her thoughts fuzzy enough that she couldn’t be certain, but she thought he might have told them he had someone he wanted them to meet.

Then light poured in the windows, cutting straight across the bed where she found herself alone. Incredibly comfortable and warm, but alone.

“The “Cooking for Levos” extranet site says that some humans like their bacon crispy, while others don’t,” Garrus called from the kitchen.

She rolled over onto her back and stretched. “Crispy. Definitely crispy.” Pulling the duvet up over her head to block the light, her grin widened. The perfect scent that was his alone permeated everything, burrowing deep down inside her to make her heart and belly flutter. God, she loved that smell.

The mattress lowered beside her, and a talon caught the edge of the duvet to pull it down until her eyes peeked out. Garrus grinned. “Good morning, sleepy.”

“How did you know that I was awake?” she asked, sliding her hand out from under the covers to lace her fingers with his.

“Your deafening snoring stopped rattling the windows and small decorative objects.” He chuckled and tilted his head off to the side. “You were sound asleep when I finished my vidcall last night.” Reaching up, he brushed her hair off her face. “Breakfast is just about ready.”

She sat up and leaned forward to kiss him, just a soft brush of her lips. “What time is it?”

“0600. We have lots of time to eat before heading back to the Normandy.” He traced her lips with his thumb, then pulled back. “However, you’ve only got about seven minutes before breakfast is ready.”

“Roger that, Mr. Chef, sir.” She watched him head back out to the kitchen, then threw back the covers and got up. “Is it okay if I leave this ensemble here?” she called after him then bent to pick
up her armour. “Do you have a closet or drawer where I could stash it?” No answer. “Garrus?” She straightened, leaving her gear on the floor.

He appeared in the doorway, staring at her, his mandibles dropped but spread . . . his expression unreadable.

Her heart speeding up, Shepard frowned and walked over to him, pressing her hands to his chest. “What? Did I say something wrong, big guy?” Heart dropping, a sick sort of ache spread through her chest. She shrugged when she still got no answer. “I don’t have to, I just wanted to save it for when it’s just the two of us.” She ducked her head a little, the intensity of his stare embarrassing her. “Keep it special, you know?” Despite trying for casual, she heard the disappointment creep into her voice.

In a blur of sudden movement, he scooped her up in his arms, holding her tight against his chest. He bent to brush his brow softly against hers. “Of course you can keep it here.” For a moment, he looked like he intended to say something further, but then he set her back on her feet. “I’d better not burn breakfast. Five minutes, Shepard.”

She watched him leave, trying to puzzle out what that had been about. Nothing bad, she decided, just . . . strange. Gathering up her armour, she headed into the bathroom. Maybe, for all his calm and apparent confidence, Garrus had some voices inside his head telling him that she’d never be interested in staying with him over the long run.

“Stupid damned voices,” she whispered as she pulled her nightgown over her head. “Why don’t they ever bombard us with positive, supportive stuff?”

She suited up and headed out to the kitchen, arriving just in time for breakfast to hit the table. He’d set them places at ninety degrees to one another, and pulled out her chair.

“This looks great, Garrus. That extranet site must be good.” She pulled her chair up and settled. “Maybe, if there is an accompanying one, “Cooking for Dextros”, I’ll make you breakfast the next time.”

“As long as you promise not to poison me . . .” He sat and placed his hand on her knee. “That way, I could sleep in and be lazy while you work your talons to the bone.” His mandible fluttered, teasing.

“You . . ..” She just shook her head and turned her attention to her breakfast. “This really looks great, though.” Two eggs, four strips of bacon, two slices of toast, and a large, squarish mug of tea sat before her. She dug in, starving, partially because of hunger, partially because of nerves. In a couple of hours, the Normandy was set to rendezvous with the geth and then head on to Virmire.

Apparently, Garrus’s thoughts had been travelling the same paths, because a couple of mouthfuls into his meat and brownish eggish things, he cleared his throat. “So, we’re assuming the council has told Saren we’re on our way?”

She nodded. “No doubt, but if the operation is as big as Benezia said, he’s going to have a hell of a time evacuating it, if he even decides to. The council gave us permission to apprehend him, so he’ll be expecting a specific sort of attack. He might just grab as many of his krogan as he can and run.”

“So basically, we’re going in and hoping for the best?” He looked up at her without lifting his head.

“More like planning as well as we can and kicking as much ass as he lets hang out for us to kick.
At worst, we give him one less place to hole up. There’s no way he is going to be able to dismantle his facilities and labs, move everything out, so we destroy all that.” She put her eggs on her toast and paused to take a couple of bites. “We could find valuable intel, maybe even his genophage cure. I doubt he’ll move the quarians—he’ll want to use them to bring me to heel if things go badly for him—so, we rescue them. If the geth and quarians can pull their part of the mission off, and we can start forging peace there, we end up with a hell of a formidable fleet building resource.”

Shepard shrugged. “We won’t get Saren, but we’ll serve notice to the Reapers that we’re ready and willing to fight back.” She let out a bitter laugh as her worst fear clawed its way up over all her hopes. “Or, Sovereign could be sitting right at the relay and blow us all to hell the moment we exit the mass effect corridor.”

Garrus winced. “Let’s try to avoid that part.” He squeezed her knee, his palm remaining there, warm and comforting. “We’re going to take casualties, Shepard. We’ve been damned lucky so far, but an op like this . . . we’re going to lose people.”

Shepard placed her hand over his and squeezed his talons. “I know, Garrus. I know.”

They finished their breakfast and discussed the plan, tossing ideas back and forth for the best way to keep things as unpredictable as possible considering that the enemy knew they were coming.

When they finished, she helped clean up, freezing everything that could be frozen, and tossing the rest into the recycler so he didn’t come back to things trying to crawl out of his fridge. They returned to the Normandy, hand in hand, something solid and still having settled between them despite, or maybe even because of Garrus’s odd reaction to her wanting to keep her nightgown there.

They shared a quick kiss outside the Normandy’s hatch, then headed in to prepare for the long couple of days ahead.

No sooner had Shepard made it to her quarters to change when knuckles banged on her door. She let out a long breath and braced herself. “Come in, Nihlus.”

The door opened, the Spectre stepping through. Shepard had expected him to be huge, arrogant and demanding, taking up every centimetre of space and every atom of oxygen in the room, but he’d calmed since the afternoon before.

He walked up to her, stared into her eyes for a moment, and then reached out to brush her cheek with a thumb. “Rested up and ready to go?” he asked, throwing her completely. So completely that the thought sprang into her mind that he’d found a way to counteract her plan.

She cocked a suspicious eyebrow at him. “Yeah. Fell asleep playing video games at about 2100.” She backed up a bit so she could meet his eyes without craning her neck. “How about you?”

He nodded toward the end of the bed. “May I sit?”

“Sure.” She watched him, trying to decide what it was she felt going on with him. It felt off, whatever it was. Well, off for Nihlus anyway. Sitting in the chair at her desk, she turned to face him. “Are you okay, Nihlus?”

He didn’t reply right away, instead, he seemed to be studying her face, looking for something. “Yes,” he said at last, his voice still eerily calm. “I spent some time meditating when I got back to the Normandy. It helped me sort a lot of stuff out.” His mandibles spread but then dropped as if he were embarrassed. “Merol was an amazing person. His passion for his work, and for his family . . .
his spiritual peace.” He shook his head. “Do you realize, there wasn’t a single selfish desire inside
his heart? When they arose, he either acted on them or meditated and released them into the water. He coveted nothing.”

Shepard smiled. “Yeah, he was remarkable. Tashac never quite managed to quell her anger or
selfishness in the same way, but she sure loved him and her children . . . and her empire.”

“The council called me in last night,” he said. “They showed me the vid of your performance on
the presidium, asked what I thought they should do.” A sly smile spread his mandibles a little. “I
told them to hang onto it so that if you started gaining some actual credibility with this insane
Reaper fixation of yours, they could tear it down before it gained any momentum.” The smile
faded and he leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs.

“I told them the last thing they wanted to do was turn you into a martyr, and everyone who knew
you would do just that.” His hands jumped up, palms facing her. “Don’t worry, about the
Normandy. They want to use it to turn the Alliance to their side. It’s a hell of a web they’ve got
going, but for now, they’re content to see how things play out.

“I’m sorry, Shepard.” He took a deep breath, his shoulders lifting with it. “For not trusting you to
know what you were doing, and then jeopardizing it. You were right. They’re testing me out,
seeing if they can draw me in. If I play it cool, I’ll be able to keep them off our backs and gather
intel.” His eyes looked up, that amazing green locking onto hers. “It’s just . . . I have this lifetime
of love and companionship and passion inside me. I know it’s not mine, and I know it’s not for
you, but it feels like it is. It’s so real, and it’s all tangled up in what I feel about you.”

His hands smacked against his thighs as he thrust himself up off the bed and paced to the door.
“The thought of you . . .” Pivoting on his talons, he spun back. “The council could still decide to
kill you, Shepard.”

“Yeah, they could, but it’s not going to stop me from doing what needs to be done to stop Saren
from getting his hands on the Conduit.” Straight, joints stiff, she stood and walked over to him.

“Can he?” Nihlus frowned. “Can he even get to it? He’ll have Tashac and Merol in his head too,
but Vigil would never let an indoctrinated pawn onto the elevator.” His eyes searched hers as if
she’d have a piece of information he didn’t, some loophole he couldn’t see that would allow Saren
to bypass the security.

Shepard shook her head. “I don’t know. I want to say it’s impossible, but it feels like there’s
something I’m missing. We need to talk to the queen when we’re done with Virmire, see if there is
anything else hidden in our heads that will help.” Pacing a little, she sorted through the
information. “I mean, I know the other keys are hidden as well, but I don’t know where or how
well. He just needs to get his hands on one.”

“If he knows where any of them are, it’s just a matter of time, Shepard. We have to take him out,
and Sovereign. Any ideas how?”

Chuckling, she shrugged. “I feel like a broken recording, but I don’t know. It’s going to take a fleet
or two to bring Sovereign down, and that’s going to mean a trap, lure it in.” She looked into his
eyes again, the beginning of an idea sparking to life. “Once we see what we find on Virmire, we’ll
sit down with the queen and see what we can figure out.”

Reaching out, his talons slipped around her fingers. “How am I supposed to live with all of this in
my head, Shepard?” His eyes betrayed the struggle going on within him, and his hand trembled
with it. Or was it hers that trembled?
Either way. She understood his difficulties. Tashac slammed at the barricades Shepard erected around her memory, demanding that Shepard give in to the emotions and desires. As long as she’d been alone with Garrus, the prothean had backed off, but with Merol back in her sphere, she seemed to have focused all of Shepard’s blood flow between her legs and kept weaving random memories of Merol making love to her through Shepard’s thoughts. Distracting didn’t quite cut it as a descriptor. Shepard forced the prothean’s memories back behind an iron wall.

Nihlus still stared at her, still waited for an answer that she didn’t have. Shepard shrugged. “I don’t know, Nihlus. I’m sure, judging by how Garrus knows everything going on with my body before I do . . . you know she’s messing with me as badly as Merol is messing with you.”

He chuckled, but it came out strained and breathy. “I’m trying not to breathe right now.”

That shattered any hope Shepard had of maintaining calm. Laughter brayed from her, all her control dissolving into helpless cackling. Pulling her hand from his, she staggered over to the bed, folding down onto the mattress, her arms wrapping around her stomach. “Sweet baby Jesus, Nihlus . . . this whole thing is nuts.” She chuckled for a couple more seconds, then let out a long sigh.

“We have to control it, Nihlus. The fact is, it’s not us. We can’t live other people’s passions. That’s just becoming a puppet. Do you want me touching you because some leftover imprint of a dead woman believes she’s touching her husband? How fucking creepy is that?” She laughed again. “So, we control it.”

“And if the council kills you?” His face showed more pain that she ever thought a turian face could. “I feel panic at that thought, Shepard. I’m a Spectre. I don’t panic. I’ve never panicked, but the thought of suffering through what this damned link will cause if you die . . ..”

“If they take me down, and that’s a big if, because I’ve proven very hard to kill in the past, it will be up to you and Garrus to take up the banner. Someone has to, and that someone has to be you. When it’s time to bring the council down, I’d never have the juice to do it. You, on the other hand, could be a force to rally the Spectres.”

She stood, strode over to him and gave his talons a bracing squeeze. “You’ll get through it by doing the work, Nihlus. Minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. The same way I’ll deal with being left here if anything happens to you. There’s no other choice.” For a moment, she almost tugged him down to meet her, her lips aching to kiss him, her cheek burning to press against his and feel his mandible flutter against her skin.

_Do you think I won’t mourn if something happens to you, Nihlus? Why do you think I went to the council alone, you idiot?_”

But instead of speaking, she released his hand. To do anything else would prove too cruel to both of them, and to Garrus. Nodding toward the door, she said, “Turn that way so I can get changed. We need to meet with everyone and get things in motion.” When he turned his back, she headed over to her closet.

“Saren has been warned,” Nihlus told her. “The council seemed to think he wasn’t all that worried, so he’s got some sort of trap planned.”

“Of that much, I’m certain.” She grinned. “But I have a few tricks up my sleeve.”

* * * * *
Whatever Shepard thought the inside of a geth ship would be like, what she saw when the shuttle door opened didn’t match to most of it. The utter calm of the place struck her first. During her brief biathlon career, she spent nearly a year stationed at the Alliance nav-sat station in the Tibetan Himalayas so she could train. One of her trainers was a buddhist monk, and although she was never permitted into the inner portions of the monastery, the whole place always felt hushed, but not in a restrictive way. The monks and their students went about their business, people came and went, but the most amazing quiet ruled over everything.

The geth ship sat shrouded in a very similar, monastic sort of peace, as if every being contained within its hull existed in communal harmony. She supposed they did, requiring no movement or words to interact, their gestalt existing within computer processors and memory banks somewhere in the heart of the ship.

The quiet helped set her at ease, but as she followed Legion off the shuttle toward the line of geth units awaiting them, she could see that not all of her team felt the same. Although, Nihlus trailed behind her, never more than an arm-length away, and Garrus followed a little behind him, the rest of the team hung back by the shuttle. She supposed they were waiting to see if she ended up bent, broken, or spindled before deciding whether or not to commit or flee. Not that she could blame them.

At her order, they stepped into the unknown. For her part, Shepard’s nerves and senses all sent constant, pricking-nettle reminders that taking the bold strides meant enduring the discomfort of stepping out into the great vacuum. She couldn’t expect her people to endure it as well. It fell to her to fill the space with air, to give them familiar footing.

She counted her steps in time with her breathing, her boot soles ringing off the metal decking. Cool, controlled, and collected.

Let the peace and energy of your surroundings enter your heart, for only when you allow yourself to be connected to everything around you, will you truly see.

“Thank you, Lama Choden.” She saw but didn’t respond to Nihlus’s curious glance as they stopped a couple of metres away from five gigantic prime units.

One of the primes stepped forward. “Shepard-Captain, prime runtimes housed in server 02242-14521 stand prepared to assist designated creator allies as requested by geth programs housed within hardware designation: Legion.”

Shepard looked up at the massive platform, its armour a flawless, matte white, head flaps moving in slow, timed waves almost like sighs, practically static compared to Legion’s expressiveness. “Legion has explained what we need from the geth on this mission?” She backed up a step, her neck getting sore from staring up over twice her height. “The Reaper . . . Old Machine, Nazara, may well be waiting for our arrival.”

The prime didn’t move, returning Shepard to her impression of everything within the ship being a part of the whole rather than an autonomous unit.

“Geth will broadcast IFF codes used by heretic runtimes in order to approach the planet and deploy designated allies,” it reported. “As a precaution against heretic active scans, Geth have manufactured cargo containers designed to shield allies during approach and deployment.”

“Excellent, thank you.” She wondered if they cared about thanks. “Your assistance is both
appreciated and vital to defeating the Old Machine.” Shepard turned to face the shuttle and waved the rest of the team over. “Come on, people. Grab your gear, and let the shuttle get back to Normandy for the second load.”

Once her people started to move, Shepard tapped Legion’s elbow. “Bring Tali, Kal, and Rael over. See if you can help make them more comfortable with your buddies here.”

Legion’s head flaps moved from dancing a waltz to the cha cha at the word buddies. “Geth do not —”

“Figure of speech, Legion. The six of you have to work together, and while the primes might not have emotions . . . might not be scared or anxious . . . I can guarantee those three are. If you’re going to integrate the quarians back on Rannoch, all of you living and working together . . . you’re going to have to do what you can to help ease their fears.”

“This unit does not understand how to make creators more comfortable. A successful mission will further mutual goals and cooperation.” It wrung its hands, so like Tali’s nervous habit. Shepard wondered how many quarians must do it for the habit to have made it into the geth’s programming. Most of them, she would think.

“Yes, it will, but for the mission to be successful, those three need to be able to focus on what they’re doing, not jumping every time a prime moves.” She raked a hand through her hair, trying to think of a way to explain it that Legion would understand. How did beings without emotions empathize and comfort beings with emotions?

Or vice versa, apparently, judging by the frustration just starting to burn between her eyes. “Start by discussing the plan. Ask them questions about what you can expect from the quarians. Pretty much all the same stuff you and Tali have been talking about over the past days. Just get some communication going.” She gave him a little shove toward the three quarians, all of whom were sort of mincing across the space as if they expected attack to come from everywhere.

Shepard turned to her people and pointed to two large shipping containers. “These are our homes for the next few hours. Stake your claim, make them as comfy as you can. If you didn’t bring blankets, water . . . anything, there are extras in that crate. Just leave me a blanket and some water and ration bars.” She pointed to the crate that sat next to where the shuttle was lifting off. “Jenkins, Sparky . . . toss it in one of the containers for me, please.”

Kaidan saluted. “Yes, ma’am, happy to schlep for you, ma’am.”

“It is why we spend all that time training,” Jenkins agreed, crossing the cargo bay at Alenko’s side. “Build up our muscle mass and fitness levels for fetching and carrying.”

Grinning, Shepard pointed to Jenkins and Sparky. “If anyone needs a bullet shield at any time, or you get tired and need to be carried, those two volunteer.” She looked over at the primes who appeared to be staring at her with something akin to curiosity. “Well, except for you guys. You’ll need a large single family home or something to take cover behind.”

“Prime platforms do not take cover,” the spokesgeth said. “They are equipped with six layers of shielding.”

“Excellent,” Shepard replied, trying not to laugh, despite the fact everyone else did. “Always good to know.”

“I couldn’t borrow three or four of those layers, could I?” Kaidan asked as they carried the crate
“Particularly if our fearless leader intends to boldly stride through the mission hiding behind me.”

“Allied designated Alenko-Lieutenant, mission parameters do not allow sufficient time to co-develop layered shielding to integrate with your hard suit,” the prime replied, its head flaps all spiking out for a moment before fluttering and settling. “Geth shielding upgrades can be made available to allied biological units in the future.”

Shepard grinned as her people chuckled again. “Sparky, you diplomatic devil, get your backside into a shipping container.” She winked at him, grateful that she could always rely on him to play along. Even the quarians seemed to breathe a little more deeply as they joined Legion and the primes.

Stepping back, she watched Rael’Zorah in particular. Kal’Reegar, she harboured no worries about. When they’d met upon her return to the Normandy, he immediately set her doubts to rest. Strong, practical, and grounded, soldiers didn’t come more solid. And something in the way his mask followed Tali’s every move gave Shepard confidence that he’d bring her youngest team member back alive.

As the discussion between the six strange team members turned from the mission to the complications of the quarians resettling Rannoch, the admiral really seemed to calm. He listened intently, rarely commenting, and spent a lot of the time watching his daughter rather than the geth. When the second shuttle arrived from the Normandy, he excused himself and approached Shepard.

She gave him a tight-lipped smile and nodded. “Admiral.”

He stepped up beside her and turned to watch his daughter and Legion running through their route into the base. “My daughter . . ..”

Shepard didn’t fill in the gap when he stalled, waiting for him to finish.

He made a low, incredulous coughing sound in his throat. “The pilgrimage was meant to allow our youth a chance to experience the galaxy, to step out of the confines of the flotilla, assume some risk, and grow. Tali . . ..” Again, he was left shaking his head. “Tali left the flotilla a brilliant child, and in your company has undergone a metamorphosis. If she were to return to the flotilla, she would be elevated to rank within a season.” He turned his silver-reflection stare to regard Shepard. “But she will not be returning to the flotilla, will she?”

Smiling, feeling a connection to the admiral at last, Shepard shook her head. “I don’t think so. Something tells me that she’s going to insist on leading the first expeditions to Rannoch. One day, our little Tali will be remembered as the spirit of the great quarian homecoming.”

The admiral stared at her for another second, then returned to his daughter’s side.

Shepard straightened and turned toward the shuttle as it opened and the second half of her team started hopping down. “Okay, people, let’s step lively. Our hosts have provided us these luxurious shielded cargo containers to smuggle us past any Reaper welcome wagons, so step on up, make yourselves at home. Any old camp songs you can remember . . ..” She grinned. “Yeah, keep those to yourselves.”

Within twenty minutes, all her people sat settled and as calm as could be expected inside the containers, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to step over the threshold.

_They could just eject all of us into a star and be done with it._
Shepard stayed outside the doors as long as she could, her heart pounding harder and harder as the deadline to locking the doors approached. When at last, time ran out, she stood in the door, staring into the perfectly well lit, but altogether too tomb-like box.

Garrus stepped up beside her and looked down into her eyes, saying nothing, but letting her know that just like Feros, he’d get her through. She nodded, gratitude warming her. With his help, she’d gotten through a lot worse.

“Anyone needs a bathroom break, now’s the time, people!” Forcing a grin that she didn’t feel, she stepped between the doors to both containers so all her people could see her. “And no grousing about how crowded it is.” She stood at parade rest. “Okay, quick recap. Saren knows we’re coming so could well have a welcome wagon waiting at the relay. This little geth beauty is going to broadcast a heretic IFF code to sneak us past Sovereign and any heretic vessels or ground scans. When we get down below the treeline, teams one, two, and three will run out, leap in the shuttle and head in to take out the AA guns on the three main gates while team four proceeds to their drop zone at the back of the compound.”

“Once we’re on the ground and in play . . .” She looked to Kaidan. “Team One?”

“Disseminate the demolition charges through the lowest level of the compound, ma’am,” he sounded off, giving her a cocky salute.

Shepard grinned. “Team Three?”

Ashley stood. “Take out the AA guns on the interior of the base and provide support. Keep as many of the bastards off the rest of you as possible, ma’am.”

“Team Four?” Shepard turned to look into the second container.

“Find the quarian hostages and get them to the evac site,” Tali replied.

“Excellent. Team Two will walk in the front door and make our way to the labs.” She paused, looking over the tight, but ready faces. “You all know what you need to do, and I have every faith that you’ll do this ungrateful wench of a galaxy proud. They might call us crazy, deluded, or even traitors, but when it’s all said and done, we will have stared into the face of the darkness and defeated it. On that day, they’ll call us heroes.” She nodded, a swell of confidence flowing through her at the calm, business-like manner of her teams. They’d get it done. “Good luck, and let’s kick some ass.”

“Oh man, this won’t be good.
Cracking one eye, she glanced up at Garrus to find him staring over her head. Changing eyes, she turned her head to see Nihlus staring right back. Teeth clenched, she winced and waited, but then they let out a sort of rumbly breath and relaxed back against the walls. She didn’t know which concerned her more, the worry that they would end up in a shouting match in the close space of that coffin, or their quiet acceptance of one another.

* * * * *

“We’re taking fire,” Kaidan called from the shuttle’s cockpit. The shuttle bucked under them, slewing hard to port as a missile impacted the shields.

“I’ve got it covered,” Garrus replied, “just try not to fly us into every single missile.”

“I thought we took down the AA guns at the gates,” Shepard shouted up. After a moment of enduring the helpless ‘I should be flying this brick’ feeling, she unbuckled her harness and stood. Flinging herself across the couple of meters, she bounced off Ashley and the interior bulkhead, both leaving hefty bruises before she made it through the doorway to grab the back of Kaidan’s seat. “I think I preferred the Mako,” she said through clenched teeth.

“We’re coming up to the last gate now,” Garrus reported, “but we’re still well out of range of its guns.” A sharp nod of his head directed her toward a missile incoming from the shallow water below. “This is geth ground units: rocket troopers and armatures mostly. One colossus.” He strafed the geth positions with the shuttle’s mass accelerator cannons, taking out an armature and rocket trooper.

“Okay, finish those puppies off, and we’ll get that last gate down.” She clung to the back of Kaidan’s seat, feeling the time ticking past, each second echoing a warning to be unpredictable.

As if to add emphasis to Garrus’s words, a huge blast of plasma from the colossus hit the shields at the starboard bow. Shepard clutched at the seat, her fingernails leaving tracks over the leather even through her gloves as the floor dropped out from under her. The inertial dampeners kicked in, but a fraction of a second too late to stop her front teeth from slamming into Kaidan’s pauldron. Pain exploded through her sinuses, but dull as if someone had wrapped a grenade in shielding and shoved it up her nose before detonating it.

“Ow, son-of-a . . .. I hate heretic geth.” She clapped her hand over her mouth and nose as the initial wave of pain passed, settling into a throb.

“Go sit and buckle yourself in,” Garrus snapped. “We’re going to need to do some fairly fancy thruster work here.”

Three explosions erupted out of the water below, finishing off the geth units in a series of spectacular mini-mushroom clouds.

Shepard leaned further over Kaidan’s shoulder, craning to see the goings-on at ground level. “Who the hell has three M-920 Cain’s in their back pocket . . . and how can I get them to give me one?” As she spoke, a needle-sharp pain yelped over the dull thud of her pounding teeth, lifting her fingers to her lip. They came away bloody. “Great. Not even to the mission yet, and I’m already bleeding.”

“Turn the workplace injury sign back to zero,” Kaidan said, chuckling when she swatted him in the
back of the head. He nodded to figures stepping out from behind one of the flowerpot island formations. “Salarrians. Huh. Should we go down and see who they are?”

Shepard shook her head after debating it for half a second. Even though using the geth ship had allowed them to get to the planet without Saren knowing, destroying two massive gates and their AA guns on the way in was sure to have tipped him off. “Keep going and take out that last gate so the Normandy can get in to save our asses if they need saving. Even if these fellows are with someone, they’re a forward unit. No doubt, we’ll find their command further in.”

She watched the salarians for another moment, the dark, slithering warning in her gut at war with the fact that the STG—for surely that was who they were—had saved them a pummelling.

“Go get buckled in, and put some medigel on your lip,” Garrus said.

Shepard nodded and ducked back out. Taking her seat, she worried over the complication of a Special Tasks Group in the middle of her mission. The council had to have sent them, but why would the council send help? It didn’t make any sense.

“What?” Nihlus called over the thrusters roaring to bring the shuttle around, then the mass accelerator cannons firing.

She looked across the overcrowded shuttle to meet his eyes. “Complications. What else?” She just rolled her eyes then dug into her belt looking for medigel. She smoothed it over her split lip and then on the inside over her bruised gums.

When the firing and jolting ceased, Garrus looked over his shoulder. “Last gate’s AA guns are down. It looks like you were right about the salarians having a command: a camp just up ahead. Looks like they’re expecting us.”

She nodded, the thunderhead building in her gut starting to roll and crackle with lightning. “Take us down, but give us a little room to suss out their intentions.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Five minutes later, the shuttle noise eased up as Kaidan set the thrusters to idle. Shepard unbuckled and headed back into the cockpit. “Sparky, you stay here. First sign of anything that looks like trouble, get the shuttle out of the line of fire.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.” He glanced back. “Be careful out there.”

“Always.” She nodded to Garrus, needing him at her back. “Come on, C-Sec. Enough sitting around.” She pulled Roger off her back and headed for the hatch. “Nihlus, you coming along?”

He stood, his rifle already in his hands, all business. “Right behind you.”

She took a deep breath, calming the squall down to a storm. “Two metre spread,” she ordered, meeting both their stares. “Don’t make it too easy for them to take us all out.”

Garrus shrugged. “Won’t matter if they have more of those M-920’s.”

Eyebrows raised, Shepard nodded, giving him a crooked grin. “All sunshine and happiness, you are.” She sucked in a deep breath and focused on the feel of the rifle in her hand and the task at hand. “Okay, let’s go and see who our reception committee is.”

Shepard stepped out of the shuttle into the nearly knee-deep water of low tide. Eyes taking in every
detail, locating every advantage for the salarians and every weakness, she kept Roger sweeping
their line. She edged along the body of the Kodiak, using it as partial cover before she opened
herself to fire. The STG camp had been built up against the cliffs and consisted of three large tents.
Two turret guns, nestled in behind shields and barriers, protected the small camp on its open
corners. She queued up an overload, overclocking it to take down at least the shields on one,
should they open fire.

When she felt her team take positions behind her, fanning out at the ordered two metre spread, she
stepped out into the open, hoping like hell Garrus and Nihlus had their sniper rifles ready to finish
off those turrets before the turrets finished her.

Two salarians stepped outside the perimeter of their camp, stopping about a third of the way to the
shuttle. One of them raised a hand. “Captain Shepard?”

She nodded, just a quick vertical jerk of her head. “Yeah, that’s me. Who are you?”

“Captain Kirrahe, 3rd Infiltration Regiment, STG.” He gave her a salarian salute. “I’ve been sent
by the council to kill you.”
Shepard stopped, her heart slowing for a single second before another rush of adrenaline hit her blood like nitrous and revved it back up, pumping hard and fast. She adjusted her grip on Roger and anchored her stance. "Well, that's going to make it hard for us to be friends, isn't it?"

Kirrahe's large, downward-angled mouth pressed flat and tight for a moment. "Not as hard as you might imagine. I have no intention of obeying my orders."

Shepard straightened a little, but didn't lower Roger from high ready, keeping him couched hard against her shoulder. "Oh? You frequently reject council orders? Go renegade on a whim? That's not the reputation of the STG." Despite the heavy lacing of sarcasm and doubt woven through her words, a spark of hope kindled in the back of her skull.

Kirrahe stepped forward a couple more steps. "No, it is not. However, we are not usually misled into committing atrocities."

Shepard arched an eyebrow. "You prefer to commit your atrocities with complete disclosure?"

"Indeed," he said so flat that she couldn't tell if he was serious or not. He didn't give her time to consider it as he turned and signalled for his troops to lower their weapons. When he looked back, he appeared as close to throwing up as she'd ever seen a salarian. "Please, Captain ... " He looked at Nihlus. "... Spectre Kryik, allow me to explain. We don't have much time."

Shepard lowered Roger but didn't hang him up. She cast a glance at Garrus, warning him to stay ready and keep his eyes open as Nihlus stepped up beside her. When his head twitched in an answering nod, she gave the salarian her full attention. "Okay, Captain Kirrahe, I'm listening."

He hesitated for a moment, waiting to see if she'd close the distance, maybe, because when she didn't, he and his companion walked over to stand a couple of metres away. "We were told that you planned to attack a council research facility being overseen by Spectre Arterius, and I received orders that you, Captain Shepard, were not to leave the planet. However, when we arrived, I sent out several scouting parties, all of whom have been missing for over thirty hours. Since then, we've located one survivor, but unless we keep him sedated, all he does is stare into space and scream."

Shepard frowned, her guts tying in sick knots. "What does he scream about? Whispers? Darkness and cold? Maybe even spiders or something like that? A horde of skittering, crawling things in his brain?" She took a step forward when she saw her confirmation on Kirrahe's face. "He's indoctrinated." She shrugged, trying to find a way to explain it. "Sovereign, Saren's dreadnought, is not a ship. It's a sentient being, and somehow it has the ability to manipulate brain chemistry in order to exert control over biological life forms."

Kirrahe cupped his elbow in the opposite hand, his other hand lifting to tap thoughtfully against his chin. "How complete is this control?"
"Absolute." Shepard let the word drop like a stone. "Once the Reaper takes over their mind, they're just puppets. After they've been indoctrinated for a while, their brain ends up destroyed, full of tumours and hemorrhages. It's safe to assume that all your scouts are indoctrinated and under Sovereign's control." She shrugged, but let empathy bleed into her stare. "I'm sorry."

He appeared to shrug it off. Not as if the fate of his people didn't matter, but rather that it was a matter for a less pressing time. "When Lt. Wiks returned in that ... state, I became suspicious and launched a covert surveillance drone. Inside Saren's compound, it found sheds and sheds of krogan breeding tanks, the inhabitants being birthed and marched out to transport ships. In addition, there are hundreds of what I assume are Saren's geth allies fortifying the compound." He shrugged. "Whatever is going on in there, it's nothing that the council would sanction. This compound needs to be destroyed."

Shepard held her tongue about the council. They had unexpected help instead of being attacked before they even made it to the compound, no point in risking turning the tide back in the council's favour. Kirrahe could learn the depth of the lies told to him as they went. Instead, she nodded. "Agreed."

Kirrahe turned and waved the second salarian forward. "This is Commander Rentola, my second in command, and our demolitions expert."

Shepard gave Rentola a curt nod. "Commander."

Rentola returned the nod. "There are several installations that will need to be destroyed on the perimeter in order to take out their triangulation and targeting, communications, air support and perimeter alarms. Geth units are fortifying all perimeter installations."

Shepard turned to wave Nihlus forward. "Since we're taking the most direct route in, we can handle the alarms. Nihlus, can you take a look at the layout and assign the other three to whatever team will be closest?" When he nodded and moved to stand with Rentola, she turned back to Kirrahe.

"If you give us a few moments, Captain, my men would like to accompany you." He shrugged, his mouth flattening back out into that thin, angry line. "We are used to holding the line, and sometimes that means being aware that where it gets drawn can change, but crossing it altogether ... ." He straightened. "Not here. Not today."

Shepard nodded. "Do you have an APC? Our shuttle won't hold too many more."

"We do. I'll have it brought around." He gestured toward the camp. "You're welcome in our camp, but we shouldn't wait very long before moving." With that, he turned away and strode toward the tents.

Shepard raised her hand to her ear. "Brother Sparky, move the shuttle into the camp, and then I need to see you and Ash."

"Yes, ma'am." A moment later, the shuttle lifted out of the water.

Shepard looked out to sea, watching thunderheads roll over the waves as the storm closed in on land. The water under her feet shimmered in the patchy sunlight, the minerals turning it a sea-green colour.

"Virmire's a beautiful place," she said, looking up at Nihlus. "Shame we won't have time to enjoy it."

Shepard jumped down out of the shuttle and ran forward to take cover behind a large rock with a
good view of the front gates. An assortment of geth units patrolled the maze of walkways leading in. The only ones that concerned her, however, were the Juggernauts nearest the doors. Not much cover that far up. Railings left large strips of body parts open to hits.

She raised her hand to her ear. "All teams, report in."

"Team One," Sparky replied. "So close behind you that I think my gun barrel is stuck in your belt. Ready to deploy when you are, ma'am."

She glanced over at him and shook her head. Incorrigible.

"Team Two has taken out the targeting assist station and is thirty seconds from deploying against the comm relay, ma'am. No casualties taking out the targeting, but there are a lot of geth out there, and they are dug in like ticks."

"Roger that, Ash. Report in when you finished with the comm relay. Hopefully we'll have the alarms down by then and you can move straight into the compound."

"Understood, Team Two, out."

Shepard changed channels as Tali reported in.

"Team Four taking heavy fire from both the ground and air at the air support refuelling station," Tali called, shouting to hear herself over the pulse cannons of the primes. "But we have most of them down. The refuelling cells have been destroyed. Proceeding into the secondary compound within ten minutes if luck holds out. No casualties."

"Roger that, Team Four." Shepard nodded to Nihlus, turning command of Team Three over to him. The inclusion of two salarian team members gave Nihlus enough people that she and Wrex could remain semi-autonomous to search out intel, coming and going while still attached to the team. Even though Kirrahe had gone along with Ash's team, Shepard remained certain that he'd hear from his people about them trying to find Saren's genophage cure rather than sending it up in smoke along with the rest of the base. The more she and Wrex could work on their own, the better.

"Shepard and Wrex, take point," the Spectre commanded, giving her a firm nod.

She peered out, then dashed forward, staying low. Taking cover behind the nearest railing, she signalled to Wrex to focus on the troopers closest. Pulling up an overload, she tore down most of the shields on the first juggernaut, then opened fire, whittling it down. When it went down, she moved up, racing along an extended, open section of walkway, relying on the rest of the team to give her cover.

Sliding in behind an outcropping of rock, she checked her shields. Nearly down. She let them recharge, overloading and sabotaging a destroyer bearing down on Wrex. A quick switch to Ingrid dropped the thing at Wrex's feet. Two troopers fell to single shots from the sniper rifle before she changed back.

The rest of both teams followed them up through the maze, providing cover and then helping whittle down the large units. The sheer number of enemies they faced solidified her determination to undermine Saren's heretic support however she could. Finally, legs shaking with exhaustion, she made it through the outside gates and down a long walkway between the walls to the security terminal to the base's interior. Hacking in through layers of security, she found herself grinning.

"A real engineer, indeed," she grumbled under her breath. Too bad Garrus was on the back side of

A plume of fire and smoke erupted into the air off to her eleven o'clock. Speak of the devil.

"Those alarms down?" Nihlus called from his position further down the series of gates.

"Two minutes. Trying to reroute them all here so that we draw some of the enemy off the other teams." She keyed in commands, rerouting all the alarm trips to the closest door. "All right, ready to go. Open it up."

"Teams Two and Four," Nihlus spoke into the radio. "The alarms are down. Move in when ready."

"Team Two moving in. Comm relay is down. Vakarian took a bullet to the shoulder. He's bandaged, medigel'd, and moving on."

Shepard's heart dropped into her belly, and for a moment, her fingers twitched, aching to pop up to her earpiece and demand to know exactly how bad it was.

**Trust Ash. She wouldn't let him continue if it was bad.**

She brought Roger up tight to her shoulder and nodded to Wrex. "Come on, old man. Let's get this done."

"Right behind you, Shepard."

Together, they took position at either side of the door. Shepard hacked the control, the air splitting with the peel of alarms as the door rose off the ground.

"Oh fuck," Shepard groaned as she stepped into the low light, her gun swinging around toward movement, identifying her attacker as an indoctrinated salarian. "Sweet baby Jesus." She fended him off with her rifle, not wanting to shoot him. What if he could be treated?

A single roar from Wrex's shot gun dropped the unfortunate fellow. "Can't afford to go soft now, Shepard. Even if we could fix them, how the hell do we get them out of here?" He took out another one. "Kinder just to put them down quick."

**How long before it's kinder just to put you down quick?**

She nodded, but concentrated on taking down the geth, leaving the salarians for the others.

They fought their way through a massive warehouse and up a flight of stairs. Shepard caught sight of computer terminals and stepped out from behind a wall of crates to take a plasma cannon blast to the chest. Even though her shields deflected it, the force threw her on her ass and knocked the wind out of her.

Wrex grabbed her hand, wrenching her to her feet hard enough that her shoulder popped. "No lying down, Shepard. I can't do all the work."

Still gasping, she overloaded the heretic juggernaut, then peppered it with rounds. Finally, it let out a bad extranet connection death squeal, its head exploding into white fluid. Shepard ran up to the first of the computers, but kept her eyes up, looking down the length of the room. "Door at the far end. Go ahead and clear the way, we'll be right behind you." Without waiting for a reply, she started hacking her way in. "What is all this?" she mumbled as the security fell before her. "Data and tons of it. It's all on indoctrination." She shook her head and slipped an OSD into the slot. "Let Dr. Chakwas worry about it."

Thirty seconds later, they went through the door, a couple of computer consoles to their right. In
under a minute, Shepard hacked in and grabbed what she could. "Moving on," she called, sprinting for the door at the far end of the room.

Bodies littered the floor, all of them salarian. More of Kirrahe's people. She sent Wrex ahead to keep an eye on the exits.

"Team Four to Shepard." Tali's voice sounded like an answer to prayer. "We're inside the base and moving toward the south detention block. Resistance inside the base so far is light."

"Roger that, Team Four. Stay sharp, and keep in touch." Shepard closed Tali's channel and opened one to Legion. "Legion?"

"Receiving."

"Keep an open receiving channel to me. We're inside the base, and hopefully we'll find something you can relay to the heretic geth to undermine Sovereign."

"Affirmative."

"Shepard out." A beep alerted her to another message, so she switched channels.

"We have salarian prisoners here, Shepard," Nihlus reported. "Some of them are beyond help, but taking a couple of others with us. Team One, here's your elevator. Get those charges set and fast. Good luck."

Shepard ran over to the first computer and flew through the drives, brain moving faster than her eyes, but trusting herself to pick out anything important. Most of the information amounted to local copies of the indoctrination information, so she left the other computers.

"Come on, Wrex," she said, running up behind him. "As fascinating as this is, we have far more important information to find."

"Agreed." He punched the door control and led the way out onto a walkway overlooking cells. High-pitched voices mumbled and screamed gibberish from below. Shivers clawed their way up Shepard's spine and tears of sympathy pricked her eyes. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Wrex shudder. "Those would be the ones who are too far gone," he said, shaking his huge head. "Poor bastards."

Shepard brought up the floor plan and let out a frustrated hiss. "We've gone too far. We needed the elevator back in that computer room." She gave him a push. "Let Nihlus and the others clear this area. We need the genophage labs." Side by side, they bolted back through the empty rooms until they reached the elevator.

"Nihlus is behind us," Wrex grunted. "That means going into a fight, Shepard." He punched one fist into his other palm and rolled his neck, vertebrae snapping like popcorn.

She grinned, the heady pulse of adrenaline and oxygen beating through her veins. She may never have liked killing all that much, but no high in the galaxy matched that of battle. "Afraid we can't take 'em, Wrex?" She hit the control and the doors opened.

A piercing shrill of feedback sliced through her head and yanked her hand to her ear. "Dammit." She shook her head and cracked her jaw as the sound and pain faded. She checked. Ash's channel. "Team Two?"

"Team Two is taking heavy fire, Shepard," Ashley called. Gunfire pelted the chief's cover close
enough to make it hard to hear Ash over the noise. Garrus hollered something, but Shepard couldn't make out anything but the hard, 'business of killing' tone. "Jenkins, cover Vakarian's back. Move up." Ashley cursed. "Turner and two salarians down. We're almost to the first AA tower, but we could use some of this heat taken off of us."

Shepard called up Ashley's tracker as she stepped into the elevator. Team Two was on the opposite side of the genophage labs moving toward the northeast corner of the compound. "I see you, Ash. We're headed that way now, hitting the genophage lab in under a minute. Hopefully that will pull them off of you. Until then, take it slow."

"Aye, aye, ma'am."

Shepard called up an overload, and readied Roger in the crook of her arm as the elevator slowed to a stop. When it opened, it felt like stepping out into a busy hospital ward. Stasis units hummed and spun, husk creatures inside each one, while lab-coated staff bustled around. Just another day in the labs of the mad scientist.

What was Saren doing with the husks? Studying them? Maybe more to do with indoctrination?

Shepard strode into the room, Wrex a step behind her. The staff remained intently focused on packing equipment into crates, allowing them halfway down the room before anyone voiced a challenge. Indoctrinated staff as well? How useful would they be?

"Who are you?" an asari in a lab coat demanded, doing a double-take. "I thought the krogan were all . . ." She stopped, apparently noticing that Wrex was no newborn pod krogan.

"I'm not one of your weakling, vat-grown slaves," the battlemaster said, the words ground out between this teeth as his shotgun levelled on the pale, blue head. "We're here for the cure."

Instant chaos. The asari threw herself at a console, her hand slapping the stasis controls in the same second that Wrex left her shoulders without a head. The released husks milled about for a moment, giving Shepard the chance to overload one and sabotage another before they charged. She got a few shots off before it turned into a furball of beating the machine nightmares off with the butt of her rifle as they pummelled and clawed at her.

Just when she started to feel that she might be in trouble, Wrex waded in, grabbing husks and ripping them limb from limb before tossing them aside.

Must be nice to have the strength of a small bulldozer.

"Smash the computers! Wipe all data! Destroy everything!" a krogan hollered from halfway down the room. White-coated assistants ran to obey his orders. Breaking free, Shepard ran down the length of the lab, opening fire on the lab coats while leaving the krogan to Wrex.

"Traitor!" the behemoth screamed, hitting the scientist with a warp that skewed the air throughout the entire room. Shepard felt the edge of the field trying to disassemble her molecules and leaped away from it, bolting toward the last few lab assistants even as Roger mowed them down.

"I'm curing our people!" Armour and chitinous shell collided with a catastrophic, wet crunch that shook Shepard all the way through. She prayed it wasn't Wrex's armour that gave way with the charge.

"You'd turn us all into the slaves of monsters." Wrex's shotgun barked three times, and the floor trembled underfoot as the scientist fell.
The last lab assistant made it to the mainframe at the end of the lab, hitting controls even as Shepard's rounds tore through him. What the hell kept him on his feet? Finally, Wrex's shotgun disintegrated the poor fool's chest cavity, and he fell.

Shepard scrambled over his body even as Wrex dragged it out of the way. Fingers flying over the controls, she tried to halt the data wipe in progress, shunting everything she could find over to her omnitool.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it." Data vanished faster than she could grab it, and what she managed to get hold of amounted to fragments. Then, the computer died. "Fuck." She slammed both fists down on the dead console, then kicked it and spun away.

"Did you get the cure?" Wrex demanded, looming over her shoulder.

"I got what I could, Wrex. We won't know how much until we get it back to the Normandy and let the experts go through it." She nodded toward the shelves and desks. "We have a couple of minutes before Nihlus catches up with us. See if you can find hard copies of anything." She attacked the nearest desk, throwing anything she couldn't use onto the floor, dumping out drawers, and generally making a glorious mess. Odd how satisfying wrecking things could be.

She shoved a couple of folders full of test results into her armour as Nihlus and the rest of Team Three ran in, a couple of extra salarians in tow. "All clear in here," she announced, not giving him time to speak. Striding for the door halfway down the room, she waved them on. "Let's go see if we can find Saren's den."

The door led into a narrow area between buildings, the tall walls drawing Shepard's eye up to the sky. Thunderheads rolled in heavy from the sea, bruising the sky a mottled violet. Shepard shivered a little as lightning carved through the air, then turned her back to it, facing the lingering sunshine that brightened their path ahead.

"Did you find anything?" Nihlus whispered, stepping up to jog at her side. He cut a glance over at her, his shotgun never leaving high ready.

Shepard popped one shoulder in a quick shrug. "Hard to say, they started burning down the house the minute they realized we didn't belong. I saved what I could."

A couple of geth troopers blocked the path, but the team made light work of them. The short open area ended at another door.

"Why do these places always have to be over-thought and over-designed mazes?" Shepard grumbled, waiting until guns covered both sides of the door before she hit the control. "What's wrong with just putting up a building?" She stepped through, past the arched brows and sideways glances.

A sigh of sound, out of place amidst the rolling surf and echoes of battle drifting on the breeze, set Shepard's internal alarm off like a small firework at the base of her skull. "Who's here?" she called, pulling Roger up to her shoulder. "Come out or we'll drag your carcass out of wherever you're hiding."

"Please don't shoot," a tiny, feminine whisper called from behind a desk. "I'm unarmed. I'm just a scientist, not a soldier."

Shepard looked to Nihlus who nodded for her to go ahead before sending Wrex to cover the right while he moved to Shepard's left flank.
"Then come out, hands up, nice and slow," she said as she walked forward, closing the ten metres or so. So many huge, empty cement rooms.

Small blue hands appeared above the desktop, then two grey-blue eyes below blue speckled brow markings. "Please, I just want to get out of here before it's too late." The asari stood, her hands held out in front of her.

"Okay." Shepard closed on her. "Let's hear it, gorgeous. Who the hell are you, and what in the name of the holy Enkindlers' great, glowing rumps are you doing here?"

"My name is Rana Thanoptis." She edged around the desk. "I'm a neuro-specialist. I was brought here to study the effect of indoctrination on organic minds." She gave a helpless little shrug. "At least, that's what I was told. Saren keeps us all in the dark as much as possible."

A massive explosion pounded through the air, sending the asari diving back behind the desk. The shock wave rolled over them, making Shepard's ears pop with the pressure change.

AA gun number one, check. Good job, Team Two.

"You can come back out," Shepard sighed. "So, neuro-specialist helping Saren indoctrinate people?" She pulled her pistol off her hip. "Any reason I shouldn't just shoot you?"

Rana let out a little squeal as her head peeked back over the desk top. "I wasn't helping indoctrinate people. In fact, I think Saren had us trying to figure out how to prevent or reverse it." She stared into Shepard's eyes for a moment, then threw up her hands. "Look, I didn't have a choice here. It's not just the prisoners that end up indoctrinated, you know. Sooner or later, Saren is going to want to dissect my brain."

Shepard's gut clenched. "Everyone here ends up indoctrinated?" She looked over her shoulder at Nihlus. All those quarian kids … . "Dear god." How the hell could they risk sending them back to the flotilla? A forage harvester began cutting swaths behind her eyes.

"Not everyone. There is another cell block away from the main compound. South side. Saren keeps control prisoners there, or so I heard. I've never actually been over there."

"Okay. Give us a minute." Shepard walked over to Nihlus, a helpless little flutter of her hands preceding her words. "What do you think? Is it worth the risk to get a neuro-specialist who has worked on indoctrination from the inside?"

The Spectre looked back at their growing team. "I'm tempted to say no just because of how many semi-crazy people we're dragging around already, but she might be a huge help to Drs Chakwas and Solus."

Shepard closed her eyes for a moment, trying to contain the headache, her brow scrunching down toward her nose. "I'm not going to be the crazy cat lady, I'm going to end up the crazy semi-indoctrinated and quite possibly dangerous refugee lady." She turned her back to the others and pressed in closer into his space. "If the quarian pilgrims are indoctrinated, there's no way we can let them go back to their people."

"One dragon at a time, Shepard," Nihlus whispered. "Let's get them out of here first, then worry about that." He looked over Shepard's head and nodded toward the door in the back wall. "Where does that lead?"

Rana shrugged, but her body language screamed that whatever she thought was back there scared her to death. "It leads to an elevator to Saren's private labs. I don't know what he does in there.
Shepard doubted the scientist's terror could be chalked up to an overactive imagination. Although, it would be amazing to walk into something that turned out better than she imagined rather than worse. Things always being worse got old after a while.

"Wrex," Nihlus called, heading for the door, "stay here, and keep an eye on our new friends. Any of them get twitchy, you know what to do." He turned slightly. "Gladstone, take cover at the outside door. Nothing gets in."

"Roger that, sir," the Marine said, moving into position.

Shepard held Rana's stare for a moment, Peduk's betrayal too fresh in her mind to take anything for granted. "We'll take you with us," she said at last, a hand cutting the air to forestall the asari's thanks. "Once aboard our ship, you'll be scanned to assess the extent of your indoctrination. You can repay us for extracting you by helping our people work on developing a treatment." Shrugging, she swept her raised hand toward the outside door. "If that arrangement isn't to your liking . . . you've got maybe half an hour to clear the blast zone."

Rana gulped, her skin paling to a peaked ice-blue. "I'll stick with you," she said, her voice aiming for a pitch that only dogs could hear.

Shepard strode to the door into Saren's part of the complex. "Then stay here with the others and don't give Wrex a reason to shoot you." Raising her hand to the control, Shepard glanced back at Nihlus. He nodded, and she palmed the panel. The door opened to reveal another outdoor walkway that led to a small empty room, that led to a vestibule that led to the elevator.

Shepard stepped into the lift and shook her head. "Like I said, ridiculously over designed mazes." She glanced at Nihlus and winked when he chuckled. "So, what do you think we're going to find in here?"

His answering shrug told her that he was as tired of the bad surprises as she was. "Whatever it is, I'm sure it'll be terrible."

"You're not going and getting cynical on me, are you?" she asked, bumping him lightly with her shoulder.

His chuckle came out weary. "Believe it or not, Shepard. I was a cynical, ornery, old ass before you met me."

She feigned shock and horror, laughing softly when he buffeted her with an elbow. "You? No! I can't believe that." Sighing, she looked front and edged toward the door. "I also can't believe this elevator is so slow. Or are we descending into the center of the planet?" No sooner had she finished and the metal doors opened, revealing another small vestibule area.

When she palmed that control, the door opened to reveal a floor made out of metal grating. On her left, a long ramp descended toward a very familiar piece of technology. "My god, he has another beacon, Nihlus." She hurried down the ramp, slowing as she reached the bottom. "This one is functioning properly." Edging forward, she looked down at the interface, knowing it as well as anything belonging to their time.

"You're going to use it?" he asked, his voice hushed, but tinted with excitement.

"We both should, but alone," she replied. "Who knows what we could get from an intact beacon, Nihlus." Her fingers skipped over the controls, a wide smile spreading across her face as the
beacon's field enveloped her, lifting her off the metal grating into its familiar, welcome embrace.

Images ripped through her mind, some of them known and familiar, many of them not. As before, they passed too quickly for her to understand or even recognize them as more than flashes of sound and light, horror, death and fear. She pressed her eyes closed as pressure built up behind them, threatening to send them flying out of her skull. Teeth clenched, muscles tied into knots, her human body protested, crying out against the invasion even as the prothean revelled.

Then the beacon released her. Her feet hit the metal floor, but her legs gave out and she tumbled down onto her hands and knees. Panting, head throbbing, she slipped sideways to sit on one hip, elbow braced against her side.

"Shepard?" Nihlus called, his voice soft and worried.

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's not a whole lot more fun the second time." She staggered up onto her feet, wobbling a little. "Definitely more information there, though." Stepping back, she made room for him to use the beacon. "I'll check in with the teams," she said, backing up the the base of the ramp, keeping an eye on him as he activated the controls.

"Team One, report."

"We've reached the lowest level of the complex, Captain," Alenko reported, his voice broken by static. "We're reading something huge down here. A massive power source. First five charges are in place. We will be heading up to the evac zone in a few minutes."

"Understood, Team One. Don't get distracted down there. As fascinating as that power source might be, it will be going up in smoke soon enough."

"Roger that, Team One out."

Shepard switched channels. "Team Two, report. How's it going out there, Ash?"

"Whatever you did helped. We are almost to the second AA tower. We've lost another STG member. The rest of us are beaten up, but on our feet and fighting. We'll be good and damned ready for that dust off when we're done."

"Roger that, Team One. Stay strong, we're almost through this." Shepard's chest clenched with guilt. So far, her part of the mission had been a cakewalk, and out there her people were being hurt, dying.

"We'll be in touch, Skipper. Team Two out."

Shepard switched channels again. "Team Four, report."

"Shepard!" Tali's voice came through Shepard's earpiece loud and shrill enough to make her ears ring. "We've located the hostages, but the cells are all wired to something . . . the cables go underground. Legion and the primes are trying to trick the system into believing the circuit is closed, but we have no idea what could happen."

"Be careful. I hate to say it, but we're running on a deadline here, Tali. Do what you can, but when we call for evac . . ."

"We'll get them out, Shepard." The quarian's voice calmed, gaining a layer of steel. "We'll get them out and report in when we're on our way to our evac."
Shepard's lips pressed together in a tight, proud smile. "I know you will, Tali. Just make sure Legion keeps that receiving channel open. Shepard out." Nihlus's armour rang off the metal grating as he clambered to his feet, the beacon transmission ended. When he turned toward her, he looked about as good as she'd felt. "You okay?"

Leaning up against the wall, he nodded and pressed his hand to his temple. "Hell of a headache, but it's backing off a little." He pushed off the wall and looked around, walking up the ramp and then toward the center portion of the upper floor. It stuck out like some sort of platform. "What do you suppose this is?"

Shepard followed a handful of steps behind him, one hand creeping up to rub the back of her neck. Damned beacon headaches. "Observation platform? But for what?"

At the end, a flash of red light coalesced into a familiar, terrifying form. Tashac spat out the name: Sovereign, but Shepard held the Prothean's hatred and terror in check. It didn't prove an easy task as she recalled the terrible, screaming roar from Eden Prime, the sheer scale of the destruction it had caused without even trying. And there it hung, insubstantial, just a translucent light show, but one that stabbed into her heart and her mind, threatening to rip them both straight out of her.

"You are not Saren," a deep, reverberating voice stated, the dead, singular tone sending a superstitious shudder down Shepard's spine. She couldn't recall ever hearing anything so absolutely alien. It tore at the fabric of reality around her . . . so wrong, so abhorrent to the forces of life and creation and evolution that it formed a sort of antimatter. Something so far into 'the other' that it shouldn't be able to exist in her universe.

Fighting off the trembling and watery twisting in her guts, Shepard forced herself straight and smiled in the face of the vast, soullessness of that machine voice. "Nope, I'm definitely not Saren." Striding right up to the hologram she felt her fear evolve into a reckless sort of giddiness that made her head buzz. Hysterical laughter pushed at her, dangling off the back of her throat and clawing at the base of her tongue. She fought it back.

"Well, well, well. Look at you. Nazara, I presume?".
Shepard's grin widened when the hologram remained silent, imagining the wheels whirling in that gigantic electronic brain as the Reaper tried to figure out how she knew its name. She held her hands out to the side and made a sweeping bow. "I'm Captain Jane Shepard. I can't tell you how lovely it is to finally meet you in person. I've heard so many wonderful things."

"Rudimentary creatures of blood and flesh," the voice continued, "you touch my mind, fumbling in ignorance. Incapable of understanding."

Shepard hesitated for a moment. She'd thought that moment would come with some sort of terrified revelation, but instead . . . calm filled her. Nihlus stepped up behind her, his hand pressing into the small of her back. She glanced back and nodded, understanding the warning and appreciating the support, but her fear had evaporated. Where others might have stood before that thing trembling, she had been given everything she needed to face it from a place of strength. Time to get some answers.

She stepped out to the very end of the platform. "Oh, I think might understand a little better than you think. You see, in all your amazing incomprehensibility, you didn't kill the Thorian before it let out your little secret. See, it watched your kind destroy Feros. It absorbed all that horror and death." A ferocious smile tightened her face, sharpening it. "It ratted on you, and then the true geth ratted on you."

"There is a realm of existence so far beyond your own that you cannot even imagine it." The monotone arrogance reverberated through the air, sending tremors through Shepard's eardrums and lips, fingers, belly … anywhere thin, fragile, and human. "I am beyond your comprehension. I am Sovereign."

Shepard laughed. "Is this a pre-recorded message? In case of contact with organics break glass?" She cocked a hip and crossed her arms, settling her head back on her neck. "Oh yeah, you're a huge mystery, Nazara." She leaned forward as she stressed the Reaper's name. "Let's see how I do on the whole comprehension thing. You're what the Protheans called a Reaper."

"Reaper, a label created by the Protheans to give voice to their destruction. In the end, what they chose to call us is irrelevant. We simply are."

Shepard leaned back, widening her stance and dropping her center of gravity, trying to look as immovable as possible. "No, you wouldn't call yourselves Reapers. You probably have no species name, because each of you is actually made from a different species … well, the remains of them."

"Organic life is nothing but a genetic mutation. An accident. Your lives are measured in years and decades. You wither and die. We are eternal. The pinnacle of evolution and existence. Before us, you are nothing. Your extinction is inevitable. We are the end of everything."

Shepard straightened, her arms dropping to her side. "That's part of the pre-recorded intimidation
message, is it? Because we've used the beacons, we know better. You were born 50,000 years ago in the heart of the Citadel tower from the grey, pasty remains of a race called the Rivaran. We saw you detach from your womb." She backed up a step. "Well? Nothing to say to that, Mr. Big and Scary Sovereign?" Nihlus pressed in tight against her, but didn't speak. She looked to him. He seemed steady and calm, but observing perhaps? Anyway, he didn't seem inclined to join the conversation. A giddy sort of laugh escaped her as she imagined what Garrus would have to say were he there.

Taking some steel from that thought, she stepped forward. "No? Nothing to that? I suppose your replies are all based on 'Sweet baby Jesus, what are you?' and 'Holy mother of God, that's not a ship'." She reached up and covered up turning on her radio with an ear scratch. "Okay, so … something easier. What of your allies? Saren and the heretic geth? What do they get out of helping you bring back all your buddies? A nice vacation condo on a beach somewhere?" She shifted a couple of steps to her right then back, pacing a mini-circuit, buying herself some thinking space. "You promised to give the heretic geth their future. What does that future look like?"

"The geth are an annoyance, creations of limited utility. They are unable to think on their own, made weak and dependent by their organic creators. Their allegiance is inconsequential outside their purpose. Once my kind blacken the sky of every world, the harvest complete, they will be exterminated. The cycle will not be broken."

Shepard grinned, nodding a little at the talons that patted her back, congratulating her. "Oh, I think the cycle is plenty broken already. The Protheans failed against thousands of you, but right now, you're here alone." She leaned in. "Trust me, I intend to see that it stays that way."

"Confidence born of ignorance. The cycle cannot be broken. The pattern has repeated itself more times than you can fathom. Organic civilizations rise, evolve, advance, and at the apex of their glory, they are extinguished. The Protheans were not the first. They did not create the Citadel. They did not forge the mass relays. They merely found them. The legacy of my kind."

Shepard nodded and paced behind Nihlus, turning her back to the Reaper, sensing it would hate that she did. For a being that demonstrated so little emotion, it reeked arrogance like a five day dead possum lying by the side of the highway in the desert reeked of … well, reek. When she reached the main part of the floor, she stopped, still turned away. "Yeah, I know that too. So what?"

"Your civilization is based upon the technology of the mass relays, our technology. By using it, your society develops along the paths we desire. We impose order on the chaos of organic evolution. You exist because we allow it, and you will end because we demand it." Its voice rose on the end by the tiniest degree, but had previously stuck to the monotone so strictly that it registered as a shout.

"So, you prod us along, herding us through our development until we reach a stage where we're useful as … what?" Nihlus strode up to the hologram. "You don't take slaves, other than turning people into shock troops that you leave to die. I don't have any memories of you stripping planets of technology or resources. Why bother with any of it? What is it about?"

Shepard nodded, cataloguing the information away, wondering how much Tashac knew. Did she know the Inusannon didn't build the relays? She must have. Surely, the Protheans had seen the trap for what it was … since they ended up caught in it.

"So you built the relays and the Citadel. You created the whole concept of the Mass Effect?" She made a face, an eyebrow cocking, her mouth skewed off to one side. That rang wrong. "Really? A race so creatively barren that they repeat the exact same behaviours over and over for millions of
years, and I'm supposed to believe that you invented anything?" She shook her head and turned back, striding down to face the hologram nose to … creepy shell, certainty fueling her. "No. Someone built the first one of you. Maybe the first several, and then you took over. You aren't capable of true creation or invention."

"My kind transcends your very understanding. We are each a nation, free of all weakness. You cannot even grasp the nature of our existence. We have no beginning. We have no end. We are infinite. Millions of years after your civilization has been eradicated and forgotten we will endure. Your kind need not understand our motives, they need only die as have trillions upon trillions before them."

Shepard laughed, but despite everything she knew from the Thorian and Tashac, an icy dread crept up her spine. Nothing said so far could have provoked it. Something else lurked under the surface, something she couldn't see, and it terrified her. The thing, the damned Reaper felt as though it was gloating rather than reciting by rote. Despite that, she cracked her neck, squashed down her fear and bulldozed ahead. "Seriously? Can't you step off the script? I told you that I already know you were created, how, when, and even out of what. And I'm supposed to be completely terrified of you?"

Looking back at Nihlus, she shook her head. "What the hell were we so worried about? It can't even carry on an intelligent conversation. It's all just scripted threats and assumptions." She leaned forward and levelled an ice-cold smile at the thing, all teeth and frozen eyes. "You're pathetic, and I'm not afraid of you. You wouldn't know what to do with a galaxy ready and willing to fight you."

"Your fear is irrelevant, as is your posturing. We are Legion. The time of our return is coming. You cannot escape your doom."

She shook her head. "Oh, we'll avoid it. We'll send you straight to hell, and if your buddies and inbred cousins and drunken college roommates show up, we'll send them straight to hell too."

"Shepard!"

Shepard's hand flew up to her ear. "Team Four? All sorted?"

"Yes, ma'am. We got the cells open and are headed for the evac site now. Moving slowly though, Captain. The pilgrims and other prisoners are afraid of Legion and the primes as well as in general."

"Understood, Team Four. Keep them moving. Let me know when you're safely back aboard the drop ship."

Before Tali could reply, an emergency communication broke through, shrieking in Shepard's ear as it cut off the other call.

"Ouch, dammit." She doubled over, her hands clapped over her ears as six inch ardox spikes hammered into her head. "Fuck, that hurts. Who decided something was worth deafening me?"

"Alenko here, Captain. Remember that energy source that was about to be blown to hell so we shouldn't pay any attention to it? We just found it. It turned on about three minutes ago. It's set to blow everything sky high and blanket the planet in massive amounts of radiation in seventeen minutes."

"What?" Shepard jerked upright, spine snapping stiff. She opened the channel for Nihlus to receive as well. "A bomb?" Her mind spun into overdrive, trying to formulate a plan, thoughts flipping
through so quickly that she almost missed his confirmation.

"Yes, ma'am. One hell of a massive bomb. It'll take out everything for five klicks in every
direction."

Nihlus stepped to Shepard's side, his hand reflexively moving to squeeze her shoulder. "A trap.
Saren let us get in this far before triggering it."

Shepard felt her heart dip sickeningly, a sponge bogged down in a swamp, riding algae-choked
waves in a storm. "The quarians." She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Their cells were
hooked up to cables that ran into the floor. Tali said they just got the pilgrims out."

"There are cables coming into the room, but Captain, we have to evacuate. There's no way to
disarm this thing, it's completely shielded. Commander Rentola and I have been trying to find a
way in, but … ."

Shepard spun back to face the hologram. "Fuck, that bloody thing's been playing with us. Get out,
Sparky. Get the hell out of there. We'll meet you at the evac point." Glancing at Nihlus, she barked.
"Get the others moving! We're not leaving anyone on this fucking planet." She marched to the end
of the platform to stare down the hologram. "We're going to end you. On the life of the sweet baby
Jesus, I promise you that, machine. I will end you."

"Your words are empty, your future nonexistent. I am the vanguard of the harvest and your
civilization's destruction. Your god has abandoned you, Jane Shepard. It left you to the batarans,
and it has left you to us. We will not be as merciful as they were. This exchange is over." The
hologram blinked out.

"… pinned down at the base of the AA tower!" Ashley's voice shouted over heavy fire as Nihlus
included Shepard in the conversation. "Every heretic geth on the planet is dug in up there."

Ashley's voice broke through the thick, glacial darkness that held Shepard frozen at the edge of the
platform. On the surface, she understood how the Reaper knew about the batarans, but something
in that voice promised something so much worse and so much deeper.

"Blow that thing and get out of there, Williams," Nihlus bellowed back. "In sixteen minutes, this
place is going to be a radioactive crater."

"Ash," Shepard chimed in as she shook off most of the terror and ran for the door. "Do what you
have to, but take that gun down. We don't have time to make it outside the range of that gun for
pick up. If it isn't destroyed, we're all dying here." Jumping through before the door even finished
opening, she dashed forward and hit the elevator control.

"Understood, ma'am. We'll get it done. Vakarian, Kirrahe, move up and overload that juggernaut."

Shepard glanced back at Nihlus as the channel closed. "Tali's running for her evac?"

Nihlus nodded, stepping past her into the elevator. "We just need to hope that Williams and
Vakarian can get that AA gun down, or it won't matter. We can't even call in the shuttle." He
punched the controls.

She nodded,shrugging Roger into her hands. Fear galvanized her. In the face of certain disaster,
only one thing remained. Action. Keep in the fight, keep moving forward until her heart stopped.
"We need to send Gladstone and the refugees ahead to the evac and try to pull some of the heat off
Team Two." She raised her hand to her ear. "Team One, I'm transmitting the tracker code for
Gladstone. I'm going to send him and the noncombatants to the evac. See if you can join up and
give them some extra fire support, make sure they get there."

"Aye, aye, ma'am. And you?"

Shepard stepped up to the elevator door, willing it to move faster. "Team Two is pinned down at
the second tower. Going to try to give them a shot to blow that gun to hell. Just get the
noncombatants out of the line of fire, Sparky."

"Yes, ma'am. Team One, out."

Wrex paced restlessly along the line of salarian prisoners when they made it back to the outer
room. "About time. I was beginning to think the two of you had gotten yourselves killed." He
strode forward to meet them, bristling and tense.

"No, but it's early still." Shepard ran over to the door. "Gladstone, run like hell for the evac with the
salarians and the doctor. Team One will meet up with you." When he responded to the affirmative,
she turned to face the salarian scouts. "Are any of you okay to handle a pistol? You're going to
need to help protect yourselves."

Two stepped forward. She pressed her pistol into the hand of one and nodded for Nihlus to hand
his sidearm over to the other. "Excellent. Good luck."

"I've fired a gun enough to help," the asari scientist said, stepping forward. "I might not hit all that
many bad guys, but I can keep them scared."

Shepard smiled and nodded toward Gladstone. "He can give you his sidearm." She patted Rana on
the back as she hurried past. "Stay safe out there."

Waving to Wrex and Nihlus, Shepard ran out the door, heading straight ahead, across a drawbridge
rather than following Gladstone to the right. The AA tower rose out of the complex a couple
hundred metres ahead. They just needed to get close enough to distract some of the defenders.

"Shepard-Captain," a geth voice called in Shepard's ear, "geth surveillance of the planet indicates
that the Old Machine disengaged with docking station and is moving toward the base at a velocity
of 1200 kph. ETA to base five minutes twenty nine seconds."

Shepard groaned. Even more good news. Now they could dodge Reaper fire as well. "Thanks.
Keep us up to date on its movements. Shepard out." Shooting a glance Nihlus's direction, she
called, "Reaper on its way."

"Shit."

She nodded, that assessment summing things up nicely, but then two geth destroyers charged them
from the far end of the drawbridge. Halfway across, the large machines went down spewing white
fluid, falling to a barrage of powers and bullets. Leaping over one even as it slid past, Shepard
bolted for the door at the end.

"Insane," she grumbled, running around a long, curving interior hallway. "What the hell is the
point of all these stupid corridors?" The door at the end of that opened, another outdoor walkway
following alongside the building, then around, giving them a clear view of the AA tower. She
could see Team Two up on the roof of the building, pinned down by a huge number of geth.
Shepard pulled Ingrid and dodged into cover behind a crate.

"Some of those jumping ones," Nihlus called. "They're crawling down the wall from above."
"Excellent. Wrex! Warp. Try to keep them still for a second or two." Shepard sighted the thing, waited for Wrex to immobilize it before she finished it off. "Nice." Four of the nimble geth went down with relative ease before Shepard had a chance to wonder why they were, in fact, still fighting geth. Hadn't they heard what Sovereign said about them? Didn't they care about being disposable, expendable tools?

"Shepard-Captain, Old Machine proceeded to the north side of base and halted. Heretic dropships moving over primary evac site," their eyes in the heavens reported.

"Understood, let me know what that Reaper does. Shepard, out." She gestured for Nihlus to move up. "Let's take out a few of those defenders and then move. We have geth on their way to the primary evac."

"Understood." He brought up his sniper rifle, aiming for a head sticking up above the railing a good forty feet up.

She and Ingrid took out two troopers and three rocket troopers, the whole time the countdown ticking away inside her head. Twelve minutes, eleven minutes . . .

"Thanks, Skipper," Ashley called two minutes later. "We're moving forward. Should be on our way to the dust off within a couple of minutes."

Shepard stuck her head out, seeing her people heading toward the gun. "Okay, let's get to the evac site and keep it clear." She turned and bolted toward the tower. "Our route down is through that elevator."

The elevator exited into another short, empty hallway, a door on the wall to the right. As Shepard opened the door, she spotted the drop ship hovering above the evac site.

"Sweet spirits," Nihlus whispered, his voice a thin, tight hiss that focused Shepard on what lay before them: one of the massive krogan breeding sheds.

"There must be a hundred tanks in here," Wrex said, his massive head shaking. He led the way through the ankle deep water between the raised tanks. "Saren has to have grown thousands of krogan."

Shepard shook at the thought that the shed before them was only one of ten. Lifting into a jog, she passed Wrex, Roger held high and ready. "Right now, our job is getting our people the hell out of here. Focus on that, and come on." A massive door blocked the far end. When Nihlus and Wrex took positions in cover, she opened it up.

Geth covered the high ground, leaving them to dart into cover. Shepard launched her drone and overloaded the closest trooper, dropping it into a twitching pile.

"Shepard! Team Four is pinned down fifty metres from evac," Tali shouted over the sound of gunfire and exploding rockets.

"Tali, we've got eight minutes before the big boom. Do whatever you need to, but get out of there!" Shepard ducked out, sighting down two troopers, finishing them both off with headshots before her shields began to complain. She wished she could see what the quarians and geth were dealing with . . . wished she could race down through the base to help them . . . anything but be trapped and helpless.

Three heretic primes marched down the slope toward them, pulse cannons sending balls of plasma roaring past her head and slamming into her cover behind the frame of the gate. She leaned out,
ripping along the closest one's shields with an overload, then hacking it. It turned on it's companions, buying her a little time.

"Sparky! Where the hell is Team One? We're pinned down and taking fire from over a dozen geth here." Automatic, smooth and mechanical, she moved from one enemy to the next, ducking into cover only when her shields threatened to fail. The movements formed a dance, a dance of lead, careful timing, and deadly consequences.

"Still two minutes from your position, Shepard," Kaidan shouted back, constant gunfire coming through his mike as well. "We hooked up with your stragglers and are moving in as fast as we can. Meeting heavy resistance of our own here."

"Shit! Do what you can, Sparky." Shepard ducked out, hitting the hacked geth with overload again, then opened fire, trying to pull it down before it reversed her hack.

"Shepard-Captain," a geth voice called through her radio, "additional geth units housed on server 02242-14521 incoming to assist extraction of Team Four. Stand by." A drop ship soared over their heads, heading for Tali's position.

"Roger that." Shepard leaned out just in time to see Wrex blown backwards, three siege pulse blasts hitting him square. He flew three metres through the air to crash into the wall, sliding down into a motionless heap. Her heart stopped, a savage pain ripping down through her arm. "Wrex! Are you okay?" No answer. "Wrex! Answer me goddamn it!" Still nothing. Forcing down panicked sorrow and rage, she controlled her urge to run to the krogan's side, focusing her emotions into blowing the destroyer closing on him to hell.

An explosion rose up over the walls from the second AA tower, sending a lightning burst of relief sizzling along her nervous system. At last, they could call in the shuttle. A second later, the sound of gunfire erupted in Shepard's ear again.

"Skipper, the geth destroyed the elevator down to the breeding shed. We're fighting our way backward toward your position the long way, but there's too many of them. Vakarian, Kirrahe, and I are all wounded. I can't walk, so I'm going to hold here, try to keep them off the team and you."

"Ashley!" Shepard hollered over Roger's staccato beat as she tore into a rocket trooper. "Get your ass back here. You still have seven minutes. Even fighting backwards, you can make it." An explosion against Shepard's shields threw her backwards, leaving the radio channel open. She shook her head, clearing dizziness and water from her vision. "Nihlus, get that damned shuttle in here!" Scrambling up out of the water, she darted for new cover at the back of the field. They should be moving forward, but instead, the geth just kept coming. She took out another trooper with an overload, then finished off the one prime.

"Go!" Ashley hollered. "Jenkins, what the hell? I ordered you out of here."

"You're too badly wounded. You won't be able to hold them off. They'll hit us from behind." Shepard heard scuffling. Why were they wrestling instead of getting out?

Shepard opened fire on a rocket trooper that had Nihlus pinned, hammering the Spectre's position with a constant barrage of ML-77 shells. "What's going on there?" she yelled over the sound of Ashley cursing. "People, whatever you're doing, get the hell over here. We're on a deadline."

Continuing fire, she exploded the heretic's head, showering Nihlus in white fluid.

"Garrus, take the chief," Jenkins called. More scuffling, then Williams yelling. Shepard couldn't make out the words. Jenkins's voice came through clearly again. "Go, get to Shepard." Gunfire
interrupted him. "You can make it if you run. I'll hold them."

The huge gate on the other side of the field opened, Sparky and his team running out to scatter behind cover. Hope burst like a nova in Shepard's chest, lighting up the stormy darkness. A few more guns might only provide a long shot of survival, but it was still a shot.

"Glory hallelujah, Sparky," she said, her voice panting and breathless. "I've never been so glad to see your handsome mug."

"Can't say the same, ma'am." He ran across to take a position next to her, his rifle peppering the geth ranks with rounds.

Shepard ducked behind the cover. "Ashley? Jenkins? Team Two, what the hell is going on?"

Nihlus slid in behind a turbine casing next to Shepard's position. "Shuttle is on the way, but we need air support, or we're dead."

The young corporal's voice answered Shepard's call. "You were right, Captain . . . Jane. It's about knowing who to take the bullet for and when. I hope you think I made the right choice. When you take down Saren, have a cranberry juice for me."

"Jenkins, get your ass down here!" she screamed into the radio. A prime strode around their cover on the right. All three of them opened fire, the giant machine going down, but not before Sparky fell back against Shepard, blood bursting from his chest.

"It's been an honour, Captain," Jenkins said as Shepard scrambled to turn Kaidan around so she could check his wound. "Been saving something for you, Jane: 'Go with me, like good angels, to my end; and, as the long divorce of steel falls on me, make of your prayers one sweet sacrifice, and lift my soul to heaven.'"

Shepard hit Kaidan's medigel three times, then pulled him tighter in behind cover.

Jenkins's words, taken from Henry VIII balled in her throat, strangling her voice. "Not a betrayal," she whispered into the open channel. "You die a hero not a traitor, beautiful boy. We'll be proven to be the patriots in the end." The radio remained as quiet as death, so she closed the channel.

Shepard bent over Kaidan, scanning him with her omnitool. Unconscious, but alive. She clenched her jaw so hard that her teeth ground together, grumbling as she pressed her hand to Alenko's cheek, "Don't you dare die on me, Sparky."

Looking out, she saw that they'd finally started making headway against the tide. "Move up, drive those bastards off the edge," she yelled. "Keep closing in the landing area. Ash's team will make it any minute." She ducked out, running a handful of metres forward. "We just have to hold until she arrives!"

"Shepard," Joker's voice practically screamed in her ear. "The geth probe at the relay just recorded Sovereign taking off through the relay like a bat out of hell. Incoming for pick up, now. Which team? I need coordinates."

"Pick up Ash's team. Hold. I'll have her contact you." Shepard closed that channel. "Team Two. Ashley. Joker is incoming to pick up your team. You need to send him coordinates."

"Aye, ma'am, sending now." Ashley's voice came through rough, every other word or so forced out, no doubt by her bouncing along on Garrus's shoulder.
"Shepard, out." Before the channel closed, a massive explosion tore through her head, deafening her and dropping her to one knee. Wind roared . . . heavy objects . . . bodies . . . impacted . . . then screaming. The channel cut out.

"Jesus!" Shepard reeled from the pain in her head, calling out even though she could barely hear her own voice. "Ashley! Garrus! Anyone from Team Two, come in!"

No reply.

Shepard jumped out of cover, striding toward the landing zone. Roger took out a small squad of drones as she clicked over into automatic. "You bastards heard what the Reapers intend to do with you, for fuck's sake!" she screamed over the din, the constant aural insanity. She fired without pause, her shields complaining as rounds pelleted her.

Nihlus went down, but managed to drag himself behind cover and stagger back to his feet.

Shepard stopped halfway toward the landing zone and turned a circle. Nearly all of her people lay in the water, a couple still fighting, others dead . . . their eyes staring into nothing. Her omnitool beeped, letting her know three minutes left before the bomb under them detonated.

"Garrus," she whispered.

The shuttle swooped in from the west, swinging around as the VI brought it in for pickup, but eight geth including the two primes stood between her people and evac. Impossible.

Someone hit her hard, driving her behind cover. Looking up, she saw salarian eyes blinking at her. "Rentola?"

He said nothing, just leaning out to open fire, stopping, his mouth gaping as he stared up into the sky. Shepard followed his stare. A geth dropship soared in low, sweeping just above the walls. Geth units began dropping to the ground, curled into balls, arms hugging their knees. They unfolded, three-fingered hands reaching behind their backs for guns. The salarian fell, a mist of green blood spraying across Shepard's face.

Shepard closed her eyes and for the first time in a very long time, she found herself praying.

*If you're out there, please, save my people.*

*Your god has abandoned you, Jane Shepard. It left you to the batarians, and it has left you to us.*

The newcomers opened fire. Shepard opened her eyes, looking up as the *Normandy* soared overhead and then took off up into the clouds. A geth juggernaut stepped behind Shepard's cover. She stared up into that unblinking light bulb, numb . . . but not quite finished as the giant machine bent down. She swung Roger around, aiming for that soulless eye, but before she could squeeze the trigger, the geth picked Rentola up in its arms and started toward the shuttle.

"Shepard-Captain," Legion called, "you must evacuate."

Shock, cold and dizzying, left her swaying, confused. Hard, cold fingers grabbed her wrist and dragged her toward the shuttle. "Come. Only ninety seconds remain to escape the blast range."
The shuttle launched Shepard across the small cargo area as the blast wave of the explosion slammed into its hind end, sending it slewing through space like a car on black ice. The lights flickered and then died, and for a moment, as she lay face first over Wrex and Sparky, she thought they hadn't made it. But then the small vehicle settled, the systems rebooted, and light returned. Legion lifted her off the wounded and sat her back down.

"Shepard-Captain, this unit recommends the use of a restraining device to avoid injuring yourself or others," the geth said. It stood, casually swaying with the turbulence, gripping a handle anchored to the roof.

Shepard nodded, still not quite able to find her voice, and did up her harness. So few inhabited the shuttle with her even though they were packed in like sardines. Half of the occupants were geth . . . their saviours. She stared at her hand, knowing it should be lifting to her radio, because although she'd been aboard the shuttle for nearly three minutes, she hadn't called the Normandy … hadn't insisted on finding out the fate of the other two teams.

You got arrogant and cocky, Janey, and it cost you a whole lot of good people. It may have cost you—

She pushed that nightmare aside and looked up to see Nihlus staring at her from across the tiny cargo bay filled with the wounded bodies of their people. The compassion in those eyes stabbed into her like a thousand white hot needles. She didn't deserve it and tore her gaze away, fixing it on the blood shining black against Kaidan's armour.

She'd gone in thinking she knew her enemy . . . that the enemy would never see her coming, never anticipate someone like her. A bitter cough of derisive laughter sliced through the shuttle noises and silence.

The silence slips along right under the noise. The truth under the noise. Listen to the truth under the noise.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she allowed the fear Sovereign had provoked to spread through her, feeling through it with clammy, shaking fingers to find the truth buried beneath. The Reapers did not invent, she knew that with the certainty born of fifty thousand years. They did not create or imagine. They were machines, limited by the constraints of their creation, as the geth were, but in different ways. They hadn't evolved any more than the geth evolved into the galaxy. Someone had built them, but who and why?

Sovereign said that Reaper motives didn't matter, but … Shepard suspected those motives would prove to mean everything.

Haven't you forgotten someone, Janey? It's not going to go away because you ignore it.
No. She let out a long breath and opened her eyes, even her distraction attempt failing to keep her heart from pulling back to the news she didn't want to hear. She looked up at Nihlus again, asking the question with her eyes. She couldn't do it. She just couldn't ask if she'd killed him.

A single nod answered her, and he reached up to his earpiece. "Normandy, Kryik here. Status?" His mandibles fluttered as he paused, mouth partially open. He sighed and closed it, head cocking a little as he listened. "The Captain is uninjured, Joker." He paused, brow plates descending into a frown. "Joker … ." A rumble rolled from deep in his throat. "Joker! Enough … yes, fine. Next time, I'll lead with that. What is the status of the ship and crew?"

Shepard closed her eyes, taking deep breaths, centering herself. It had been so long since she allowed herself to care about someone. Everyone left her in one form or another eventually. Well, except for Anderson. Some day even Martin would find his wings and soar away. As splendid as that day would be, it would also prove the rule. Everyone left.

"The geth pulled out Team Four," Nihlus said. "Tali'Zorah and Kal'Reegar have minor injuries. Rael'Zorah is seriously wounded and needs evac to the Normandy as soon as we get back." He paused, nodding to himself. "Normandy was able to dust off Team Two survivors. Vakarian, Williams, and Kirrahe are injured, but stable."

Shepard's eyes opened, latching onto his. His mandibles fluttered in a gentle smile as he nodded.

Garrus was okay. A relieved hiccup of sound escaped before she clamped her teeth down on it.

"ETA to Normandy is seven minutes," Nihlus continued. "Alenko, Wrex, the salarian Commander Rentola are injured." After a second, he nodded. "Roger, Normandy. Kryik out." He met and held Shepard's stare. "Garrus was injured, but he's not in danger."

She nodded, eyes dropping. "Thanks. I thought I'd … ." She cut that thought off as its dagger broke the skin. The night before he'd carried her to bed. No. She shook her head, and swiped at the sudden dampness in the corner of her eye. She looked up at Legion. "Geth casualties?"

"Runtimes in three prime and seven smaller platforms destroyed without sufficient time to upload to the server. All other runtimes uploaded before memory core loss," the geth reported.

A short sigh acknowledged its words. "Thank you, Legion. Without the geth, none of us would have escaped."

"Shepard-Captain believes in geth. She has agreed to aid geth in achieving coexistence with galactic civilization. Her organic platform must remain functional."

A grateful smile just touched the corners of her mouth. "You saved my people. You have my gratitude forever, Legion. You and the geth."

The geth came through where God failed me yet again. There's a lesson in there somewhere.

When the shuttle landed in the Normandy's cargo bay, Shepard helped move the injured to stretchers, leaving Wrex to the primes as they were the only ones who could move him without resorting to sticking antigrav generators on him.

"Captain Shepard?" Rentola asked, regaining consciousness as she pushed him into the elevator. "The others?"

She grasped the cold hand that reached up. "We got your non-combatants out. Kirrahe and two others are injured but stable. The rest died on the planet. I'm sorry." She eased him back onto the
"Rest easy. My people will take good care of you."

Garrus lay unconscious on one of the beds when she entered medbay, but she passed him by. She'd come back as soon as everyone was sorted. As captain, she needed to take care of her people before indulging herself.

She almost believed the excuse.

Back in the shuttle, hopping across to the geth ship, Shepard looked up at Legion. "Next stop, Rannoch? We'll have to meet up with the flotilla, but then we need to make a plan for dealing with Saren and Sovereign. I'm going to get Anderson there for sure, but I'm hoping he can convince Admiral Hackett to come along as well. Sovereign is not going to go down without a fight."

"Affirmative."

On the geth ship, they effected a quick exchange of geth units and dextro food supplies for Tali, Kal'Reegar and Rael'Zorah.

Shepard stood beside the shuttle as the VI fired up the thrusters and held out her hand to Legion. "Thank you, my friend. We'll see you at Rannoch tomorrow morning."

The geth stared at her hand for a moment before reaching out to take it. Its head flaps danced, but it said nothing as it shook once, then released her.

"We're pulling out, Tali," she called. A few metres away, Tali reassured the cargo bay full of quarian youth that they would be returned to their families in the morning in the heavens above their homeworld.

The ride back to the Normandy passed in near silence but for the wheezing rattle of Rael'Zorah's breathing and the odd beep from Tali's omnitool as she keyed information into it at a prodigious speed.

After a few minutes, Tali must have felt Shepard watching her and looked up. "I'm sending requisitions and relaying Father's orders back to the flotilla. We're going to land the first expeditionary survey team on the homeworld when we arrive tomorrow."

"Good." Shepard smiled and shook her head. "After what happened today, I know you couldn't be in any better hands. Legion will look out for you and your team."

Tali let her arm drop, her omnitool sliding down to hang over her thigh. "Two of the primes blocked the path behind us so we could escape. They didn't say anything, didn't act like it was anything special for two massive geth platforms containing thousands of runtimes to die saving a bunch of quarians." She turned to look into Shepard's face, those silver, reflective glints behind the mask blinking quickly. "But it was the most remarkable thing to have happened in three hundred cycles of quarian history."

Shepard nodded, unable to find any words to add to the perfection of that statement. Instead, she reached out and squeezed Tali's fingers. Feeling those slender digits trembling in hers, Shepard held on to them for the few moments it took for the shuttle to hop back to the Normandy.

Enraged krogan bellows set Shepard running the moment she stepped down off the shuttle, Wrex making himself plainly heard even through the deck plating. As she stood in the elevator, waiting as it crawled up to the crew deck, Shepard vowed to find a way to put in a flight of stairs. The cacophony ramped up to deafening as the elevator opened, Dr. Chakwas and Nihlus adding to the din.
"What the hell is going on in here?" she hollered as she burst through the medbay door. A very naked Wrex barrelled down the length of the cabin, stumbling right at the threshold, one massive arm flailing out to grab hold of her. Staggering, Shepard managed to avoid getting crushed and stay on her feet, but if the krogan thought she'd be able to hold him, she felt sure that reality asserted itself when the deck plating came up to smack him in the face.

"Urdnot Wrex is in no condition to leave this medbay," the doctor insisted, striding over to help wrestle her patient up off the floor.

"I'm regenerating just fine," he roared. "Let go of me and stop poking at me with your damned needles and knives." He staggered up onto his feet and tilted, slamming into the wall. Once propped up there, he looked down at Shepard. "I just need to eat. There's nothing broken that won't heal fine on its own."

Shepard looked from him to the doctor then back. "You got hit with enough firepower to leave a half metre hole straight through me. Maybe you should just let the Doc do her thing, indulge her a little." She leaned in close, lowering her voice to a near-whisper. "Can't hurt to have a handsome woman fawn over you a bit, can it?"

His huge eyes narrowed as he leaned forward until his face was pressed against her nose. "You mean, you think the Doc is after my hump?" He sounded drunk, probably thanks to all the blood draining from his brain to repair his enormous body.

"Who could resist? Seriously? Look at those battle wounds." Shepard reached up and placed her hand on the crest of his head plate. "If I wasn't spoken for, sir … you would be in serious trouble."

"Ha!" He straightened. "Fine, but she can look after me in my corner of the cargo bay. I'm not staying up here." He staggered out the door a couple of metres then stopped. "Kryik, quit staring, and give me a hand."

Nihlus brushed past Shepard, giving her a quick wink and a smile as he went by. "Why would I be staring at you, krogan?"

Wrex chuffed, a harsh cough of sound that echoed like an explosion around the galley. "You could only dream of having a quad like this."

Nihlus laughed. "I can't say I've got room for a quad, and the rest, well … let's just say it's a good thing what I've got stays tucked away. A jealous krogan is an ugly thing."

Shepard winced. "All right, you can just take that down to the cargo bay. Sweet baby Jesus, you two. None of us can un-hear that." She stepped out of the way as Rael'Zorah's stretcher came around the corner.

Dr. Chakwas sighed. "It's just as well we have the room, I suppose, but really, Shepard? Now I have a krogan battlemaster thinking I'm after his quad."

Shepard winced. "Everyone stop talking about Wrex's personal bits, please." She waited until they moved Rael to a bed then squeezed past to where Garrus slept on a cot against the wall. A large regen cage enclosed most of his chest while a smaller one worked on his upper arm and shoulder.

Leaning down, she stroked her fingertips over his fringe then crouched by his side. "I'm so sorry, Garrus. I should've been . . . ."

_Your god has abandoned you, Jane Shepard. It left you to the batarians, and it has left you to us._
Choking down a hoarse sob, she bent to touch her brow to his then shoved herself up and pushed through to the door. Once clear of the crowded medbay, she turned and bolted across the galley, slamming the door control to her quarters. Surrounded by dark and quiet, she stumbled over to her desk.

*Your god has abandoned you, Jane Shepard. It left you to the batarians, and it has left you to us.*

Another hiccoughing sob forced its way out of her throat, dropping her to her knees. Shoving the chair out of the way, she crawled underneath. Her back pressed into the corner, she drew her knees up to her chest and hugged her arms around them. She trembled, her entire body shivering with a chill that radiated not from the air around her, but from that dark place inside where the spiders hid. How long had they been there? Had they truly invaded that day on the Citadel? Something in the way Sovereign spoke of god having abandoned her to them said no. No, the spiders had made their home inside her far, far earlier.

Slipping beneath the surface again, tentative thoughts sifting like fingers trying to find a coin in the mud at the bottom of a dark pond, she searched for the hidden context under what Sovereign had said to her. Layers of whispers drifted through her head, stacked so that she could just about hear one before another drifted past. She wished she could talk to Tashac, certain that the prothean would understand. Then again, maybe not Tashac. Wise, god yes, the female had been wise, but she'd also been a soldier to the core. She'd never discovered her own voice of council, never been able to find true peace. Well, except for one place. For Tashac, peace existed in the form of a person.

*The darkness has been watching you your whole life, Jane Shepard. It's waiting for you out there.*

She pressed her eyes closed and rested her forehead on her knees.

"Shepard?" A faint knocking rattled the door on its hinges. "You in there?" The door swung open, a crack of light spreading across the floor. "Jane Shepard, are you in here?" Heavy footsteps crossed the pristine white of the tile floor, marring it with the man's shadow.

She didn't bother to look out. He'd find her. It wasn't like he didn't know where to look.

Sure enough, twenty seconds later, Anderson crouched down, one hand on the top of her desk, the other resting on his knee. "Hey, kid."

Nodding toward the floor next to her, she replied, "Hey." She laughed, but it came out dry and bitter, a desert wind making promises of plagues to come. "How far did they drag you this time?"

He shrugged, groaning a little as he lowered himself onto the floor, sitting cross-legged. "Not far. I was on leave on Arcturus." He sighed and wrapped his arms around his knees. "So, when are you going to get out of here? Three months is a long time for a perfectly sane person to spend in a place like this." He winced as a wail echoed down the hall as if to emphasize his point.

"They shut me in here in the dark, Anderson." She gestured up to the empty light socket. "They tell me that it's important for me to learn that there's nothing to be afraid of. They don't get it, Anderson. They don't know that it's alive, that it moves when you aren't looking." She glanced over at a deep pool of black gathered behind the door. "They don't know how many monsters can hide in it."

He jerked stiff, suddenly giving off a rage that made her pull back from him. "They do what?" He climbed to his feet then reached down, holding out a hand. "Come out of there, and get dressed." Shaking the hand at her when she didn't move instantly, he said, "Come on. I'm going to the
administrator, and then I'm taking you the hell out of here."

Shepard eased out from under the desk and took his hand, letting him pull her up onto her feet. When she didn't move—they'd never let him take her—he strode over to her locker and pulled everything out, tossing it onto the bed. His every movement screamed fury, and she winced back from him. She'd never seen Anderson angry before.

At the door, he turned back. "If I take you to Earth, and we get a home ... you'll have to stay with people while I'm away. You okay with that, kid?"

She nodded, pressing herself up against the wall.

"Nothing to be afraid of ... " he grumbled, turning away. "Goddamn idiots." He pushed her door wide, letting in the light from the hall, before striding out. "Get dressed."

"Shepard?"

She jumped, cracking her head against the underside of her desk. "Ow, goddamn it." She squinted against the sudden light of her lamp. "Nihlus? What's going on?" Lifting a hand to shade her eyes, she stared at the Spectre crouched next to her desk. "What are you doing in here?"

"I was looking for you. Someone said you were in here, but you didn't answer the door. I came in to make sure you're okay, and I find you hiding under a desk." He backed up a bit. "You all right?"

She nodded. "I needed to think. Did you hear what Sovereign said at the end, Nihlus?"

He sat down. "What part? That thing did a lot of talking."

She unfolded a little but tucked her hands into her armpits, not wanting him to see how badly they shook. "The part about god having abandoned me." When she looked up into his eyes, he stared back as if he could see past every mask she wore, all the way down into the center of her. The dark center where a terribly naive child lay out in the cold. A corpse with a heartbeat, that child prayed to a deaf God that the horrors being visited upon her amounted to nothing more than some terrible dream. Those unanswered prayers devolved into the screams of the damned as the dark unleashed its monsters upon her again.

The dark. It always came back to the dark.

"Shepard?" He pulled off his glove and held out his hand, lifting it to where she could see it. "Look."

She did, able to see his talons trembling.

He chuffed, sort of halfway between a snort and a chuckle. "Twenty cycles of walking into every sort of fight imaginable, and they still do that after days like today." Turning it over, he held it out to her. "Come on, maybe we'll cancel one another out."

After a moment, she slipped her hand into his, the palm warm and calloused, pushing back the chill seeping through her. He turned to lean against the desk, and slipped an arm around her, pulling her in against his side. "Okay, better. Now, talk to me about hiding under a desk in the dark. I might not be as observant or perceptive as Vakarian, but even I've figured out how much you hate the dark."

Suddenly, exhausted down into the very center of her, Shepard leaned into him, resting her head against his shoulder. She tried to explain what was going on a couple of times in different ways, but she couldn't even manage to figure out her own thought process. The truth danced tantalizingly
close to her grasp only to dodge away when she tried to grab hold of it.

After opening and closing her mouth for the third time, she let out a long sigh. "I don't know, Nihlus. I thought Sovereign might have been saying something more than what it seemed on the surface. It laced something under the words, a whisper … something that just felt as though it reached a lot deeper."

The arm around her squeezed gently. "Shepard, stop worrying about making it sound sane, and just say it. I already know you're crazy."

She dug her elbow into his side. "Nice." Still, she took a deep breath and unleashed the crazy … the real crazy. It took a couple of seconds to chain the wild varren that even mentioning the memories unleashed in her guts. "The batarians staked me out in the center of their holding area. They blindfolded me and put a hood over my head, so I was in complete darkness most of the time." She squeezed his hand as the tremors got worse, her whole body trembling but distant and numb. The wall between her and the reality of those hours held, solid and rooted in age.

The long breath in squeezed out as a sigh past the fist gripping her throat. "Have you ever looked into a perfectly harmless patch of darkness and felt as though it had eyes? That something within the shadows was always there, watching and waiting?"

His handsome head dipped a little. "I don't think anyone who has seen and done what we have can honestly admit otherwise." A frown lowered the white sweeps of his familia notas over his eyes as he squeezed her hand. "This is what you were worried about asking me?" Another sigh whistled through his nose. "Shepard, we know what's out there, and we know that evil rarely shows itself. The monsters are real, and they hide in plain sight, waiting to come at you from behind. That's not crazy. That's reality."

She curled in against him. Of all the people to understand, she never expected Nihlus. Maybe she should have after what he told her about his mother. Maybe she should have. "Nihlus, the darkness found me when I was sixteen. It crawled into that hood and inside me. I thought the batarians put it there, but now … ." Shepard squeezed her eyes closed, walling up the faint colours and scents that leaked through before they could turn into anything substantial. "I think Sovereign was telling me that the Reapers have always been the ones behind it."

He rested his cheek against the top of her head, his mandible moving ever-so-slightly back and forth through her hair. "We need to talk to the rachni queen. We both know we got more information from that beacon. Maybe there will be something in there to help us figure out what the hell to do about Saren and his Reaper."

Shepard nodded. "I know. They will find a way to get one of the keys eventually. They will carve a wide, ugly swath through the galaxy trying to find one. I'm going to have Anderson grab Hackett and meet us at Rannoch tomorrow. We need to set a trap, and it has to be a good one. That thing might be an arrogant hunk of organic metal paste crap, but damn, it's a hell of a lot more clever than I gave it credit for. It'll see through just about anything we come up with."

Nihlus pulled away and shoved himself up onto his feet, groaning like an old man the whole time. "Spirits, I'm getting to be too old for days like today." He held out his hand to help her up.

"I've always been too old for days like today." She elbowed him. "Besides, you can't be much more than what? Seventy?" One large hand planted between her shoulder blades and gave her a shove, sending her stumbling into the bed. "What? Too young?" She chuckled, affection warming her through. Before Therum, she would never have guessed they'd ever recover let alone find somewhere so much better.
He smiled, but wistfully. "I suppose I'm an old man compared to you."

She shoved him that time, not doing much more than making him sway a little. "Please, you act way younger and more stupid than I do, although I have you on the crazy." Nodding toward the door, she led the way. "Come on, let's go see what the rachni queen can do to help us sort this mess."

"I've been a Spectre twenty cycles," he said as they crossed the mess, heading for the elevator. "I was solid. Solid as hell. Every mission tougher than the one before. I set a plan, and although even at my most bloodthirsty I never came close to being as ruthless as Saren, I got the job done. People in the way moved aside or were mowed down." He shook his head, mandibles dropped. "What has happened to me since Eden Prime?"

Shepard palmed the elevator control. "I don't know, but maybe you just came to a place where what happened with Saren forced you into a hard reset." Leaning against the wall as the lift ground its way up to them, she shrugged, remembering their battle of wills on Eden Prime. "I did think you'd be a much harder fight. I admit that I take charge, bulldoze over or around people, but yeah, I thought you'd fight me a lot harder for control."

He stepped past her as the door opened. "Hard reset. Hmm." He cocked his head a little to one side, his mandibles sweeping slowly out and back in. "Maybe. I suppose, this is about the time in a torin's life he stops to consider how he wants to live the next third of his life." He leaned his shoulder against the back wall. "I always felt like a big part of the picture just wasn't there. I didn't know what part it was, so just tried to ignore it. Well, and fixated on someone I could turn into perfection inside my head. Someone who'd never disappoint because she was always out of reach."

Shepard's head shake barely registered as movement. "Whatever made you decide to open your perfect lie to the harsh glare of reality?" She punched the control to emphasize the word lie, a trickle of bitterness weaving through her words. Building someone into an effigy of perfection only to let them burn for the sin of being a disappointment could hardly be considered fair. It wasn't her fault he possessed an exceptional imagination. "Surely, you had to know that I'd never live up to that woman."

He stepped right up to the door, placing her behind him. "Who said I meant you? Spirits, Shepard, your ego."

Shepard straightened, keen-edged and bright. "Oh wait! I get it. Now all the injuries make sense. It's Dr. Chakwas, isn't it? Damn, she is one seriously popular lady."

He laughed. "Maybe once, but there's no way I'm fighting Wrex for her." He stepped out as soon as it opened, heading for the back corner of the cargo bay where the queen had made herself a nest of sorts behind a barrier of crates. Stopping as they reached the back end of the shuttle, he looked over at her. "Some things are worth taking a shot at. Maybe they'll disappoint, but maybe they'll turn out so much better than you hope."

She hesitated for a second as the bitterness rose up to choke her. Not having the slightest clue what to do with herself under his scrutiny, she pushed on. "Nihlus, I really am sorry if I'm never more than you hoped. But it's just not fair—"

Nihlus caught her elbow, vice-like talons squeezing hard enough to hurt. "Shepard, you already are." Their eyes locked for a moment, then he shrugged and jutted his chin toward the crate wall. "Come on, let's see what that beacon stuck in our heads."

Setix 26.2, 4521 of Kirash Par
Tashac walked out onto the balcony, her eyes drawn up to the stars the moment she stepped out the door. Ribbons of light danced amidst the indigo and obsidian, calling out to her … beckoning her back into their embrace. Bright and clear, each crystalline jewel sang with the promise of a new civilization, a hope for the future of her beloved galaxy. She closed her eyes, trying to draw their light into her, focusing it into a laser to burn away the darkness at the heart of her.

Soon now. Soon I’ll return to you for the last time.

"I believe I have dedicated an adequate amount of time to hanging upside down inside the drive core tonight," Merol called. She opened her eyes to watch her mate as he stepped out of the large shed across from the house. He wiped his hands on a rag, then threw it over his shoulder. "Our wings should be ready to unfurl and carry us back into the heavens in two days."

"Excellent." She leaned against the railing. "I have ensured the remainder of our affairs will keep until we return." She glanced up at the mountain side, unable to see the evidence of her work in the darkness.

Every five cycles, they left the isolation and peace of their mountain home and returned to Ilos, slipping amongst the sleeping stars. The relays burned like candles at a funeral, the sight of them rekindling the melancholy that shrouded the core of her spirit. Through that void of light and peace, a terrible darkness moved, silent and swift, hunting from star to star. Her eyes closed once more, blocking out that soulless gaze.

"Even now?" Merol asked, his arms slipping around her from behind.

She laced her fingers with his, pulling his arms tighter around her. "Always, my heart. Always." Turning within his embrace, she wrapped her arms around him, burrowing in against his solid warmth. "I looked into that thing, and it looked into me." A shudder rolled through her, travelling down into the mountain beneath her feet, even the stone trembling at the memory of staring into that abyss.

The memory of that presence invading her soul formed the reason behind their return trips to Ilos. It whispered through her dreams and out of the shadows, promising to discover a way to recover the Conduit, something she couldn't allow.

Somehow we missed you, the silent voice called out. But we see you now. We are a part of you now.

"I admit that I am weary, haksaya kubenar," Merol whispered. "I shall not mourn this being our last return to that silent, sleeping grave. Time to let this good, clean ground cradle us into our ancient days then embrace us at last."

The sound of singing drifted on the cool breeze, dragging her from the darkness, Merol becoming solid and warm within the circle of her arms once more. The blue natives—asari—sang in their village below, the night marking one of the celebrations on their calendar.

"Shall the mysterious monks of the mountain grace their festival tonight?" she asked. "I would welcome a merry fire and some of their hot, spiced wine." Although they needed to remain cloaked and veiled amidst the beautiful primitives, Tashac enjoyed their company.

"Several kilos of those preserved fruits that caught the matriarch's fancy still adorn our parlour shelf," Merol replied, chuckling. "Such a gift is certain to earn us platters teeming with roast jikuru and those tubers from the south slope."
Being such a long-lived species, generosity formed an important pillar of asari culture, gift-giving the tradition of welcome and thanks. Tashac appreciated such simple lenity after the exigent selfishness and hoarding that blemished the empire's twilight.

She chuckled. "Always with you, desire distills down to your belly, light of my soul." Pulling away, she brushed her brow along the ridge of his kepala. "Come, let the monks of the mountain partake of the celebration of Athame's light. It seems only fitting, Athame and her disciples being protheans, after all." She glanced up at the brightest star in the sky named for the asari's goddess.

Out beyond that star, deep beneath the surface of Ilos's long-dead corpse, she and Merol would marry fifteen cycles of planning and craft to ensure that the monsters never returned to rain their evil upon the galaxy's barely born children. One last defiant strike on behalf of the dead to preserve the living.
Chapter Summary

The aftermath from Virmire continues, spreading out like ripples.

Shepard opened her eyes and looked over at Nihlus, a slow smile blooming across her face as the memory of Tashac and Merol's last return to Ilos played out inside her mind, flowing along the strands of the rachni queen's song.

Nihlus leaned in, the movement as natural as breathing, caressing his brow along her hairline. "We've got the start of a plan," he whispered, his tone almost reverent, as if he feared that speaking the words too loudly might jinx everything. "They knew ... she knew that this day would come."

Gratitude and love drove out the darkness, leaving Shepard filled with the most wonderful peace, even if just for a short time. Fifteen years those two worked to create an insurance policy, an insurance policy that gave the younger races an even better shot of preventing the Reapers' return. The protheans might not have had the resources or expertise remaining to destroy the keys, but they had done the next best thing.

"Ribbons of corruption as broad and dark as a river flowing through stone taint the mighty one's spirit," Shiala said. She sat cross-legged on a low crate, eyes closed, swaying ever so slightly to the rhythm of the whispers that coloured the air around the queen. "Teeth of metal and blood. Violet whispers of madness."

Tashac looked up from her tools, staring into the darkness of the Conduit chamber for nearly a minute, chasing the whispers that coiled through her mind. Fifteen cycles she'd fought off the darkness, refusing to look into the void that yawned within her. Fifteen cycles she'd worked to silence the whispers that warned her the Conduit would never be truly safe from the Vanguard. She turned from her work to look into Merol's eyes. "Is this my will, or after all this time, have they finally made me their hands?"

Stepping around her to check her work, Merol asked, "Are you afraid they'll sabotage it through you?"

"No, my heart. I'm afraid that the last fifteen cycles have been spent pursuing the monster's goals." She closed her eyes, but reached out to take her mate's hand. "The whispers say it will work, but are they mine or its?"

Merol pulled her into his arms. "I trust you to know your own mind and heart, mother of my last children ... to see how far the stain has spread."

Tashac buried her face in against his neck, the darkness around them reaching out to pull her in, tendrils as cold and dark as midwinter wrapping around her, searching for a way in. "I do not, haksaya kubenar. I no longer trust anything but you."

Shepard blinked, the silent stillness of Ilos taking a moment to pull back completely. Even when it did, the terrible doubt remained. "She spent fifteen years creating a plan to ensure the Conduit could never be used only to doubt at the last moment whether it was her plan at all."
"Deep and ebony the enemy digs its burrows, staining blood and bone, heart and will with its discord." The queen dipped her head, tucking her beak in along her leg. "Crimson and steel claw into the foundation until the good, strong surface succumbs, collapsing into hues of such sadness that to hear them shatters the soul." Shiala opened her eyes, midnight black staring straight into Shepard. "They paint their terrible cacophony within you even now."

"Shepard?" Tali's voice spoke in Shepard's ear, her tone soft and nasal, breaking through the thunder of Shepard's own heartbeat drumming in her head.

Shepard blinked back the shimmering, disorienting blanket draped over her thoughts and tore her eyes away from the asari's. Through that fathomless stare, she felt the queen's thoughts and song slipping their feelers through her mind, searching for her soul. She jumped up, the action severing the connection like a sharp knife. "Shepard here."

"If you have a few minutes, my father wishes to speak with you, Captain," the quarian repled.

Using the movements to order and smooth out her thoughts, Shepard dusted off her clothes. "Oh my way, Tali. Is he still in medbay?"

"No, he wanted to be back in his own cot, have some privacy."

"I'm on my way. Shepard, out." She looked to the queen and smiled, though it felt forced. Even though she knew the truth for both herself and Tashac, no one was welcome inside her mind or spirit no matter their intentions. Still, without the queen, the beacon's visions would amount to nothing more than nightmare fuel.

"Thank you, so much, Amalair. We would never have understood any of this without your help." She bowed her head a little to Shiala. "Or yours. Thank you."

"They sing such sweet music of victory, burying lies beneath such sweet, golden desires," Shiala said, her eyes still black voids. "They whisper promises in rose and lavender, of open skies and wings, but if you listen, you become their claws and their teeth." The asari blinked, emerald irises appearing once more. She slid her legs out from under her and stood, walking over to take Shepard's hands in hers. "Be careful, Shepard. I hear their song within you even now."

Jerking her head in two, sharp nods, Shepard pulled back. "Thank you."

Nihlus got up and gave the rachni a shallow, rigid bow. "Thank you, Amalair. Shiala."

Shepard led the way out into the main part of the cargo bay, cutting a glance across at him. "We'll meet after we reach the flotilla? See if we can figure all this out before we have to present everyone with a plan to save the galaxy?" Despite the queen's dire warnings, hope sparkled like bubbles in clear soda, sprinting for the surface, the giddiness threatening to make her cocky and careless again. But then guilt flung the image of Garrus lying on the cot in medbay at her, dealing arrogance a fatal blow before it could even begin.

He nodded and called the elevator. "Tashac lived with the ghost of her contact with Sovereign haunting her thoughts and her spirit for the rest of her life." He entered the car and stood facing the door, casting only quick glimpses her way. "Do you think she was indoctrinated?"

She understood, grateful for the distance. Fifteen years of growing old together had been turned loose and needed time to get under wraps. "Yeah, and it terrified her, but she used it. Damn, did that woman use it." She reached out, giving in just long enough to squeeze his talons. "And she had Merol. When she said he was her heart … ." She blinked back a slick of tears along her lashes,
swallowing the sudden tightness in her jaw. Releasing him, she stepped up to the door, needing to flee the moment it opened. "He really was the beating heart of her." Impatient fingers swatted the few persistent tears from her cheeks.

When the door finally opened, what felt like a lifetime later, Shepard ducked straight across and into the crew area. She needed to get done with her chores and find Garrus. Guilt be damned, she needed to hold him and be held, to tell him how sorry she was. If only she could find the courage to tell him the rest.

"Shepard." Tali hurried over to meet her as she walked into the gym, those delicate hands wringing hard enough to snap the young female's fingers. "Father . . . ." She gulped, her shoulders heaving in a helpless shrug. "He isn't doing well."

Shepard pulled Tali into her arms, wrapping her in a tight hug. An old thread of sorrow worked its way loose, tangling into her empathy for the young woman. Regardless of the relationship, losing a father left a hole that could never be filled. "I'm so sorry, Tali."

"You should have seen him, Shepard," the quarian whispered, her thin arms strong as they clung to Shepard. "He stayed at the base of the ramp, covering the geth retreat. He was like one of the heroes in the tales mother used to tell me."

Shepard pulled back, pressing her hand alongside the young woman's mask. "Of that, I have no doubt."

"Shepard . . . Captain," the admiral called, his voice still strong despite his injuries.

Her fingers lingering on Tali's shoulder, trailing down the suited arm, Shepard pulled away, walking the few strides to Rael'Zorah's cot. "Yes, sir?" She crouched next to his elbow. "How are you feeling?"

He nodded, just a slight tremor of movement. "Your doctor has made me as comfortable as possible." He reached out to grip her upper arm. "I do not have much time. Take us to the flotilla, please."

Shepard smiled, just a tightening of her lips. "Already on our way, Admiral. ETA is just over three hours. Dr. Chakwas is already in contact with surgeons on the flotilla. They'll get you fixed right up." As much as the admiral had driven her to distraction with his arrogance and constant demands, he'd stepped up when it mattered, overcoming generations of fear and hatred. Losing him would hurt her war effort, but more importantly, it would break Tali's heart.

The admiral groaned and shifted a little. "No, Captain. There is nothing they can do. I have maybe a day to prepare. Will you assist me?" His hand lifted from his blankets. "Please."

After staring into the purple mist of his mask for a moment, Shepard reached up and took his hand, trying to impart both her respect and grief through the contact. "Whatever you need, sir."

"Thank you." He let out a long breath, sinking into his blankets. "We need to prepare an expeditionary team to make landfall on Rannoch. When we reach the flotilla, may the members of the Admiralty Board and a squad of marines board?" When she agreed, his head jerked in a firm nod, still every bit the admiral in control. "Good, then we will set course for Rannoch. I swore my life to giving my daughter a home, an oath I am content to have died fulfilling, but I wish to do so with my face uncovered, under the homeworld's skies."

"Then you will, Father." Tali walked around the cot and sat at Rael's side. "Several of the pilgrims
have volunteered to make landfall on Rannoch. They seem to believe that helping our people return to the homeworld would make a suitable pilgrimage gift."

Rael chuckled, a wet cough chasing it out, confirming his estimation of how long he had to live. "It will at that, Tali." He touched her shoulder. "You may consider your pilgrimage complete. You will be elevated to captain to lead your crew, the first quarian to bear the title vas Rannoch." He made a soft, humming sound. "Your mother would be so proud of you." Vicious coughing racked his slight frame. "I am so proud of you."

Tali bent over her father, embracing him.

Shepard watched them for a moment, sorrow warring with gratitude that the father and daughter had been gifted those weeks together away from routine and duty. A respect and love that she knew had always been there had finally been allowed to dwell on the surface, where it belonged. She squeezed the admiral's hand. "I'll be back when we reach the flotilla. If either of you need anything, call."

"Thank you, Captain. For everything." Rael'Zorah wrapped his arm around his daughter.

Shepard blinked back the burning in her eyes and walked to the gym door. Dr. Chakwas met her just outside.

"Most patients are stabilized, Captain," the doctor reported. "Rael'Zorah is succumbing to infection, however. His suit is sealed and we're bombarding his system with antibiotics and antihistamines, but they're having very little effect. I estimate he has maybe twenty-four hours."

She leaned against the door frame, exhaustion apparent in every deep line carved around her eyes and mouth, the slump of her shoulders.

"Thanks, Doc. I don't know what we'd do without you." Shepard squeezed Chakwas's hand and headed toward the mess.

"I do, and it wouldn't be pretty. By the way, Ashley's been asking for you," the doctor called after her, "and I released Officer Vakarian about twenty minutes ago. Just try to keep him from exerting himself for a day or two."

Shepard lifted her hand in acknowledgement, but didn't reply, changing her destination from her quarters to medbay, wanting to check up on Ash, Sparky, and the others. When she opened the medbay door, she just stared down the lines of cots. So many wounded, but without the geth, the cabin would have stood empty. Hell, her quarters would have been empty.

"Skipper," Ashley called. The chief pushed back her blankets and struggled to sit up on the side of the bed.

Giving Ash a tight-lipped smile, her face feeling like it would freeze in that position any second, Shepard walked into the room, heading straight for Kaidan's sleeping form. She bent down and pressed a hand against the LT's cheek, the stubble of whiskers sharp against her skin.

"Doc says he came through the surgery in good shape," Ash whispered. "He'll be out of commission for a week or so, but considering he took a couple of rounds through the lung … ."

Shepard straightened and turned to face Ashley. "And you? How are you doing?"

Ashley slid down off the bed, hobbling down to the end. "I made the call, Skipper. I made the decision to stay and hold them off the team. Jenkins … " She shook her head, her shoulders stiffening. "He had no right to countermand my orders. He was just a kid, ma'am." Pushing away
from the bed, she paced back and forth across the medbay, hobbling so quickly that Shepard worried she'd end up falling on one of the wounded in the cots. "I should have been the one to stay. I was the one who made the decision to hold."

Shepard watched her for another moment, then walked over and grabbed the chief's shoulders. Holding Ashley in a strong grip, she waited until the younger woman met her eye contact before she said, "Will your grandfather's disgrace, whether real or imagined, be better erased by you dying in a blaze of glory, or by you sticking around to take a leadership role in the war to come?" She raised her eyebrows and gave a little shrug. "I know you have greatness in you, Ash. I can see it as clear as day."

The chief scowled and pulled back, averting her eyes. "Ma'am, I … ."

Shepard sighed and nodded toward the bed. "Get back up there. I need to tell you something, and I don't feel like wrestling with you the whole time." Giving Ash a crooked smile, she gestured toward the bed again. "Go on."

After a moment of rebellion, Williams did as she'd been told and climbed back up.

"Okay, you heard Nazara today, didn't you?" Shepard waited for the chief to answer with a terse nod. "There are a whole lot of his buddies out there in dark space waiting for Saren to give them their ticket back. Even if we stop Saren, do you think the Reapers are just going to shrug and go, 'Oh well, I guess we'll just stay out here then'?"

Ashley sighed. "No, ma'am, I don't." She shook her head. "But that doesn't make that stupid kid throwing himself on my sword any less a waste."

"Shut it!" Shepard barked, storming over. She leaned in, her nose almost touching the chief's. "You will give that brave young man the respect that he deserves. He thought you worthy of the greatest gift he had to give. He thought this war and our eventual victory worthy of it, and I won't listen to you mock that. Is that understood?"

Ashley paled a little and drew back far enough to nod. "Yes, ma'am."

"All I want to hear from you on this subject is how you intend to honour his sacrifice." She threw a furiously pointed finger toward the door. "You have the ability to help lead the war effort. You disproved the family legacy; you stood firm. Now, make it count. I want to hear from you how you're going to step up by the time you leave this medbay, or you can pack your kit and get the hell off my ship. I don't have room on my boat for self-pity. Is that understood, Chief Williams?"

Ashley's back straightened, and she snapped a salute. "Yes, ma'am."

Shepard returned it. "Good." Pivoting on her heel, she marched from the room, not looking anywhere but directly in front of her until she reached her quarters.

The door opened when she palmed the control, revealing Garrus sitting on the corner of her bed. Her gaze followed the slumped and weary lines of his plates up to the arch of his neck, then to his eyes. He'd removed his visor; she could see it glowing on top of her desk, where it lay on his tunic. For a moment, he simply stared back, but then he held out his arms, nodding a little to call her over.

Shepard let out a long breath, practically running across the few metres to step into the welcome comfort. He drew her in, pressing her along his body, and turned his face in against her neck.

Gentle hands caressed the spikes of his fringe before wrapping around his neck, pulling him into a careful embrace. "I almost lost you today," she whispered, pressing her lips against his temple. "I
thought I'd gotten you—.

He turned to kiss her. "Sh, Shepard. Can we just get into bed for a couple of hours? I want to hold you." Pulling back a little, he nuzzled her brow, cheeks, nose, and finally her mouth, kissing her deep and slow.

She clung to him, returning the kiss, their mouths fitting so unusually and yet perfectly together. The trembling returned, shaking her from head to foot, but right then it didn't matter in the least. When they pulled apart, Shepard took his face between her hands, thumbs caressing along his cheekbones and mandibles, her eyes trying to take in and memorize every detail at once. "God," she whispered, gratitude and fear and guilt all spinning into a ball that threatened to blow her apart at the seams, "that amazing, brave boy."

She kissed Garrus's brow, cheekbones, and finally his mouth, unable to form perfect words to describe the depth and breadth of the emotions rampaging through her. "He sent you back to me."

Joy. Above them all, joy rose supreme. Joy that she could curl up under the blankets, pressing in against the hard lines of his plates, tuck her face into the curve of his neck and breathe in the perfect scent of him. No amount of gratitude, no number of words … nothing could ever adequately express her thanks for that gift. Nothing but savouring every moment Corporal Richard Jenkins had given them.

"Admirals," Tali called, her voice ringing through the cargo bay, having left behind all sorrow and youth in favour of a confident authority. She strode up to within a couple metres of the Admiralty Board's shuttle. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with us." Turning to Shepard, the quarian held out an arm, both drawing their attention to the captain, but also inviting her forward. "This is Captain Jane Shepard. Captain Shepard, the members of the Admiralty Board of the quarian flotilla."

"Permission to come aboard, Captain?" a female with a warm, heavily accented voice asked.

Shepard stepped up beside Tali. "Of course, permission granted. Welcome aboard the Normandy. If you need anything during your time on board, please do not hesitate to ask myself or any member of the crew."

The quarian stepped down out of the shuttle and approached, her hand extended. "Thank you for your hospitality, Captain, although we're not sure why it's necessary."

"Please, Admiral Raan," Tali said, stilling the restlessness of all three admirals, "my father and I will explain everything." She held a hand out to indicate the admiral. "Captain Shepard, Admiral Shala'Raan vas Tonbay, a close friend of my father's for many cycles." When the only male in the trio walked forward, she said, "Admiral Zaal'Koris vas Qwib-Qwib." She gestured past him to a female who hung back, appearing to want little to do with being there. "And Admiral Daro'Xen vas Moreh."

"Welcome. Please, make yourselves at home." Shepard stepped back, letting Tali take over. In the end, when Rael died, it would be up to Tali to convince the rest of his peers to listen to her. She followed a few metres behind, smiling to herself as the young quarian skillfully skirted their questions and demands. Nihlus fell in with them at the gym door, taking a seat at the back of the small space next to Shepard.

The admirals reacted with horror when they entered the gym and saw the extent of Rael'Zorah's injuries. Despite their very vocal insistence that he be transferred to a quarian medical facility, Tali and Rael convinced them to settle and listen. Over the next four hours, while Shepard wilted in a
corner, Rael brought his fellow admirals up to speed. The news of the geth prompted a great deal of yelling and debate, but Rael controlled it before the urge to wade in and start knocking helmets overcame her. The footage of the primes sacrificing themselves for the pilgrims ended the arguments, allowing for planning to start.

Shepard sighed, sliding lower and lower onto the mats as the talk continued. The third thing to come out of Admiral Daro'Xen’s speaker had Shepard vowing to keep a close eye on Legion whenever the admiral was around. "Creepy little thing," she whispered under her breath and shuddered.

An elbow in her side roused her out of a strange dream in which the admirals debated whether or not to serve cake at Tali's pilgrimage ceremony. "What?"

"Tali has her expeditionary force," Nihlus said, pushing up onto his feet. He held out a hand to help her up, holding it when she stood. "Do you always snore like that?"

She punched him in the gut. "You let me snore?"

He nodded and let the way over to the others. "Don't your people have a saying about sleeping lions?"

She kicked him in the ankle, then plastered on a smile to wish the admirals goodnight.

Shepard shook everyone's hand, made sure they would be able to sleep comfortably and then staggered toward her quarters, wanting nothing more than to fall into bed and sleep all the way to Rannoch. An impossible dream, but a pleasant one nonetheless.

Nihlus found her in the galley, shovelling vast amounts of hot chocolate powder into a large mug of boiling hot water. "You look like I feel," he said, collapsing into one of the chairs. "Can we put a hold on that planning meeting until after a solid six hours of sleep?"

Shepard added sugar and creamer to her brew, then a couple of whacks of protein powder just to keep her health critics at bay. "Yes. By the fantastically glowing buttocks of the Enkindlers, yes." She flopped into the chair across from him. "We arrive at Rannoch in four hours. The landing is set for five hours after that. I already called Anderson. He and Hackett are hitching a ride on one of the Shadow Broker's frigates so they can remain incognito. They'll be here for the big homecoming." She blinked a couple of times, the inside of her eyelids feeling too small and lined with sandpaper.

"I wandered off there, didn't I?" she asked. "What was I saying? Oh yeah. We'll be landing on Rannoch in nine hours. Let's get six hours of sleep, barring any emergencies, then we can plan over breakfast."

He nodded and leaned over the table, using it to lever himself up onto his feet. "Gladly. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a closet waiting. Good night, hak'aya kubenar."

"Good night, Nihlus." Shepard watched him to see if he showed any recognition of what he'd said to her. He didn't, the words coming out of the combination of weariness and lowered barriers.

For a full minute and a half, she stared across the five metres that separated her from her quarters, trying to find the will to move rather than just crawl up on the table and go to sleep. She needed a shower, but there was a better chance of a giant space dragon leaping out of Earth's sun to eat the Reapers then there was of her dragging her carcass into the women's head to shower.

Finally chivvying herself from the chair, she shuffled to the door and into her cabin, stopping a half
Shepard opened her eyes and looked up into his, a wry smile twisting her lips hard to one side. "Yeah, I'm glad you think so, but this amazing smell is so not me." She sniffed inside the collar of her uniform. "Nope, way more gun oil, sweat, and smoke than flowers and spice."

He chuckled and bent to kiss her, just a soft brush of mouths, the tip of his tongue teasing her upper lip before he pulled away. "It's incense, Shepard. When they make incense that smells of gun oil, sweat, and dirty socks … ." Shaking his head, he slid his hands down her arms to grasp her fingers. "No, you're not allowed to use it. We have more than enough of that smell already."

He led her over to the bed and sat, tugging her in to stand between his thighs. "It's cleansing, a mixture of different botanicals that represent your energy," he said, indicating the incense. He stared into her eyes for a moment, then reached up to caress her face. "You look like the Mako ran over you." Pushing her gently, he sent her toward her closet.

"I feel like it did, but we are landing the first quarians on Rannoch in a few hours, so well worth having to sit and listen to the admirals argue." She stopped halfway through pulling out her nightwear and turned to look at him, an incredulous grin slowly spreading across her face. "Sweet baby Jesus, Garrus, we're taking the first landing party down to Rannoch. Over three hundred years of exile and in the morning, it ends. When I was a kid, I wanted so badly to get off Mindoir and have adventures, but this is a whole other level."

One hand flopped a little as she tried to put her awe into words. "Our little Tali will be remembered for as long as there are quarians." Shaking her head, she blinked back what felt like the five hundredth bout of tears for the day and turned back to her closet.

He nodded. "It's extraordinary, and it all started with one of the best shots I've ever seen."

Shepard laughed. "One of? Oh, Officer, you will pay for that one. You know … one day when you aren't covered in bullet holes and blast damage."

Shepard met Anderson and Admiral Hackett at the airlock, snapping a sharp salute. "Good morning, sirs. Welcome aboard."

"Thank you, Shepard, but I still have no idea why I'm here," Hackett said, stepping forward to shake her hand.

"I'll explain everything, Admiral, but I'm afraid we're going to have to do a lot of the catching up on the move." She ushered them down the CIC. "Did you both get a chance to look at the packet of information that Barla Von gave you before you took off?"

Hackett cleared his throat. "Massive, mind-controlling machine intelligences that sweep through the galaxy every fifty thousand years to wipe out all advanced sapient life. The council and Saren mind-controlled by this thing through the use of some sort of telepathic amplifiers seeded at the very least around the Citadel … ." The stare he levelled on her could be called dubious, if one was given to vast understatements.

"It's all true," Nihlus's deep, rich voice said, startling her as he stepped around the edge of the
galaxy map. He held out his hand, looking to Anderson. "Captain Anderson, good to see you again, sir."

Shepard bit her lip against a smile as she met the Spectre's eyes. "Admiral Hackett, this is Spectre Nihlus Kryik, my partner in crime."

Hackett shook the Spectre's hand, and shot a glare across at Shepard. "In truth if the rumours are to be believed."

"Admiral Hackett." Nihlus nodded. "We met a few years back. We spoke of instability in the traverse. A pleasure to see you again, sir." He stepped back, allowing them to continue, falling in beside Shepard. "The queen wants to see us."

Shepard nodded, hiding the butterflies that bared their fangs and started to work on her stomach lining. "We can stop on the way to the shuttle." Herding the men before her, she headed to the stairs and down.

"Okay, Shepard," Hackett grumbled. "You have a rachni queen on board the Normandy?" He nearly missed the bottom stair turning to level that gruff frown on her again. "The council's official stance on the rachni is shoot on sight."

She nodded. "As is the current Alliance policy for the geth." She laughed and glanced over at Nihlus. "Well, actually, I did shoot Legion on sight. Good thing he didn't hold it against me."

Shrugging, she stepped past the admiral to palm the elevator control. "Anyway, my point before I destroyed it for myself was that the standard orders for geth is to destroy on sight because they are the enemy." She stepped inside when it opened. "And yet, here we are, on the cusp of repatriating the quarian people, because a geth asked for a chance to prove their verisimilitude, and I gave it."

He grumbled, but didn't reply.

Shiala met them halfway across the cargo bay, while the queen remained a few metres behind the asari. No doubt the presence of so many strangers coming and going had her a bit unsettled.

"So, that's a rachni," Anderson said under his breath, taking a couple of steps toward the queen.

"Good morning, Captain," Shiala said and nodded to the others. "The queen wishes to join you, to add the moment to the ancestral memories. You're allowing her people to prove their worth, and Legion spoke up on her behalf on Noveria. She wishes to honour those demonstrations of good will."

Shepard looked at the shuttle then at the queen, who even in a few days had grown a half metre in every direction. "Sure, but I'll have to send the shuttle back. There isn't room this trip. Please come with her though, just in case there are issues."

The asari smiled. "Thank you, Captain. She'll be very happy."

"A happy rachni," Hackett grumbled. "Shepard, if I didn't know you as well as I do and for as long as I have, I'd swear that coolant had leaked into the water supply."

Shepard laughed. "Somedays I wonder if it hasn't, Admiral." She ushered them straight to the shuttle. "Sorry to rush you through, but I want to be there when the two sides arrive. The admirals other than Rael'Zorah are still very jumpy."

Thirty seconds after she sat down and buckled in, Garrus leaped out of the elevator and raced across the cargo bay, just squeaking in the hatch before it closed. Shepard grinned as he sat next to
"Cutting it close there, Vakarian. I thought you were going to miss the bus." She grinned and winked as he grumbled at her.

During most of the trip, Admiral Hackett and Rael'Zorah discussed the military politics of everything that Shepard had brought to light. Shepard didn't envy Hackett. He was an Alliance man through and through. He'd never been afraid to colour outside the lines when it was needed to save lives, but out and out going against the Alliance and the council ... he'd never do it. In order to get the fleets she needed to take down Sovereign, she'd have to carefully massage the truth, and god, she hated doing that.

"You've been awfully quiet," she said to Anderson. She bumped him with her shoulder. "I'm glad to see you."

He reached over and squeezed her arm then pulled his hand back. "You too, kid. You've been busy out here." He chuckled. "And back on the Citadel. Udina came in sporting two of the best shiners I've seen in a long time the day after your last discussion with him." Turning his gaze to Hackett, he shook his head a little. "It's going to take some convincing to get him to go along with your plan, Shepard, and I've been quiet because it's going to be up to you to convince him."

"Do you think I've got a shot?" She watched his face, looking for the tiny hints as to what he thought and felt; Anderson could out-stoic a turian. A slight softening around his eyes as he glanced back at her told her what she needed to know; it would all come down to presentation. Hopefully seeing the quarians and geth working together would help.
"Captain." Rael'Zorah's weak voice reached Shepard over the shuttle's rumble, calling her from her thoughts. "I spoke at length with the admiralty board, and should I pass before our discussion on the planet's surface, they have agreed that Tali is authorized to speak on my behalf."

Shepard looked over at Tali as a small, strangled sound issued through the young quarian's speaker. "Well, let's make sure that she doesn't have to just yet. We're two minutes ahead of the quarian shuttle, and Legion has assured me that they are prepared for our arrival."

"You've got all this organized," Hackett said, but his tone didn't come across derisive. Instead, it sounded thoughtful, as if he hadn't considered her organizational skills quite up to the task but had begun to think differently. Not that she blamed him. Her career amounted to a long series of one-woman shows. No one, including her, could have guessed that leadership would fit so well.

Guessing Tali's excitement, or possibly nervous, level from the amount of wriggling she did in her seat, Shepard turned on the vid screen to allow everyone a view of the planet as they approached. She found herself as enraptured as everyone else as they broke through the clouds and descended toward a high plateau overlooking the ocean.

"Keelah se'lai," Tali whispered.

Rannoch. Whatever Shepard thought she'd see when the hatch of the shuttle opened, what awaited her left her imagination in the dust. A huge, oddly beautiful structure stood built into the cliffs, far too new to be anything but geth design. Further inland, deep in a canyon formed of heavily ribboned rock that shone in a hundred shades from copper to violet in Tikkun's perpetual twilight, a ruin climbed, clean-lined and square up the cliff face. Nestled in front of the ruins on the bank of a fast moving creek stood a neat camp of large tents.

"It's so beautiful," Tali said, her voice hushed and reverent.

"It sure is," Shepard agreed. She stayed in her seat, waiting as Tali and Kal'Reegar stood and stepped to the door. The pair hesitated for a long moment, just staring out at the stone and scrubby, desert plant life that welcomed them home. As they stood there, on the cusp of claiming their new lives, a sharp needle of bittersweet loss stabbed through Shepard's chest. The house would sit so empty soon.

Looking across the compartment, she met Nihlus's eyes, her lips twitching into a crooked smile that
disappeared almost instantly. He just held her gaze, understanding looking back.

"Creator Tali'Zorah, Creator Kal'Reegar," Legion called, dragging Shepard's attention away from the Spectre as it strode toward the shuttle. "Preparations are concluded for your arrival." Shepard laughed, quickly clapping a hand over her mouth, as the geth held its arm out like a waiter ushering them to a table. Garrus elbowing her only made matters worse.

The quarians stepped down then, Kal hanging back to allow Tali to be the first quarian to feel Rannoch beneath her feet in over three centuries. After a few seconds, he joined her and they crouched, reaching down to drag their fingers through the dry, sandy soil. After a moment, they looked at one another and laughed, the high, merry laughter of delight that becomes so scarce after childhood.

"It's real," Tali said, her voice saying that she'd been fairly sure the whole thing was some sort of long, involved hallucination. "We're home, Kal." Tali stood, and for a moment, Shepard thought the pair of them might just hug, but then they turned away, looking awkward enough that Garrus chuckled.

The shuttle with the admirals and quarian marines landed a moment later, the occupants a little more cautious as they stepped out the hatch, but no less like youth turned loose in a park once they did. Tali headed over to embrace Shala'Raan then the small group walked over to the edge of the cliff to look out at the water.

Legion and another geth moved Rael'Zorah to a cot near the site for the meeting, then the shuttle returned to the Normandy to pick up the rachni queen and Shiala.

A half hour later, Shepard watched as Tali walked up to the Admiralty Board, poised to present her gift and become a full adult. Grinning at the strength and purpose in the young female's strides, Shepard could scarcely believe that it was the same Tali'Zorah they'd rescued from Fist's office in Chora's Den.

Tali stopped a couple of metres from the admirals and reached up, crossing her arms to touch her fingers to her opposite shoulders before extending her hands out toward her elders. Taking a deep breath, she let out a long sigh that trembled just enough for Shepard to know tears trickled down behind that mask. "After time adrift among open stars, along tides of light and through shoals of dust, I have returned to where I began."

Shepard smiled through her own tears and leaned back gratefully into the hand that pressed against the small of her back. If that was a traditional passage for the pilgrimage ceremony, never before had it been more true or appropriate.

Shala'Raan repeated the crossed arm gesture, but when she extended her arms, she stepped forward to clasp Tali's wrists. "You are welcomed home most joyously, Tali'Zorah nar Rayya," the admiral replied. She appeared to flounder for a moment, no doubt trying to adjust the usual ceremony to apply to such an unusual turn of events. "When our people left these shores, the blessed ancestors kept us alive and sustained us, building a home among the stars so that our children might one day return to walk upon this very soil."

Admiral Zaal'Koris stepped up beside Raan. "Honouring their struggle, over the centuries of the long exile, each member of the quarian people has sacrificed and given freely to ensure that one day the hope of the ancestors would come to pass. To this end, our children went out into the cold and silence, searching to find a token, a gift to prove their dedication to sustaining our people until the day they were able to return home."
Shepard closed her eyes and turned her face into the breeze, inhaling the sharp, spicy scent of the desert. It filled her, warm and comforting, and she smiled before looking back at the ceremony. The quarians had a wonderful planet to come home to.

Shepard leaned into Garrus, looked up into his eyes and whispered, "I knew we should have put a bow around the planet."

Despite his mandible flutter, he elbowed her, a grim nod telling her to be quiet and pay attention. She grinned and did as she was told. For a minute, anyway.

Daro'Xen dragged herself away from staring at Legion and the other geth to step up on Raan's other side. "Tali'Zorah nar Rayya, have you returned to take your place among your people, to uphold and honour all that it means to be a citizen of the quarian homeworld?"

She looked up at Nihlus as the Spectre stood silently on her other side.

"And you thought being my partner would suck," she whispered.

Nihlus elbowed her. "Be quiet and pay attention."

Smothering a laugh, Shepard nodded. "I see how this is going to work."

Tali nodded, drawing herself up tall and straight, her voice losing the earlier tremor. "I return to my people bearing the gift of the cradle that sustained our race from its birth. With it, I bring peace with the geth in the hope that we may discover a shared destiny as brothers and sisters of Rannoch." Tali tilted her head to one side a little, her posture cocky enough that Shepard felt a flush of guilt. "Does my gift meet with your approval?"

"You're a terrible influence," Garrus whispered next to her ear. Shepard just nodded. What could she say? He was right.

"We find your gift most acceptable," Raan answered, her voice light and tinted with sunny hues of laughter. "We name you Tali'Zorah vas Rannoch. As the Admiralty Board of the quarian people, we declare that the designation 'vas Rannoch' shall be passed down exclusively through your progeny to honour your role in ending our long exile." Raan held out her arms, folding Tali into a warm embrace. "Welcome home, Tali'Zorah vas Rannoch, and thank you."

Compared to the gift ceremony, Tali's promotion was a simple affair. Shepard kept an eye on Rael and pushed for them to get to the planning as quickly as possible. He insisted on being a part of it to lend Shepard and Nihlus his support, but she wanted him to have his time lying under the sky with his face uncovered and his daughter at his side.

The geth proved as good as Legion's word, supplying a large table and seats for everyone involved. Shepard settled reluctantly into the seat at the head of the table and watched the others. Anderson and Hackett sat quietly, looking a little like they'd fallen down the rabbit hole to discover quarians and geth wearing giant grins as they offered cakes and strange liquids that insisted on being consumed.

She watched everyone take their places, feeling again that sense of urgency and loss she'd felt when Tali stepped down out of the shuttle. She'd had so little time with them … not enough to know any of them they way she should. She spent her days running from task to task, as if she had infinite time to spend with them once she finished. And then she never finished.

By the end of the day, Tali would be gone as well, moved into the camp nestled in the shadow of the edifice of her ancestors. She'd take her place, leading her people, remembered for a hundred
thousand years for that day. Shepard smiled, but it felt sad. Perhaps once the Reapers were thwarted, she would return to Rannoch and help the colonization effort … do a little digging around in ruins. That would make a fine vacation.

Seeing everyone watching and waiting for her, dragged her out of her thoughts, and she stood, suddenly nervous. They needed to eliminate Sovereign. No doubt hung on that. Whether or not she would prove clever enough to pull it off … doubt weighed it down and held it under.

Taking a deep breath, she swallowed the doubt. It did not belong at the table. She looked over to where Shiala sat cross-legged on the ground next to Amalair a good distance away. A quick nod acknowledged them, then Shepard turned to her task. She had a Reaper to kill.

"By now you all know either by experience or by briefing that Saren Arterius discovered a huge dreadnought that he calls Sovereign. It is, in fact, not a ship at all, but a being. The Protheans called them Reapers, for they swooped down on the galaxy fifty thousand years ago, death incarnate, and completely obliterated the Prothean Empire in a monstrous harvest." She took a breath and leaned forward, her palms pressed to the warm metal of the table top. "The Reaper invasion began through the Citadel, which is in fact, a giant mass relay. However, the Protheans also discovered four other major relays that opened to dark space. Each of these relays contained a key."

Over the next half hour she and Nihlus explained how Tashac, Merol, and the Senarium had located and hidden all five keys away then left the information buried in the beacons, preparing for the Reapers' eventual return.

"Saren has used the beacons, and although he has not had the advantage of the rachni queen's ability to decipher the messages for him, he has the cypher and until recently, he had Matriarch Benezia to help him sort through it." She took a slow survey of every set of eyes at the table, pleased with what she saw. "Even if Saren isn't able to get to the Conduit, he will continue to search, tearing his way through the galaxy until he finds one of the keys."

"It's a big galaxy, Shepard," Anderson said, his mouth quirked in the way that told her he was setting her up. "Saren and Sovereign could take out fifty colonies, catching us with our pants around our ankles every time if Eden Prime is any indication. According to this information, the heretic geth did not respond to finding out that Sovereign considered them disposable, so he's still got an army behind him."

Legion tilted its head. "Shepard-Captain, heretic runtimes have begun to contact geth asking for confirmation of the upload from Virmire. Several thousand have asked to return to the consensus. Extrapolating from current data, 94.78 percent of heretic runtimes will be reintegrated or awaiting reintegration with the consensus within the next forty eight hours."

For a moment, Shepard considered walking down there to punch the geth for not telling her sooner, but then she decided that the broken hand probably wasn't worth it. "Thank you, Legion. That's very good news. Saren still has thousands of tank-bred krogan under his command—from the number of tanks we saw, he was creating ten thousand a generation—but losing the geth will hit him hard." She grinned, hard and bright. "Excellent."

"Thousands of krogan?" Hackett asked. He cocked an eyebrow at her. "If he can fly that dreadnought up to any colony and land even five thousand krogan … . Add to that his hatred for humanity, and Anderson's right. He'll destroy every human colony before he even gets warmed up." The admiral shoved himself up in his chair and leaned forward, back rigid as he braced his forearms against the table. "Hell, he might come after Earth."

"Exactly, Admiral." Her smile hardened, setting onto her face like cement. "That's why I want to
set a trap, and luckily, Tashac Jacar gave us the perfect means to do exactly that." She sat and leaned forward in a much more relaxed imitation of Hackett's pose. "She was afraid that given fifty thousand years, the Vanguard would find a way to access the Conduit, so she set a plan in motion to protect it."

"Wait," Tali spoke up. "You said she was indoctrinated. How can we know that she didn't actually make it possible for Saren to access the Conduit rather than protecting it from him?"

"We can't." She shrugged, resignation rather than dismissal. "What we can do is set a trap at Ilos to capture Saren and destroy Sovereign when they come to get the Conduit." She smiled and leaned back, arms crossed. "We'll let him know that we don't believe the Conduit is safe and intend to move it to a secure location where we can work on destroying it."

Hackett and Zaal'Koris grumbled, the latter voicing their objection. "Shepard, a dreadnought of that size and firepower. It will take tens of ships to bring it down."

She nodded. "Fleets, and that is where all of you come in. I intend to have two fleets waiting for Sovereign in the Refuge system. With the Vanguard destroyed, it will buy us time to prepare for when the Reapers find another way to return." She let out a long, heavy breath. "And we're going to need every second we can get."

Over the next hour and a half they hammered out details, the planning coming to a halt when Rael'Zorah beckoned Shepard to his side. "My time is nearly done, Captain." He locked wrists with her when she crouched by his side. "Thank you for returning my people to the homeworld, Shepard."

She shook her head. "I didn't do anything. You, Tali, and Legion made this happen."

He chuckled, then coughed weakly. "Tell that lie to whomever you wish, Captain, but those of us here, we know the truth. I would have filled Legion with bullets and thrown its platform out an airlock without giving it a second thought." He squeezed her wrist. "And I would have been wrong." A shallow breath made him appear to collapse into the cot. "And thank you for my daughter: for saving her life and then giving an old fool a chance to repair the damage he'd done."

Shepard nodded, swallowing hard. "It was my pleasure to be your host, Admiral Rael'Zorah. Rest easy knowing that we'll keep an eye on her."

He nodded, then looked past her to Tali. When Shepard stood and backed away, Rael held his hand out for Tali's. "Have them carry me over near the edge of the cliff, my daughter. Will you sit with me, unmasked, to watch the sun set?"

"Of course, Father." She held his hand as Kal'Reegar, Zaal'Koris, Legion, and Shala'Raan lifted his stretcher and carried it to where he could see the ocean. When they set him down, Tali knelt at his side, bending over him to remove his mask. Tender fingers caressed his face before helping him slip off his hood, allowing the breeze to ruffle the short, dark hair on his head. Kal helped the admiral sit up so that Tali could ease in behind him, holding her father as he had surely once held her, leaning against her side in the crook of her arm. After a moment, she reached up, removing her own mask.

Shepard withdrew back to the shuttle and sat in the open hatch, giving them their privacy. Garrus sat next to her and wrapped an arm covertly around her waist, saying nothing, just sharing the last moments of the sunset. She leaned into him, appreciating the silent support as the day cooled toward night.
"Father." Tali's thin cry and quiet sobbing marked Rael'Zorah's passing in the quiet of early evening. Under a sky deepening from indigo to navy, stars peeking out to shine like pinprick diamonds in the abyss, she folded down to hold him in her arms.

Shepard longed to go to her, to wrap her in the comfort of someone who'd faced almost that exact moment: a father who'd died to keep her safe. But it wasn't her place, so she settled for leaning tighter in against Garrus as Shala'Raan and Kal'Reegar knelt at Tali's side. Their comforting touches eased the grieving daughter up off the ground and brought her back to where everyone waited.

Shepard stood when Tali looked up at her, their eyes truly meeting for the first time. Even in her sorrow, Tali's ethereal beauty stole Shepard's breath. Smiling through slow tears and a heart aching in empathy, the captain held out her arms, but then ducked her head a little. "You should probably put your mask back on first."

Tali nodded, slipping back behind the translucent protection before rushing over to wrap arms like steel bands around Shepard. "Thank you so much, Captain," she said, her voice thick with tears. "Thank you for my father and my home." A strong series of hiccupping sobs broke loose. "He told me he loved me." Her grip on Shepard tightened. "What am I going to do now, Shepard? I'm alone."

"Oh, beautiful girl, you are most definitely not alone. You have Shala'Raan and Kal, and you know that you can always count on me and on the rest of the crew. We're a family. You need anything, all you have to do is call. Wherever we are, we'll come running." Pulling back, Shepard held Tali's shoulders. "You are the bravest, strongest person I've ever known, Tali'Zorah vas Rannoch." She laid her hand alongside Tali's mask. "Take care of your people the way I know you can. Make them a beautiful home to last the ages." She grinned. "And help me kick the Reapers in the ass so we can come back here and sit on the beach, take a good long vacation. Deal?"

Tali chuckled softly. "Deal." She pulled Shepard into a tight hug. "You're the bravest, strongest, most remarkable woman any of us will ever know. Don't forget that."

Shepard returned her hug with a quick one then pulled away, feeling naked and awkward. She stepped back, hastily slapping the wall back up. "We'll be back for a vacation in a week or so. I'd like a tent overlooking the beach, please."

Tali nodded toward Legion who watched them, those expressive head flaps never ceasing their movement. "I'll have our social coordinator take your reservation."

Shepard laughed and lifted a hand to Legion, another friend and trusted companion that would be moving on. "I'll see you and the fleet at the relay in just over twenty nine hours."

He repeated the gesture, his hand lifting to drift slowly back to his side. "The geth will be prepared, Shepard-Captain."

"As will we, Shepard," Tali said. "What ships we can muster will be waiting at the secondary relay for your orders."

"Thank you, Captain." She winked and then nodded toward the shuttle. Behind her, Anderson, Hackett and the others climbed in and took their seats. "I'd better get back and start this ball rolling. We have a Reaper to kill." Backing toward the hatch, she looked around and shook her head. "Quite the home you've got here Tali … Legion. Take good care of it and each other." She lifted a hand in one last wave, biting down on her grief—she hated goodbyes—and stepped up into the shuttle.
Waving a hand to the rachni and Shiala, she called them from their place well back from everyone else. "Come on ladies, the bus is pulling out. It's going to be crowded."

Shepard looked up from her computer as Garrus entered her quarters, then just leaned against the wall, staring at her. She quailed a little under the intensity of his stare. It stripped her bare and crawled inside her, trying to discover everything she wanted—needed—to keep hidden. Her heart stopped between beats, feeling as though blood flowed in only to be trapped, building until the poor, fragile organ exploded. That stare wanted to possess her. It asked for everything, absolutely every tiny piece of her.

"Garrus?" She turned in her chair, meeting his gaze for a moment before she stood and took a hesitant step toward him. "What's going on?"

He let out a long breath and shook his head. "What you did today … what you've done since the day we met … ." He shook his head again then pushed off the wall and strode toward her with purpose. "You perform miracles as if they were everyday occurrences, Shepard. You're a miracle; a tiny, ornery, crazy, beautiful miracle." He reached out to cradle her head between his hands, his brow plates lowering into a considering sort of scowl. "What did I ever do to earn you in my life?"

Shepard flinched back a little, but then long arms wrapped around her, lifting her off the floor to press her against the right side of his chest. His mouth moved along her jaw, his breath hot and ragged, his tongue sliding along the underside of her jawbone, hungry and possessive. "You're a goddess," he whispered when he reached her ear. "The spirits of war and peace and compassion and justice all tangled up inside that tiny body."

Bracing her hands in the curve of his neck as it swept down inside his cowl, Shepard pulled back. "Garrus?" Her heart beat against her ribs, a frenzied prisoner trying to smash a hole through the cell wall as the executioner entered the door. "Please." Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes, her belly watery and trembling, threatening to embarrass her. Guilt trickled through the fear as he drew back, releasing her as though she slapped him, letting her slide down to the floor.

He hasn't done anything to deserve this reaction, Janey. The torin wants you. What's wrong with that? Would you rather not inspire any passion in him?

Sorrow bit deep. She backed up a few centimetres, until her back thumped against the bulkhead, then looked up to meet the confusion and hurt in his eyes. Holding out a hand, she invited him back into her space, but at a distance.

Welcome to your life with Jane Shepard, Garrus. I'll pull you in but only so that I can hold you at arm's length.

He moved past her stopping point, leaning in to touch his brow to hers. "I'm sorry, Shepard, I shouldn't have come at you so fast." Sighing, he tilted his head to nuzzle her nose. "I just … . Spirits, you make me feel so damned much."

Shepard brushed her lips against his mouth, then leaned back against the wall, keeping her eyes focused on his chest. "I know, C-Sec." She sighed at the old habit, and ran her hands down the panel of his tunic. "I mean Garrus. I'm just … ."

He nodded, caressing her cheek with the backs of his talons. "I know you're scared, Shepard." Leaning in, he nuzzled along her neck, flicking his tongue in the hollow between her collarbones. "But you also know I'd never do anything to hurt you." Nuzzling and nipping gently, he explored his way to her shoulder.
She pushed him back a little. "I'm not ready, Garrus." She pressed her forehead against his keel. "I don't know if I ever will be."

Sighing, he pulled her in tight. "Okay. You know it's okay. Come talk to me, Kahri. Let's sit down and actually talk, see if we can start getting someplace that doesn't scare you."

Afraid he'd feel her heart hammering against the plates on his chest, she pushed him back. "Talk about what, Garrus? How screwed up I am? How badly broken I am?" She tried to duck around him, but he put his arm up, hand pressing against the wall to block her. Fury scorched through her, burning away the fear, or at least transmuting it into something more volatile. She wiped her palms against her trouser legs, then stuffed her fingers into her front pockets, drawing her shoulders up, all angles and spines.

"No, I don't want to talk about how broken you are, because you aren't broken, Shepard. Terrified of trusting, of allowing yourself to let go of control, or being vulnerable, yes, but never broken."

His long talons massaged her shoulders, the contact warm, asking her to relax. For a moment, her shoulders succumbed, but then she twisted away, only to run into the wall of his arm.

"Please just let me go."

He didn't move his arm, but leaned back a bit, taking some of the pressure off her. "No. I know you care about me." He tucked a stray bit of hair behind her ear, the gentleness of that gesture almost undoing her. "If you trust me for one second, I won't let you down." He leaned in, touching his brow to hers. "We could start with these … ." He slipped his hand under her uniform and traced the pads of his talons over her scars. "You could tell me how you got these."

Shepard shoved his hand away. "Stop pushing, Vakarian." The room seemed to fill with screams; shrill, terrible wails of pain and fear and helplessness. "Don't you understand that the walls I built between me and those memories are all that keep me sane? Why do you want to tear them down? Why do you all insist on making me relive it? Do you want me to fall apart? To turn into a drooling idiot?" She lunged against his arm, bursting through it like she would a old door, swollen and stuck.

He followed, dogged, unrelenting to the point of chipping away enough of her control that it was all she could do not to haul off and punch him. "You know that's the last thing I want, Kahri. Those walls aren't keeping you sane, they're keeping you safe." A soft keen trembled through the air between them. "At least, you think they are, but they're eating you alive a centimetre at a time."

"Could you live with the memories of being whipped and beaten and raped endlessly for over a day rattling around inside your head, Garrus?" She held up a finger to interrupt his reply, ignoring the fact it shook so hard that it looked as though she were scolding him. "And the horrendous things they did to me aren't the worst of it." Her hand slumped in slow motion to her side. "Everyone you love caged, screaming and begging … in pain … your father's heart breaking before you because you're the very best weapon they could use against him."

She leaned into the table, hands braced against the top, head hanging. "Why is it so important to you that I drag all this out?" She looked up into his eyes without raising her head. "Could you be with someone so soiled? Really?"

His face fell, his expression so painfully sad that it made her breastbone ache. "Yes," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "There is no taint on you, Shepard. It's on the animals who hurt you. Never you." He strode over and took her by the shoulders, turning her away from the table none too gently. "Is that why you refuse to talk to me about this? You think I'll turn my back on you? That I'll think less of you?"
Shepard backed up, tugging at his grip as she edged away. "How could you not? I can barely stand
to touch my own damned skin." She wrenched loose and spun, stalking over to the desk. "All of
that stuff is one giant ball of shit waiting to stink up everything in my life. Don't you get it, Garrus?
Everything I touch blows up, eventually. It can't help but turn to crap, not when … ." She left the
rest unsaid, just shaking her head, her arms curling around her waist.

Garrus let out an exasperated sigh, his footsteps heavy on the decking as he followed her. "Spirits,
you've got so many wires crossed that I'm amazed anything coherent gets through that mess." He
pressed his hand between her shoulder blades. "I want you, Shepard. All of you. Not this pretty part
over here, or that intelligent spark over there. All of you. I'm willing to work through the crap." She
felt him shrug through the contact. "I thought I'd been pretty clear about my intentions."

She turned and pressed her back against the wall, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on his chest. "Jesus
Christ, C-Sec … you must be fucking desperate for some action. Seriously, how bloody horny and
pathetic do you have to be to want to wade into this quagmire?" A quick glance at his face, at the
hurt in his eyes, slid a scalpel-sharp stiletto between her ribs and straight through her heart.

Taking a deep breath, she swallowed that pain. She needed to keep going, for his own damned
good.

"Fine, you want me? You want to wade into the shit?" Shepard slid down the wall into a crouch,
fumbling with the fasteners on his leggings, her movements frantic, edged with ice and black with
fear … and with sadness. Better to break everything apart before they got in any deeper. "Is this
what you want, C-Sec? Oh yeah, I think I remember how this goes. It was a long time ago, but I'm
sure I can figure it out."

He reached down and grabbed her arms, dragging her to her feet, pressing her against the wall.
"Shepard, stop it. Stop it." He stroked her cheek with a gentle hand. "You know … ."

"No? That not what you're looking for?" She shoved him back with enough force that hitting the
side of the bed sat him down. Furious, frantic hands tore her uniform off over her head and threw it
onto her desk.

"Shepard!" He jumped up and tried to grab her. "Stop!"

She threw him back with two hard jabs to the belly, punching him with a strength she saved for
battle. It bought her enough space to kick off her boots and get her trousers undone. Bile erupted
into her mouth, making her gag. She swallowed hard, her mouth sour and burning as she shoved
her pants to the floor, stomping her feet clear of them. Holding her arms out to her sides, she
stepped toward him. "How about this? This is what you want right?"

She grabbed his cowl, pulling him across the space until she ran into her desk. "Just spout some
beguiling rhetoric, pin the girl up against the nearest thing, or wait … bend her over it … . Is that
what you want? Prefer to not look them in the eye?" Her voice trailed off, slow tears forcing their
way from the corner of her eyes as the bitter taste in her mouth spread into her chest. Ugly and
insidious, the fear's taint radiated, black mold tendrils slithering through her flesh until they
penetrated her soul. A harsh, gagging sob escaped, surging from her throat. "It's what they all want,
right?"

Letting out a long, slow sigh Garrus leaned in, pressing his brow to hers. His eyes closed, and he
shook his head. "No, Shepard. It's not what they all want." A gentle hand pressed against her neck.
"It's definitely not what I want." Pulling back, he stared into her eyes, reaching up to pull his visor
off with an impatient tug. He tossed it over on top of her uniform.
"This … ." He gestured down at her body. "I only want this, Kahri, when it comes because this … " He pressed his hand over her frantically racing heart. "… belongs to me, and you love me so hard that you ache for it." Shrugging, he reached up and brushed the tears from her cheeks. "And if I have to wait twenty cycles or a hundred for that, I'll wait." He let out a whistling sigh. "And if it turns out that you ache to give it to someone else, I'll find a way to live with that decision, somehow."

Shepard stared at him for long moments, the passage of time counted in heartbeats. The sorrow and the patience in his eyes reached down inside her, taking hold of the fear and crushing it until it bled tears of pure remorse. Such a beautiful soul. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him down to hug him tight. "Oh god, Garrus, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"You don't need the shields with me, Shepard." He rubbed her back, his hands rough and so very warm. "I'm not going to hurt you."

She sniffed and turned her face into the curve of his neck. "Everybody does eventually, Garrus."

"Not me." He pulled back, taking her shoulders to push her away. "Not me."

Reaching up, she pressed her hand against his cheek. "Why can't I drive you away?"

His mandibles spread and fluttered as he looked down at the floor, his smile suddenly shy. After a second, he met her eyes again. "Because I've fallen in love with you, Kahri." He stepped back, and turned away, walking over to her closet. He took out a t-shirt and shorts, then tossed them to her. "Get dressed. I'll go find us some food."

Shepard stared at him, her heart alternating between stopping completely then pounding so fast it felt like it would punch right through her ribs and chase after him as he walked out the door. Running her teeth over her bottom lip, she sniffed, staring at the door for over a minute after it had shut behind him.

"Sweet baby Jesus," she whispered, the words barely more than a sigh. "He loves me."
Ilos. Shepard stepped down out of the shuttle and looked up. The towering ruins, stacked like blocks set by giants, felt like old friends come to welcome her home. Her gaze tried to travel along the straight lines of the ancient architecture, but vines snaked everywhere, their sinuous lines dragging her along their length instead. Voluptuous leaves erupted from the stalks, shining a waxy green against the grey, begging her to trail her fingers over their veins, reading from them the history of the planet. She walked over and pressed a hand against the soft, velvet bark of a tree that looked for all the world like a vine stalk that had grown rampant. It vibrated under her palm with the low hum of an electrical cable, so alive it felt poised to leap up and run off if not for the roots holding it anchored.

Ilos. Standing on that soil felt like arriving home after a long, exhausting trip.

Behind her, the rachni queen sang a note that sounded decidedly delighted and hurried off. When Amalair expressed an interest in seeing Ilos as a possibility for her home, Shepard had allowed it providing that she head the opposite direction and stay well clear of any fighting. Not that Shepard planned on there being much fighting. Not on Ilos. With two fleets in the air, Saren would want to come in as quietly as possible, exploit the security weakness and get out with the Conduit as quietly as possible. A big fight left too much to chance.

“The queen’s going to want to live here,” she said, glancing back at Nihlus. “Trust me, she feels whatever it is that calls to me . . . I mean, that called to Tashac.”

“Merol never understood her obsession with this place. He found Ilos creepy, not peaceful.” Nihlus shrugged, his gaze skeptical. “I thought rachni liked a more toxic atmosphere.” He set out toward the largest part of the ruins.

“Or maybe they just chose planets that discouraged visitors,” Garrus said, stepping down out of the shuttle. He crossed to where Shepard still communed with the massive tree. “The shuttle VI is set to track us every fifteen minutes, but if we need to, we can still send a signal for immediate pick up.”

“Excellent. We’re going to need to get out of here in a hurry.” She turned to face him, sliding her hand down his gauntlet before stepping away. Following Nihlus toward the main door into the compound, Shepard kept every sense on alert for anything that felt out of place. Strange to feel so familiar with a place that she’d never been before. She understood why, but still it felt a little too close to possession for her comfort, particularly with Nihlus an arm’s length away.

She headed off, putting some space between them, rooting through a tangle of vines and plants growing up the side of the building to find the door control. It had to be there somewhere.

“Captain Shepard?” Shiala’s voice came through over the radio.

Shepard grinned and turned to Nihlus. “I told you so.” Ignoring his confused stare, she opened the
channel with one hand while pulling away a handful of vines with the other. “Let me guess, the rachni queen wants to live here?”

“Yes, ma’am, she says the whole planet sings with history. How did you know?” the asari replied.

Shepard shrugged even though Shiala couldn’t see her. “A good guess, or maybe she’s been in my head enough that we have a shared brain thing going.” She drew in a long breath. “Besides, I want to live here. Sweet baby Jesus, it’s so quiet. A body could actually hear themselves think here.” She looked up from her search, glancing over at Garrus. “You wouldn’t mind living here, would you?”

His mandibles spread wide at the question, then fluttered once, hard. He shook his head, but nodded toward the statues of the Inusannon. “Not if we can ship all of those off somewhere and put in a nice rifle range.”

Shepard grinned. “Deal. Those statues creep the hell out of me.” Letting out a soft cry of victory, Shepard tore the vines away from the door panel and touched the control, giving the VI time to scan her. When it didn’t respond, she scowled and pressed a couple of controls before trying again.

“Something wrong?” Garrus asked, walking up beside her, his eyes and gun still facing out into the ruins.

“The scan should be almost instantaneous. The door controls aren’t responding.” She crouched and popped the front panel off the console, searching through the electronics for signs of a hardware issue. “It’s like Vigil isn’t there.” She tweaked a couple of connections.

“Com . . . m . . . man . . . n . . . der T . . . T . . . Tashac Jacar re . . . re . . . cognized . . . d . . . d.” Vigil’s voice came out of the console broken, drawn out, and stuttering.

“He’s damaged,” Nihlus said then sighed. “It could be sabotage, but he’s also been sitting here for fifty thousand years.” His brow plates lowered to shutter his eyes as he ducked his head. “Did you repair it?”

“No, it just took him a while to process the request.” Shepard set the panel back into place, thumping it with the side of her fist to latch it, as the door ground open.

“Captain?” Shiala called.

“Sorry, in the middle of a mission here. Tell her she can stay for a couple weeks to decide for sure. I’m not just going to dump her on a dead world and walk away.” Even before Shiala responded, she heard the queen singing happily as she rustled away in the underbrush.

“Understood. Thank you, Captain. Sorry for the interruption. Shiala, out.”

“Well,” Nihlus said, shooting a grin across at her, “mission success on one front, anyway.”

Shepard nodded, but her internal alarm started burning at the base of her skull. Something was wrong. And it wasn’t just the fact that Saren could be anywhere, or that he might already have the Conduit in his possession. Whatever the problem was, it felt like a great, dark hole at the center of the complex. She shrugged Roger into her hand and swung him around into low ready, but hesitated at the threshold, focusing herself on the coming game. The pieces were set, the board laid out . . . time to move forward two spaces.

Nihlus laid a heavy hand on her shoulder until she nodded and headed in. They walked along the main corridor, the whole place long cracked open like an egg by tree roots, life invading what had
still been sterile stone walls when Tashac walked the same route. Shepard squinted against the wide shafts of sunlight, deciding that she liked the interior decorating of the years as she waded through a shallow stream. It wandered a serpentine path down the long gentle slope descending into the heart of the facility.

Shepard guessed by the way that both Garrus and Nihlus kept close, their eyes and guns in constant motion, that they sensed the same vague wrongness that she did.

“I’d feel a lot better about things if we’d brought Wrex,” Garrus grumbled. He stopped and ran his hand over his fringe. “Something here is yanking on my spur.”

Shepard glanced back, a teasing grin curling one corner of her mouth. “That’s a new one.”

“It hurts,” Nihlus said, his tone brusque. He walked past her, heading toward what had once been an environmental interface with the main computer for the facility.

“What?” Shepard’s grin folded into a scowl. Now what had shoved a bug up Nihlus’s ass?

He brushed away the plant life, touching a few controls, and when he replied, his tone came across distracted, almost dismissive, “Someone yanking on your spur. It hurts. Lots of nerve endings.” Grumbling he fiddled with the interface for another couple of seconds, his shotgun hanging from his other hand. “Something’s definitely up with the computers. This interface is dead as well.” He raised his gun and started back down the corridor toward the main elevator.

Shepard followed, hanging back a little to wait for Garrus. When he walked up behind her, he turned a slow circle, his hands uneasy on his rifle.

“This place is starting to feel like Noveria, Shepard.” He nodded for her to go ahead. “I know it’s supposed to be deserted, but it has that same feeling of a lot of bad things moving around just beneath the surface.”

“Yeah.” Her gaze followed the lines of the building and invading plants, trying to find some reason for Tashac’s memories screaming warnings in the back of her mind. “Tashac is going nuts in the back of my head.” She scowled and trotted to catch up with Nihlus a little as the Spectre hurried ahead. “It’s like she knows something, but won’t let me see it. It’s got to be something protected by the indoctrination.”

“No use speculating about it,” Nihlus called back, his tone brittle and angry.

Shepard gestured for Garrus to give them a little space and jogged up to walk at Nihlus’s side. “What’s going on, Nihlus? Are you okay?”

His answering nod could have sliced through stone. “I’m fine, or I will be if we can start treating this like a mission rather than a date.” He cut a glance across at her as sharp as his nod.

Shepard growled low in her throat as she sighed. “Excuse me?” She turned to face him, walking sideways. “Please tell me we’re not headed for Shepard is a whore territory again. We’re just getting somewhere okay, Nihlus.”

He scowled, and shook his head, speeding up a little. “No, that’s not it.” His mandibles flailed. “I apologize. Merol has memories of the last time they came here. They’re laced with betrayal and fear and sadness.” He reached up to brush the back of a wrist over his brow. “So much sadness. Tashac did something, but it’s like he won’t let me see it, or he forced himself to ignore the memories . . . .” Sorrowful eyes turned to her. “It’s just all tangling up with reality. I have no idea how you keep it so straight, how you fend her off so easily.”
Shepard shrugged. “It’s not always easy, but I have a lot of years worth of practice living with walls in my head. I just stick her behind another one.” She stepped ahead of him then looked back and gestured for Garrus to close up. “As far as what is going on here . . . . It scares the hell out of Tashac, but more than that . . . it’s killing her.” She let out a long, frustrated huff of air. “The damned indoctrination tells you that you’re doing the very best thing you can do to save people, and the whole time it’s using you to do the opposite.”

A rough, quick hand scratched at his cheek, leaving marks on his hide even through his glove. “Let’s just get in there and deal with it. No point talking it to death.”

A grim smile answered that. “True enough.” She snagged his hand on its way back to his shotgun, and gave it a brief squeeze. “We’ll get it done.”

They reached the elevator without encountering any resistance other than the continuing feeling of oppression. Shepard felt as though a black hole had invaded, occupying the complex like an enemy army. Every step she took, the pull of that dead blackness strengthened, tugging not at her body, but her soul, trying to tear it out of her, consuming it whole.

Unlike the computer interfaces, the elevator both had power and responded immediately, but that only deepened her disquiet rather than easing it. They were being led, herded toward the Conduit chamber, everything shoving them toward a trap set a very long time ago. As Shepard hit the control to take them down to Vigil’s control room, she began to wonder if they could still manage to pull off their trap while escaping whatever awaited them.

Deciding to hedge her bets, she raised a hand to her ear. “Joker.” The radio crackled in her ear. She looked up at Nihlus. “Comms are jammed.”

“Merol Niral imprint recognized,” Vigil’s voice said in Shepard’s ear. “Unindoctrinated. Overriding communications lockout.”

“Normandy here, Shepard,” Joker’s voice came through a second later. “What’s up?”

“I have a couple of messages that I need you to pass on. They’re both text.” She keyed her omnitool and uploaded the messages to him. “The one for Anderson . . . he should be back on the Citadel by now.”

“Yes, ma’am. Anything else I can do for you?”

She grinned and shook her head. “Sure, I could use a sandwich. Got one you could shoot down to me?”

“I’ll get right on that. Look for the flaming meteorite of bread.” He chuckled. “See you when you get back. Normandy, out.”

They descended down through the levels, able to see the base staff’s sleeper pods through the slats in the elevator car. Some remained lit, but a great many of them had gone dark, their power severed. She opened her mouth to ask Nihlus if she thought the power failure due to time or attack, but closed it without speaking. The answer whispered through her mind. Tashac felt a remorse and sorrow too great to be accounted for by anything less than a massive act of betrayal. The shape of it remained elusive, however, and Shepard began to wonder if Tashac even knew what she’d done. Perhaps a part of her that remained untouched by the Reapers just knew that she’d been used.

A blast of darkness like a barrage of daggers swept inside the elevator as soon as the door opened. Shepard staggered backwards under the assault, then dropped to a knee as Tashac sent a shrill wail
of pure, agonized terror stabbing through her head. Pressing her eyes closed, she braced her forearm on her knee and fought back, shoving the fear and pain back behind a wall. Still, the darkness slammed into her over and over, a battering ram of terrible, roaring nothingness that tore apart her every thought, splintering every ounce of control she maintained.

_Little pig, little pig, let me come in._

_Not by the hair on my chinny chin chin._

_Then I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow your brain into tapioca._

A strong arm wrapped around her shoulders, sending the battering ram into retreat even before something bit into her neck.

“Hold tight, _Kahri_. It’ll just be a few seconds before it kicks in.” Garrus’s soft words sounded as if they came from behind a thick door at the end of a long hall. “I’ve got you.”

She wanted to reassure him, to thank him . . . anything, but her jaw locked tight, her teeth aching with the pressure. Still, she managed to keep the terrible, tar-slick spiders at bay until the injection eased them back, standing shoulder to shoulder with her resolve to shove them out of her head.

When she opened her eyes, a hand came down to help her to her feet. She took it and hauled herself up, feeling as though she gained three hundred pounds while down. “I’m okay,” she managed to say, the words sounding more like a gasp. “There’s something huge down here. I think it’s the Conduit. Tashac sabotaged the containment fields while they worked on it.” Hefting Roger back into both hands, she staggered to the door and looked out.

“Spirits. All these people,” Nihlus said, his voice hushed and sad. “All indoctrinated in their sleep.” He stepped past her, his eyes following the lines of sleeper pods up the massive walls. “All lost. All the people we . . . they knew. Dead or asleep and never able to wake.”

“No . . . no, it’s worse than that. I just . . .” Shepard brushed by, packing Tashac’s sorrow behind the wall. “I just don’t know how.” Despite her efforts, whispered tendrils snaked out to curl around Shepard’s heart, a ghostly ache that wondered if she could have betrayed even her son had he survived.

Shepard strode down the walkway to Vigil’s console, stopping a good six metres back, her heart seizing. “Sweet baby Jesus, what the hell . . .?” A device encased a portion of the console, its black, oil-slick form sending out wisps, not of darkness but of nothingness—pure void—that diffused like ink in water. The pure, horrible essence of the indoctrination field. “How did Sovereign not find out about this place?” she whispered. Her eyes travelled up the rest of the room, seeing the signs of Reaper tech everywhere.

“Spirits.”

Shepard spun to face Garrus, the horror and fear in that single word enough to chill her to the core. She followed his eyes down over the edge of the walkway, but couldn’t see what he looked at. Creeping closer, not at all sure she wanted to look, she peered over the edge. For a moment, her brain froze, unable process what she saw. Then, as she began to pick out recognizable shapes amidst the horror, her guts turned to water, threatening to spill out one way or the other.

Beneath them, Prothean bodies, almost completely turned into machines like the husks, hung between bits of cannibalized computers and other technology. Heads . . . far too many heads . . . stared out of the monstrosity, their glowing eyes sputtering, mouths hanging open in endless
screams. Arms reached up, fingers splayed as if dragged into that pit clawing at anything to get a
handhold and pull free before the machines consumed them. Tendrils of tech threaded through
everything, punching through bodies like the tentacles of a ghoulish kraken, wiring them together
and then up into Vigil’s base.

Again the question formed, leaving her lips almost like a prayer, “How in the name of the poor,
destroyed Enkindlers did Sovereign not find out about this place ages ago? This has to be able to
transmit.” The answer came to her as Tashac whispered a single name.

_Merol._

“The computers and Vigil are down. I couldn’t call out to the _Normandy_ without it recognizing
Merol’s unindoctrinated imprint,” she said, turning away from the inhumane travesty. She looked
up, meeting Nihlus’s eyes. “She knew. Even though she couldn’t stop herself, she said it herself,
Nihlus. She told Merol that she trusted nothing but him, and he came through for us all.” Shepard
brushed errant tears off her cheeks. “He sabotaged everything to contain her betrayal. He couldn’t
stop it from happening, but at least he could keep it from getting loose.”

Casting one last glance over at the grisly remains of the people entrusted to protect the primitive
races, Shepard approached Vigil’s console again. “Do you have more shots of that cocktail in your
pocket there, barkeep?” she called over her shoulder. “I reckon I’m going to need a top-up or two
before this business is through.”

“I’ve got four shots of the good stuff left,” Garrus answered. “And a couple experimental turian
ones that Dr. Solus mixed up, but Dr. Chakwas said no guarantees with those.”

She crouched down a couple metres back from the console, able to feel the seductive, velvet slither
of the Reaper field caressing her inside and out. “Take them. This thing is throwing the whammy
out big time. And then stay back. I’m already brain-fucked, you two try to give it as much space as
possible.” She activated her omnitool. “We need Legion and his industrial cutter down here.”

_Amalair._ Shepard stopped and looked back at Garrus. “Contact Shiala, get Amalair back on the
shuttle. There’s no way we can leave her here. Who knows what Reaper crap is crawling around.
That’s the last thing we need: Reaper rachni everywhere.” Turning back to her work, she fabricated
a fine laser and started cutting away the Reaper tech surrounding Vigil’s heart. The VI had opened
the outer door, recognizing Tashac, and it had let her communication go through, so some part of it
must still be intact.

Power cells pillaged from appliances and tools surrounded an invasive web of cables and conduits.
Shepard cut it all away, letting out a sigh of relief when the power cells fell onto the ground and
the worst of the field bashing at the inside of her skull died.

Somewhere not too far away, machinery whirred to life. It took a moment for her to recognize the
sound, but as it registered, ice water flooded her bloodstream. The sleeper pods. “Oh crap.” She
tore at the tech faster. “Um, I seem to have tripped a failsafe here, gentlemen. We’re going to have
visitors.”

“I hear it. The sleeper pods are activating,” Nihlus called back. “I’ll head down to the Conduit
chamber, make sure it’s secure. We need to grab the Conduit and get the hell out of here.”

Shepard nodded without looking up. “Garrus, go with him.”

“Shepard!” they hollered in protest at the same time.
“We need the Conduit a lot more than I need someone staring at my ass while I do this. Go!” She reached the cover to the local hardware. Vigil was housed in a massive core at the bottom of the base, but if Merol needed to leave a message, instructions... even tried to save any of the VI, it would have had to be there. Otherwise Tashac would have known. “At least I hope so,” she whispered, cutting and tearing until she finally managed to remove the cover. She heard the elevator begin grinding its way down toward the Conduit chamber.

*Two birds, one hand in the bush, and all that BS.*

Judging by the shifting and banging coming from the other side of the wall, they were going to need to run their asses off and soon. She set the cover down and stared into a mess of combined Reaper and Prothean tech.

“Oh crap,” she sighed, looking in at the complexities of the Prothean tech. “Tashac, I’m going to need some help here.” Three devices stuck out as not quite belonging, but the Prothean had no knowledge to share. “Oh yeah, serious crap.” She reached up and opened a channel. “Legion, I need you. Can you take a fighter down to me or something?”

“Affirmative, Shepard-Captain. It will take this unit fourteen minutes and thirty nine seconds to reach your current location,” came the reply.

“Excellent, get your chassis in gear. Can you analyze some tech for me while you’re at it?” She keyed her omnitool and scanned the interior of the console. “I’m hoping to salvage something of use out of this mess.” She sent it to the geth.

“Affirmative.”

A low, guttural moan drifted from below and behind her. Shepard closed her eyes for a half breath, then glanced back. A three fingered hand, desiccated and riddled with metal, reached over the edge of the walkway, the clawed tips of the fingers scratching half inch grooves through the stone as it fought to catch hold and pull itself loose of the mess below.

“This is when you need to know how to use a shotgun properly, Shepard.” She shrugged Ingrid into her hand, changed the rounds, and sent an explosive round tearing through the things head, blowing its misshapen kepala right across the walkway. Without waiting to see the creature fall, she turned back to the console.

“No time to wait, Shepard. This ain’t going to be pretty.” Rubbing her hands together, she took a deep breath and reached out. “Here goes nothing.”

“Shepard.” A channel opened, Nihlus’s voice coming through sounding weary and sick. “We’ve got a pile of dead quarian kids down here. It looks like Saren exposed them to the beacon and then tried to use them to get past the security. They haven’t been dead long. The door is locked, but—”

“Shepard. Imagine meeting you here,” an altogether too familiar, flanged voice said from behind her.

Shepard’s spine stiffened as if someone had stabbed a javelin down through the top of her head. Damn, how did such complete madness manage to sound so controlled, so rational and sane? She stood slowly, reaching for Roger as she did.

“You won’t be needing that,” Saren said, walking a few steps from the elevator. “I’m not staying. I just thought I’d take a moment to talk to you. I tried talking to Nihlus, but he’s always been over-emotional. I’m hoping I can rely on you for a little common sense.”
Shepard laughed, hard and guttural. “Seriously? Nihlus is over-emotional. Oh, buddy, you’ve got no idea how much worse I am.” She fired off a couple of rounds, his shields deflecting them, then used bullets to punctuate her words. “Those kids down there . . . did they get you through the door? Or did you just throw them away . . . just a few more acceptable losses in your march of ‘Great holy shit, I’m as stupid as fuck, let’s help the bloody Reapers because that’s the absolute best plan my tiny bird brain could come up with’?” For the last bit she held the trigger, stopping just short of overheating.

“The Conduit is on its way to the Citadel,” he replied, completely unruffled by her bullets or words. “This is the only way, Shepard.” He held out his arms to encompass the chamber. “How can you not understand that when you can see the result of fighting back? No one escapes. If you fight, they twist you into their weapon.”

Shepard fired off a few more shots. “And if you help them, they twist you into their weapon. Given that choice, I’ll fight every time.” She closed on him, fury narrowing her view down to the spot between his glowing eyes. “Do you honestly think they’re going to spare your people?” She shook her head, barely suppressing the urge to retch. “You poor, delusional bastard. You’ve got a hell of a wake up call coming.”

Garbled moans and bellows echoed up from below and came through the side walls, backing Shepard toward the console again. Too many pods in that place still had power when she came in. The three of them needed to get out before they ended up overwhelmed. She had a Reaper to kill.

“Shepard.” Nihlus again.

“Go ahead.” When the elevator closed, she spun back to the console.

“The Conduit is gone. We’re on our way back up to you.”

“Understood. Shepard out.” She closed that channel and opened one to Legion. “Okay, I have to move. Have you had a chance to look over the scans?” She forced back the fury, letting it cool into a sharp, steady focus. Rage and electronics never mixed well.

“Affirmative. There is a black rectangular box at the center of the open panel. It is the direct, tactile interface module.”

“Okay.” Shepard activated her omnitool again. “I can get these leads off the main branch and still leave them attached to the interface module.” She reached in.

“No. Shepard-Captain do not make contact—”

“Circumstances conspired to wake me from my long slumber this morning, despite my pod remaining locked. At first, I believed it to be a malfunction. Employing the ingenuity for which I
was brought here to help them build the first prothean constructed relay, I rewired the pod from the inside and escaped. Others were already up and working, but they did not respond when I spoke to them. They do not even appear to see me. They move about like the risen dead.

“Several of my peers also awoke early, fully in command of their faculties like myself. I can only extrapolate from what I see of the workers that we form the exception rather than the rule. Perhaps our waking up was a malfunction. If so, it appears the antecessors decided a different fate for us.

“I do not know what has happened, nor how many cycles have passed. I finished work on the relay yesterday and went to sleep. Today I awoke into a nightmare. Antecessors watch over and guide me. I am afraid.”

The feed skipped. “We have extracted eight of my fellows from their pods now. The small team of we fugitives have dedicated the last several days to accessing Vigil. The VI appears to have been sabotaged and sent into a record loop in order to prevent the monstrosities from accessing it. My spirit quakes at the horrors I have witnessed since waking. A full half of the sleeper pods still occupied are being reconfigured to transform our brothers and sisters into monsters while they dream. When they emerge, their souls are stolen, plucked out by the cold hand of the machines. They do not eat, they do not sleep, they simply work until their body fails and the new generation scavenges it for parts to build the great machine in the central chamber.”

Another skip. “I have been awake for one hundred nightmarish days. What began as a group of eight fellows has been reduced by half in that time. Every day, the slaves, the monstrosities of metal and flesh, pull more of our peers from their pods to work or undergo transformation. We entered Vigil’s control room two days ago, disguised as workers. The lead scientist of the Senarium left a message attached to one of the surface subroutines. Before we were discovered and forced to flee for the sewers, we were able to listen to the message recorded almost a millennia ago, and discovered the reason for our terrible fate. Betrayal at the hands of indoctrination. Tashac was the best of us. Is there nothing these machines cannot corrupt and destroy?”

“This will be my last chance to leave a message for any who may come after me. It’s alive, this Conduit. It is not merely a device, it is a Reaper in its own right, a being of terrible will. It demands to be returned to the Citadel, a demand that grows ever more strident day by day. Most have given into it. I have almost given in to it. The others build a device on top of the compound. I do not know its purpose, only that it is intended to let this beast escape. I cannot allow that to happen. I have only one recourse open to me, for I am the last who retains some small measure of herself, although I feel my grasp grow more tenuous by the day. What . . .? Oh yes, containment. I will release the suppression gas. All still living will die, the facility will go hermetic. Nothing will get out. The relay we built a millennia ago to infiltrate the Citadel will sit unused . . . although I do not possess sufficient naivety as to believe it will do so forever. If you’re hearing this. Stop it. Please, find a way to stop the Conduit from returning to its nest.”

“—with the module, it will download the information directly into your primary somatosensory cortex.”

Shepard raised a hand to her temple, pressing down hard in a futile effort to keep the small bombs going off inside her skull from blowing her brain all over Vigil’s console. “Thanks, Legion,” she said, the words coming out sounding more like muffled grunts than anything else. Heavy waves of nausea followed the pain. “Excellent advice.” She blinked hard a couple of times, trying to clear her vision. “So what should I touch?”

He relayed instructions as to her best chance to extract useful components.

“Shepard?” She heard Nihlus and Garrus jogging down the walkway behind her. “Any luck?”
She glanced over her shoulder as she worked the primary memory buffer loose, glad to have them at her back again. “Yeah, I touched something I wasn’t supposed to and found out there is some sort of back door onto the Citadel from here . . . out behind the base. A relay.” She winced as she pinched a finger. “Ow, dammit. Oh, and in other news, Saren stopped by to tell me how awesome he is. I shot him a lot. I tell you, we need to figure out his barriers, because . . . damn. Anyway, he’s on his way to the relay with the Conduit now. As soon as I grab these last couple of pieces, we’ll head after him.”

“Shepard?” Joker called, his voice laced with urgency.

“Sovereign has arrived at the Citadel?” she called, reaching up with one hand without stopping her work.

“Yes, ma’am. Commander Vakarian just contacted me. He said that the 2nd and 3rd battalions, 1st Marines had arrived at their assigned stations, but the 1st and 3rd battalions, 2nd Marines are still on their way.” He laughed, but it was a vicious laugh. “I’d love to see that, ma’am. Nearly six thousand pairs of Alliance boots on the ground. I bet the council is having kittens. Maybe I can adopt one and name it Suck on this you Indoctrinated Asshats.” He paused for breath. “What do you think? Too long?”

Shepard pulled the buffer free and stuck it in a pocket. “Little bit, sort of like this conversation. Put me through to Admiral Hackett, please, Joker.”

“Yes, ma’am. Normandy, out.”

“Shepard. Sovereign has arrived at the Citadel,” the admiral said.

“Yes, sir. It appears that Saren and my team have a back door onto the Citadel, so we’re going to be headed that way. He has the Conduit.” She popped another component out. “We’ll set out after him in about a minute.” Sighing, she said. “Before the Fifth Fleet heads for the Citadel, it needs to completely obliterate this base, sir. There’s Reaper tech everywhere.”

“Speaking of,” Nihlus called, as they opened fire.

“Understood, Shepard,” Hackett replied. “Let us know when you’re clear.”

“Yes, sir. Shepard, out.” She glanced up at Garrus. “Your suit getting all this? I want hard copy.”

“It is.” His sniper rifle sent echoes booming around the chamber every three seconds. “You just about done? It’s starting to get crowded in here.”

Shepard opened the link to Legion. “Okay, those two are out, anything else? And how close are you, we need to bug out of here in about ten seconds.” She shook her hands to stop their trembling as adrenaline sluiced through her bloodstream. Despite the shaking hands, the fear had bled away, leaving just a fierce determination. Sovereign and the Conduit had tormented and destroyed the last of the Protheans, and if allowed to activate the Citadel, the Reapers would destroy everything all over again. One option remained. One choice. Her two best men stood at her back. They’d get it done.

“One component remains, Shepard-Captain. It is a silver, metallic cylinder directly behind the seat of the primary memory buffer. We are landing at the shuttle now.”

“Excellent, stay there, and keep the evac clear,” Shepard shouted over the gunfire and growing screams and moans of the Prothean husks. She popped out the component and stuffed it into her belt, then grabbed Roger off her back and spun around to help. “Legion, is the rachni queen aboard
“the shuttle?” She winced against the roar of a great many terrible things coming echoed through the vaulted ceiling of the chamber. So much for Ilos’s peace.

“Affirmative.”

“Excellent. Prep it to go. We’re on our way to you now.” Prothean husk creatures climbed up from below and down the walls, horrific cockroach abominations of the people they’d once been. Opening fire, she moved steadily from one head to the next, blowing them open like dried up, dusty coconuts.

“Let’s get to the elevator before they all make it down here,” Nihlus shouted over the growing din of howls and roaring moans. Even in death, the creatures shrieked their torment, their bodies locked in a lingering nightmare. She prayed at least their souls escaped to find peace.

Shepard took point as they moved up, a wedge of bullets clearing a path through the dead. Nihlus and Garrus followed tight behind, their guns roaring until Shepard’s ears rang. Once they made it to the elevator, she’d have to turn her implants down before she went deaf. Slowly, they moved up the walkway, bodies scrambling over the dead even as they fell, clambering to obey the machine and destroy the invaders. After fifty thousand years of struggling to get free of the Senarium’s prison, the Conduit sat poised to return to its seat and fulfill its purpose. Through the voices of its victims, it defied their attempt to stop it.

Shepard hit the elevator control and the doors opened, a small horde of the husks pouring out. Beating them aside, she backed down the walkway, returning the way they’d come. “Back away from the doors. I’m going to use a little force.”

Once they had enough distance, she tossed two grenades into the mob, activating them on impact. Bits of bodies rained down on them, accompanied by an ichor she didn’t want to know the source of. The way open, they ran for the elevator.

“I really hope the grenades didn’t damage the mechanisms,” Shepard whispered as she punched the controls and the door closed. She looked over to find Garrus staring at her. “What?”

He just shook his head, then reached over and picked a strand of desiccated intestine from her hair. “Nothing.” Facing front, he shrugged. “Just sometimes I’m not sure if I’m glad you’re on our side or wish you were on theirs.”

Shepard let out a surprised chuckle and elbowed him. “Nice, and right after I saved our asses too.”

“Unless the elevator breaks and sends us crashing to our deaths,” Nihlus said, glancing down at her for a fraction of a second before looking back to the door.

“Great, two comedians teaming up. I see how it’s going to be.” She stretched her neck and rolled her shoulders, keeping herself loose in case a fight waited for them at the surface.

When the doors opened, however, the route out to the shuttle remained clear, the creatures no doubt still crawling up from below. She raced down the short hall and straight into the shuttle hatch, taking the copilot’s seat.

“Legion, you’re driving.” She keyed in the Conduit’s EM signature into the computer and set the nav system to follow it. “Just follow that marker the best you can.”

“Captain?” Joker called.

“Go ahead, Joker.” She opened the channel and shrugged herself into her harness.
“Anderson called to report that the krogan are landing in force, but all Alliance troops have arrived to support C-Sec and the combined forces are holding well. But he says the Citadel is closing, with Sovereign on the inside. Unless we can get the arms open, the fleets will be useless.”

“Understood. Tell him we’ll get the arms open. He needs to signal the Second Fleet and the quarians, maybe they can delay Sovereign. Even a few minutes could help. You need to get the Normandy there, Joker. We’re coming a different way.” She brought up the weapons systems, prepping just in case Saren had surprises waiting.

“Roger that, ma’am. We’ll see you when you get there.”

“Kick some ass, Joker, but don’t get my ship blown to hell. She’s brand new.” Even though she kept her tone light, a knot tied in her gut at the thought of the Normandy going up against Sovereign.

“God, Shepard, have a little faith. Like I’d kill my baby. Normandy, out.”

The shuttle lifted a metre off the ground and then zipped forward, navigating the treacherous corridors at a speed that kept Shepard’s eyes on the weapon screens.

“Thank the spirits for geth reaction times,” Nihlus grumbled from behind her.

They emerged from the far end of the base into the ancient aqueducts. Taking the shuttle up, Legion cut across the top of the base.

“Crap,” Nihlus whispered. “They were so damned close to letting that thing out of there.”

Shepard looked up, her gut clenching. A tower, five storeys tall, rose out of the center of the base, as much of an abomination as the technology they’d discovered inside. “They were trying to build out of the range of the jamming signal.”

“What stopped them?” he asked, crouching between the seats, steadying himself on the backs.

“Some of the Prothean researchers awoke early . . . a malfunction. When they saw what was going on and realized that the Conduit was an intelligence of its own and was trying to get out, she unleashed some sort of failsafe and killed everyone, locked the base down.” Shepard shrugged when he arched a brow plate at her. “Like I said, I touched something I wasn’t supposed to. I’m talented.”

“There it is.” Nihlus pointed to a brilliant blue-white glow up ahead. “They built a relay. It’s still active. Saren just used it.”

Shepard nodded, her guts twisting into a rock-hard pretzel. “Yeah, the Protheans built it to run infiltration missions. It’s been dormant for fifty thousand years. Legion, put the pedal to the metal. Let’s see if we can get through on Saren’s dime.” She looked over her shoulder, meeting his eyes. Nodding her head toward the crew compartment, she said, “Better buckle in. It could be a hell of a bumpy ride.”

As they cleared the building, Shepard opened a channel to Hackett. “We’re out of the target area, sir. Blow that place to hell.”

“Roger that, Shepard. Good luck. See you on the other side.”

“Yes, sir. Shepard, out.” Just before they reached the glowing, spinning rings, Shepard glanced back. As the first rounds impacted, explosions pluming into the air, she closed her eyes against
tears of mixed sorrow and relief.

“And so passes the Prothean Empire.”
"Let's all agree to never do that again."

"Agreed." Shepard stared at Nihlus, waiting for the upside down Spectre to stop spinning. "Ow. Who builds a relay within striking distance of buildings?" She craned her head but couldn't see Garrus for frantically kicking rachni legs. She took a quick inventory, finding a few places that had complaints, but nothing major. "Hey, C-Sec, you breathin'?"

"Yeah." Garrus grunted then cursed. "Although, I'd be better if I didn't have a rachni queen flailing against my personal bits." She heard his armour banging against the hull as he tried to wriggle loose.

A loud, metallic thump from the pilot's side dragged her attention to Legion. The geth lay sprawled on the shuttle's ceiling, but quickly gathered itself and stood.

"Shepard-Captain, do you require assistance?" The geth crouched beside her.

"Yeah, help me not break something getting out of this harness." She waited until Legion grabbed hold of her shoulders and legs then undid the buckle. Although not an entirely graceful way out of her seat, at least it stopped her from slamming head-first into the roof.

"Are you injured?" it asked, helping her sit up.

"No. Go help the others. We've got to get out of here and hijack a car." Crawling between the seats, she managed to duck the queen's flailing limbs to force the hatch open. "Well, we're upside down after slamming into the tower and flipping over, but hey, we're on the Citadel." Dragging herself out, Shepard scrambled to her feet, then turned to help Nihlus crawl free of the wrecked shuttle.

"Amalair," she called, crouching in the hatch, "I apologize, but this extraction is not going to be big on dignity." She elbowed Nihlus. "Grab a leg. Let's just try not to do any major damage." She grabbed hold of the rachni queen's leg as close to the body as she could manage. "Legion, do you have an angle to push?"

"Affirmative."

Together, the three of them managed to wrestle the queen loose, then Legion went back in to help Garrus.

"Okay." Shepard sorted her armour and shrugged Roger into her hand. She turned a slow circle, letting out a low whistle. "Sweet baby Jesus, C-Sec and the Marines have had a hell of a fight on their hands." She offered her hand to Garrus as he crawled out, looking back to the destruction even as he pulled himself up. "Come on, we've got to keep moving."

Dead krogan, Marines, and C-Sec lay strewn like refuse over barricades, filling her with a deep, aching sorrow. None of them deserved to be there. Even the krogan were just pawns, sent to die
without being given a choice or knowing why. She choked back her reaction; it wouldn't serve to do anything but slow her down. She set out, jogging past fires reaching up into the false sky from cars shot down to lie in battered heaps amidst the lakes and gardens. As she headed toward the tower, hoping to find a car in working order, Shepard noted the lack of civilian casualties. It looked as though C-Sec had been given enough notice to clear out the streets at least.

"C-Sec shuttle," Garrus called, jabbing his rifle in the direction of the vehicle. It stood in a garden just outside the wards access, which looked to have provided it some cover.

"Brilliant." Shepard veered to follow him, catching movement in the corner of her eye in the fraction of a second before a rocket exploded against her shields, throwing her into the air. After a moment of flight, she crashed into a railing and flipped over, landing butter side down in a patch of hibiscus. For a second, she lay stunned, every cell in her body aching and vibrating from being hit by the equivalent of a small bus.

Thank the sweet baby Jesus for shields.

Gunfire broke through the ringing in her ears. She shook her head, trying to clear away the strange, quivering layer over her eyesight, then clambered up onto her hands and knees.

"Shepard!" Nihlus called out, "are you all right?" Why did he always have to sound as though he was shouting from a half klick away?

"Yeah." She fished Roger out of the shrubberies and turned him on the krogan with the rocket launcher. "I think it rattled all my teeth loose, but I'm still moving."

Three more krogan joined the first, but at least only the one had a ML-77 launcher. She ducked down behind the railing, giving her shields time to recover.

"Is everyone else okay?" she called. Even as she asked, she felt the strange musical whispers of the queen moving through the air. They latched onto her guts like hooks, pulling at her to put down her guns and be calm. A grim smile scarred her face, guilt raking her with its claws as she called, "Press the advantage. We can't afford to fight our way across this damned station."

She unhooked three grenades from her belt, throwing them into the krogan line even as their fire slowed. "C-Sec, get your ass in that shuttle and get it up and running!" The grenades tore down the krogan shields, so she switched to Ingrid, lining up headshots as quickly as she could without overheating her gun. "Come on, go down, you bastards."

As she spoke, the sun went out, but she couldn't spare a glance for the sky. Instinct told her—pure, hysterical, primitive terror told her—what eclipsed the artificial sun, but two krogan still fought, advancing on Nihlus and Legion who covered the queen. They were trying to herd her down the stairs to the wards, but they didn't need to worry. The krogan stopped firing and stood, faces slack, held rapt by her song.

"I'm going to regret this," she sighed, pulling the last grenades. "Duck and cover, people!" She pulled her arm back. "Forgive me." She threw them, then dove behind the railing and hit the trigger.

"They're down," Nihlus hollered. "Let's move, Sovereign's incoming on the tower."

Shepard popped up from behind her cover, she saw the Spectre staring straight up, but she didn't spare a glance for the Reaper. Instead, she raced for the shuttle. Why weren't the thrusters firing? Why …?
Garrus appeared in the hatch. The expression on his face told her everything she needed to know, so she changed course. Fifty thousand years of planning, hard work, and suffering had gone into making sure that Sovereign didn't turn the Citadel into a Hellgate, and in a very few minutes, all of that would go straight to down the toilet.

"C-Sec will have a defensive line at the embassy," she called back. "They should have a working shuttle there." Shepard picked up the pace, ignoring the nettle-sting of rising panic under her diaphragm. "Someone grab that damned rocket launcher. We're probably going to need it."

"Keelah, is that our brand new shuttle upside down at the tower?" a familiar voice called, crackling and broken as it tore through the jamming. "Shepard, they're going to stop letting you have nice toys if you just keep breaking them."

Shepard spun around to see a Kodiak racing toward them at breakneck speed. Grinning, she reached up to open the channel. "Tali? What in the name of the holy Enkindlers is a nice girl like you doing in a warzone like this?" Shepard backed away, more and more quickly as the shuttle closed without slowing. "And who taught you to drive?"

"Saving your backside is what I'm doing." The shuttle stopped suddenly and dropped straight down. "And no one taught me to drive. I just watched you."

Only the rachni queen didn't dodge for cover as the shuttle slammed into the ground.

"Remind me to get you some remedial training," Shepard said as she ran over. She opened the hatch. "Come on people, we've got a lift."

"Driven by a drunk hanar," Nihlus grumbled as he stepped inside. He sat and strapped himself in. "Tali'Zorah, as glad as I am to see you, maybe you should let Garrus drive."

Shepard helped the rachni queen on board, then shut the hatch and ducked into the pilot compartment. "Thanks for stopping by," she said, grinning as a giddy relief swept through her, sunshine racing in behind windswept clouds. A second later, Tali lifted off, the shuttle shooting straight up faster than the inertial dampeners could compensate and sending Shepard scrambling to stay on her feet. The relief died in a flash of dizziness. They were all going to die before they made it to Sovereign at that rate.

Tali glanced back. "Did you think I'd come all this way with you and miss taking down Sovereign?" she replied, scoffing. "No chance." She looked back at the controls just in time to dodge a rocket launched from the ground, sending Shepard crashing to the floor behind the pilot seat.

"Ow." Shepard scrambled back up onto her feet. "Yeah, I'm thinking Garrus should be driving. Tali. We need to fly into the superstructure. It's going to get a little hairy."

Tali grumbled, but slipped sideways to let Garrus slide in behind her. "Fine, but I get complete credit for the big save this time." She paused then slanted one slender shoulder in a vague shrug. "Well, Kal can have a little of it."

Shepard brushed a quick kiss against the cheek of the quarian's helmet as Tali squeezed by to take a seat. "Absolutely." The captain turned to Tali's copilot. "Kal'Reegar, I'm glad as hell to see you, but I need to boot you out of your seat too." When he moved, she flopped in and entered the Conduit's signature into the nav computer.

"Okay, Brother C-Sec, let's follow that blip." She did up her harness and brought the weapons
Garrus sent the shuttle looping high above the presidium, heading for the outer edge of the ring. It felt like going the wrong direction, but Shepard left it to the C-Sec agent's superior knowledge of the Citadel. At least it seemed like the wrong direction until they cleared the ring and the immense bulk of Sovereign reared over them, millions of years worth of the collective nightmares of every race.

For a moment, her blood turned to paste in her veins, but then she gritted her teeth and pressed her eyes closed. "If there was ever a time to prove that monster wrong, now would be it," she whispered under her breath. She cracked her neck and steadied her hands on the firing controls. Even if God had abandoned her, even if He'd turned a blind eye to the pleas of billions of voices calling out to Him in thousands of languages, she was there. She had a chance to end it, and she wouldn't let her own cowardice destroy that.

They entered the presidium ring so close to Sovereign's underbelly that it felt as if she should be able to reach out the door and run her fingers along that black, oil-on-water hull.

"It gets tight," she said, mostly just needing to hear her own voice for a second, "but Tashac got a small frigate through, so we should be fine."

Garrus glanced over, his mandibles flicking ever so slightly. "Don't worry, Shepard. I've got you."

She grinned, and turned to her nav panel, updating the station's overlay. "There it is again, C-Sec, that delusional streak."

"When it comes to you, always," he said, his voice low enough to stay between them and rumbling deep in his chest in a way that made her heart stop and then start fluttering like a hummingbird's wings.

"Stop that," she grumbled, half-heartedly. "You're going to give me a heart attack." And yet, something inside her that had been floating loose, crashing around with her every movement and every thought, settled, anchoring itself. For all she teased him, he had her.

They encountered no resistance on the way through the superstructure until they came to the huge doors leading into the chamber where Sovereign had been born. Garrus set them down at the doors, Shepard leaping free of her harness even before it landed.

"Everyone, guns at the ready. I'll be a monkey's blind, fat aunt if there isn't a small herd of krogan on the other side of this door." She waited until her people stood behind her, then turned and opened the hatch.

Try as she might to ignore them, Tashac's memories burst free of Shepard's control, flooding her with the fear and sadness the Prothean had felt upon seeing the now pristine floors covered with the bodies of so many races, the Keepers sorting through them like workers on some grisly mass production line … Attit and Merol's presence at her back, giving her courage even as her own failed. The loneliness … and the hope.

Shepard grabbed onto the last and pushed the rest back, forcing Tashac behind her wall. She couldn't concentrate with two sets of thoughts rolling around in her head, and if she couldn't concentrate, they were all very, very dead.

Gathering herself, focusing on the task, she skirted around the shuttle, heading for the door. "Cover me, I'll crack it open."
The team moved like water, effortlessly flowing into positions to cover the door as Shepard ran to the panel. She expected it to be locked, and it didn't disappoint. "And that's why God made engineers," she whispered, cracking the panel open. She overrode the door controls in under five seconds, the giant gears grinding and roaring as they began to move for what was likely the first time in fifty thousand years. "And made us awesome," she crowed.

She ducked behind the rear panel of the shuttle, giving Garrus a cocky grin as she took cover next to him. "Not a real engineer, my ass."

He just shook his head. "Never letting that one go, are you?"

Unfortunately, rounds interrupted her witty comeback, four krogan spilling out the door in an undisciplined charge. One of them slammed into the front of the shuttle hard enough to knock both Shepard and Garrus on their asses, but the behemoth also knocked himself senseless. Tali and Nihlus's shotguns tore into its head, pulverizing it into a pulpy, shredded mass. A shot from Ingrid between its nonexistent eyes put it out of its misery.

That left three.

"Shepard, Vakarian, Tali," Nihlus called. "Bring down their shields. I'll handle the rest of it." He brought the rocket launcher up, couching it in against the angle of his shoulder.

Three overloads tore along the krogan's shields, bringing them down with an impressive light show. Not two seconds later, rockets sizzled through the air, slamming into the krogan before they could spread out, each blast damaging all three. They went down without a sound, their unnatural silence saying everything about the wrongness of their origin and being.

"Krogan should go out roaring in defiance," she muttered, choking down a hard lump of pity. Just one more sin to chalk up on the Reaper's endless tally. Did God, or the universe, or karma even have a sufficient punishment for the horrors the Reapers had inflicted? In the end, she supposed it didn't matter. Saving the living would even the scales enough for her. As long as the harvests ended, she could let the dead sort the rest of it out.

She burst out of cover, dashing forward to the door, checking through for any more surprises. Nothing. She scowled at that. Was it arrogance, supreme confidence that made Saren leave his back so wide open? Four krogan to stop her? Surely, he knew better.

"He's just slowing us down," Nihlus said, stepping up beside her. "He wants us there at the end. Or Sovereign does." He shrugged, a quick, barbed jerk of his shoulders. He strode through the door, passing her like a storm, all lightning and thunder. She grabbed his hand, stopping him. He squeezed her fingers, a little of the electricity dissipating. "I'm okay, Shepard. Just ready to end this. Spirits, am I ready to end this."

She nodded and released him. "Feels like we've been fighting for fifty thousand years." Looking back, she said. "Tali, Kal, stay here, and watch our backs. Make sure the path out of here stays open. Protect Amalair." She crooked her finger at Garrus and Legion. "You two can keep an eye on the canyon from the archway." Following Nihlus, she lifted into a jog, keeping her eyes carefully averted from the open chasm where Tashac had stared into the darkness, letting it in to eat away her soul.

She paused just inside the arch, turning back to look into Garrus's eyes. Damn, those ice-blue eyes. They pulled at her, but she shut that down too. The fight had always been coming down to her and Nihlus. She needed Garrus to get out and keep things moving if everything went FUBAR with the Conduit. With the shuttle, the rest of the team had a chance to make it to the Normandy and then to
"Here's your position, gentlemen. Keep our retreat open, and if anything goes too enormously wrong up there, get Tali, Kal, and Amalair to the *Normandy*. Joker already knows to bug out if Reapers start pouring through that relay, but he'll be waiting for you." She smiled as Garrus's mandibles and brow plates dropped, seeing the realization slice through him that she was going on and leaving him behind. She wished she could break down and tell him how naked her back would feel without him there. That she could tell him … .

"Keep a weather eye. We'll be back," was what came out.

Tearing herself away from the stare that begged her to let him have her back, the one that told her how much she was loved, she turned to the ramp leading down. God, she hoped she was coming back. She really wanted to see where that whole thing was headed. What if it had lasted, and they managed to grow old together? Wouldn't that have been something?

"Shepard!" Garrus made as if to follow her, but she turned back, slicing the air with her hand to still his protest.

"No, stay here and protect the others, Garrus. I don't want you exposed to that thing." She gave him a tight-lipped smile. "I'll be back in a few minutes, then we'll find ourselves a nice restaurant that hasn't been shot to hell." She began backing down the slope into that fabricated canyon. "Or … maybe we'll order in pizza. Tomorrow, I could even make you breakfast."

He followed her a couple of steps. "I still don't trust you not to poison me." He held out a hand, talons reaching for her. "Come back."

She winked, her eyes hungrily moving over his face, hoarding and packing away everything she saw there, storing it down deep for safe keeping. Just in case. "Count on it." Another step and she turned, running down the slope. "Come on, Brother Nihlus, get your assless in gear. We've got a harvest to stop, glory hallelujah."

A small squad of krogan moved down into the low spot from the platform ahead, but between Nihlus's new-found love affair with the rocket launcher, and her overload, they made short work of them. Still, would have been nice to have Wrex or Sparky along to fling them over the edge.

When she reached the bottom, she put rounds through their brainstems, making sure they didn't regenerate and come up on them from behind. That battlemaster on Therum still haunted her every time she faced a krogan, and heaven knew Wrex could take a licking and keep coming back for more. That was so not the time for taking chances.

As they climbed the other side, Nihlus dropped the rocket launcher, trading for his shotgun. Ahead, Shepard could see the faint energy wrinkle of a barrier blocking access to the platform, and beyond that, the Conduit raised slowly into the air, lifting to seat itself into its nest of controls. For a second, the sight sent a thousand splinters of panic slicing through her. How could they stop it in time?

"Sovereign, the Conduit is in place," she heard Saren call out as they reached the barrier. "What are your orders?"

"Your purpose has been fulfilled," the soulless monotone replied, its words glacial and dark as they boomed over them. "Your utility is at an end, your mind too damaged to be of use."
Saren stared up at the Reaper for long seconds before he turned to look at Shepard and Nihlus. Although his face showed no emotion, his mandibles pulled in tight, his brow plates still, his mouth hung open ever so slightly, and his back bowed as if a load too heavy to bear had knocked the breath out of him.

Although too filled with anger and disgust to allow it, Shepard wished she could feel at least empathy for the fallen Spectre. She knew how it felt to witness god turn its back. Stepping up to the shield, she pressed her hand to it. The darkness lashed at her, and she winced as the coils of its whip tore into her but didn't fight the pain. She didn't need to fight it. The pain and darkness already lived so far down inside her that her entire being had formed around it like a tree's flesh growing around a nail.

"I was afraid you wouldn't make it in time, Shepard … Nihlus," Saren called, his voice that same even, rational tone. Perhaps too much of him had been eaten away by the indoctrination to even feel Sovereign's betrayal.

"I always got excellent marks for punctuality in school." Shepard craned her head, trying to see if she could find a way around the barrier. Nothing showed.

He took a couple of steps toward them. "I think the three of us have known from the beginning that it would end like this." Those horrible, glowing eyes turned to Nihlus. "You've lost, you know that don't you? In a few minutes, Sovereign will send the signal to the Conduit. The relay will open. The Reapers will return."

Nihlus stepped up beside Shepard, as sharp and brittle as glass shards in liquid nitrogen. "We still have a few tricks up our sleeves."

Saren's mouth opened, but he hesitated over his next words, and when they came out, the tone flattened. "Sovereign has recognized your value. You've both impressed it. Surrender to the Reapers, and you will be spared."

Shepard laughed, the sound cracking the air like a gunshot even over the noise of the Citadel and Sovereign moving overhead. "You think we're going to buy that line after hearing you get the royal kiss off? Seriously?" She slammed a fist against the barrier. "Let us through this fucking thing, and we'll give Sovereign a kiss off that he'll remember for about twenty seconds before his ass gets blown out through his weird tentacle-leg-finger-things."

"Don't you understand, Shepard?" Saren called. He spread his arms out to the galaxy. "Every cycle there are hundreds like you. Hundreds who fight back, who organize and resist. They find every single one of you and destroy you from the inside out then turn you on your own people. You aren't special. You aren't mighty, and in the end, they will reduce you to dust, just like the thousands before you."

"Saren." She reached out a hand. "It's not too late. We can counteract the effects of indoctrination, mostly. You have so much intel that could help us prepare." A wrecking ball slammed through the wall of anger, allowing empathy, and worse … a gut-twisting sympathy to wash through—cold, clear waters pouring through a dam.

"The most crushing blow … and yet the most precious gift a warrior can be given," Tashac whispered through Shepard's thoughts, "is the moment of crystal clarity when hatred clears to reveal that the enemy is a shadowy reflection of oneself. For all their deeds, they are neither superior nor inferior, just beings seeing the infinite complexities of the universe through a different glass. In that moment, you fall in love, and it breaks your heart. All killing diminishes the whole. All of it."
Shepard pushed that aside and lifted a beseeching hand to the barrier. "Please, help us. I get it. Your best chance for salvation just kicked you in the ass. I've been there. Use it."

"Saren!" Nihlus stepped up beside her. A soft, rumbling keen underscored his words. "Listen to her. You were led along the wrong path trying to save our people. I understand that. What Shepard and I are doing could actually save them. If we can stop Sovereign from opening the relay, we could delay them for cycles … give ourselves a chance to prepare."

Saren shook his head. "No. Like I said, Nihlus … thousands like you. It always turns out the same. They are too many and too strong." He laughed, but it came out a warbling sort of keen. "What I didn't realize is that every cycle, there are also thousands like me. Pawns twisted by indoctrination to believe they are doing what is best. In the end, we die ground into dust just as fine as the ones who fight."

His eyes turned to look at the Conduit. "It's just about seated. When it reaches full power, Sovereign will open the arms and beam a signal through the Conduit into dark space. It will last exactly forty-five seconds." As he spoke he backed up to the edge of the platform. Stepping up onto the low barrier around the edge, Saren pulled his pistol from his hip.

"Saren?" Nihlus ran up a step, slamming into the barrier. "Saren! Don't. Please."

"I knew what you were the moment I saw you in that mine, filthy and ragged. I knew that one day, you'd eclipse me. I kept you angry, kept you raging against your mother and the galaxy, because I knew that was the only way to hold you back." His mandibles spread and fluttered hard. "You are so much more, Nihlus. Let go of your anger." The glowing, blue stare turned to Shepard. "That one will show you how limitless you are."

The Spectre activated his omnitool, keyed in commands, then lifted his gun. "Watch your back, Shepard," he said. "They'll be coming for you. You forced their hand."

"Saren, no. Nihlus is—" Shepard slammed her fists against the barrier.

"It's too late for me, Shepard." He leaned back, a talon touching a control on his omnitool, dropping the shield protecting the Conduit, as the gun travelled past it to his chest. Two reports hammered through the air, a mist of indigo blood exploding outward as the bullets tore through his heart. Saren fell backwards off the platform, his body tumbling through the awkward, partial gravity.

Shepard fell forward onto her hands and knees as the shield dropped. She scrambled up and ran forward, reaching out, but too late. Eventually, the gravity of one of the wards would snag him, but it didn't matter. Saren was dead, buying peace and perhaps absolution the only way he knew how.

"I as free forgive you as I would be forgiven: I forgive all," she whispered, Jenkins's last words whispering through her, a gentle breeze of understanding.

Shepard turned from Saren's corpse and ran up to the Conduit interface. They had a much bigger problem ahead. "Oh god. Okay. We know that they sabotaged this thing to do something, right?" She looked over at Nihlus, desperate stare begging him to know what they were supposed to do. "Do you remember? Anything?"

He shook his head and raced to her side, looking over her shoulder. "It's like Merol dumped the information out of his memory." He threw up his hands. "Forty-five seconds is a hell of a short window, Shepard."
"Bloody lot of good you are to me," she snapped without any heat. She looked up, Sovereign's massive form hidden by the platform's roof. Still, the horrible insect legs scraped and ground against the tower above them, a cacophony of metal on metal that hammered spikes into her gums and set her teeth grinding. "Tashac knew she was indoctrinated. She couldn't stop them from using her to sabotage the base, but maybe she managed to keep this locked away from them."

She reached up for her radio, then realized the uselessness of that gesture. Even if the Conduit wasn't jamming all their signals, Amalair didn't use a radio. Her heart fell, splashing into a chill, slimy hopelessness that sloshed in the pit of her belly. She reached back and gripped Nihlus's hand. "Go, open the arms. If I fail, maybe the fleets can still take that thing down." Releasing him, she laid her hands on the interface, hoping some spark of inspiration would strike.

Nihlus leaned down over her and nuzzled her ear. "If we don't survive this … thank you, Shepard."

She let out a bitter cough of laughter, the boggy hopelessness splashing up. "For what? Getting everyone in the galaxy killed?"

"For the best few months of my life." He strode to the console before she could reply.

Pressing her eyes closed, Shepard searched, rifling through thoughts and memories, tearing at the wall she'd erected around Tashac with desperate, bleeding fingers. The answer was there. It had to be there. The Prothean spent fifteen cycles creating a way to make sure Sovereign could be stopped. Surely, Tashac would have found a way to pass the information on.

"Come on," she growled. "You were strong enough to fend the darkness off for more than fifteen years. You're strong enough to help me figure this out."

Inside her mind, the oil-slick oozed out of its carefully partitioned area, millions of microscopic legs skittering and scrambling, racing along her neurons. They laughed, cold and pointed, mocking her desperation and fear as the bit and chewed. "Thousands like you throughout history," they whispered. "Thousands and thousands over the millions of years since the cycles began, and here you are poised on the edge of the great abyss that took them all."

Shepard scraped the back of her glove across her brow and pulled back from the interface. She had a picture in her head of the moment Tashac turned away from the Conduit in the chamber under the base. She'd opened something to expose inner workings. A panel.

Climbing up to within arm's reach as the Conduit seated itself and began to power up, Shepard circled its heinous form, running gloved fingers over the surface, searching. Touching the thing exhumed a long-buried corpse: ancient, clotted, and dirty. So very dirty. The kind of filth that made it so no one could ever bear to touch her again. If they did, they'd feel the depth of that mark, recoil and turn their backs on her. No amount of time, no number of deeds noble or great could clean away a taint like that, it could only be borne until it eventually ate the sufferer alive. One day, Shepard's would eat her alive.

The darkness crawled over everything, leaching all colour from the world. The gelid sludge crawled out of her belly to ooze over her organs, easing her down into its embrace. 'What will you have? What will the darkness allow you to keep?' it asked. She knew the answer. It would allow her nothing. She'd fight until the moment she died, never discovering victory, never knowing peace. Was there any point to fighting a battle she could never win?

"It's okay, Janey," her father whispered in her ear. She whimpered a little as the warmth of his breath seeped through the hood. "If you need to let go … ." A sob tore from his throat, but he cleared it as if it was just another breath. "... it's okay. You've fought so hard, been so very brave. I
know it hurts, baby, so if Jesus calls you home ..." Gentle pressure dimpled the hood, pushing it against her skin. "... you can go. Your mom and I understand, and one day we'll all be together at His—"

"Shepard?"

She looked up at Nihlus, his voice breaking through the litany of hopelessness inside her head, his *familia notas* bright and gorgeous in the dim light. He really was beautiful, particularly right then. Beautiful and so very alive. So very there, despite everything they'd been through over the weeks. Clinging to that, she asked, "Please tell me Garrus gave you those injections? I really need one right now."

He tossed her a syringe. She snatched it out of the air, yanked the cap and pressed it to her neck, then threw it away. "Thanks."

Then she saw it, right where her hand had been, and she laughed, throwing off the chill. "Oh ho, afraid are you, you bastard? Nice trick, putting the whammy on me like that." She opened her omnitool and fabricated a tool to pry the cover off the panel. There, in the center, sat a very familiar-looking black rectangular component. She grinned and called out, "So, Legion, I probably shouldn't touch this one, either, should I?"

Despite her words, she reached in, closing her hand—

"*I have dedicated a great many cycles to installing this backdoor. I hid it within the work that the darkness commanded I perform. It is not the miracle I wished to leave for the one who follows in my footsteps, but it will have to suffice. I have laboured for cycles to alter the Reaper technology or sabotage it, but it defies even the miracles that Merol can force the galaxy to perform. Instead, I have simply wired in a small amplifier and transmitter."

"*When the Vanguard transmits the signal for the Conduit to open the relay, a feedback loop will return along the same pathway, thus bypassing the Vanguard's defenses. For those brief moments, the feedback will cripple the Reaper's sensory processes and disrupt its defenses."

"*I pray that whomever discovers my work possesses the armada to destroy the Vanguard during those moments. If not, the relay will still open and the cycle will begin anew. If, however, the Vanguard meets with its destruction while transmitting, the Conduit will be destroyed as well. It will not save the galaxy, but it will buy precious time to prepare, and the Citadel will be closed to them as a means of return. I just pray it is enough.*"

—in the small box.

"Shepard, the arms are opening," Nihlus called. "Fair bet that Sovereign knows something is up." He glanced over at her. "You okay?"

"Better than okay. This thing is seconds from hitting full power. Can you get me a channel to Hackett? We need a crazy-ass amount of precision here." She opened her omnitool, setting it to scan the receiver. "Just get me a line through the jamming, or we're going to be oh so very royally fucked. I really don't want a front row seat for a Reaper invasion today."

Nihlus keyed commands into the console, then tossed a glance back over his shoulder and shrugged. "It's scratchy, but you should be able to get something through."

"Admiral Hackett? Are you receiving?" Static and a harsh clicking sound answered her. "Shepard to Hackett, please come in."
"... eading you, Shepard. What's ... status?"

"We've reached the Conduit. It's rigged to help bring down Sovereign's defenses. When I signal, the fleets need to open fire on the Reaper. All of them. We have a forty-five second window to take that thing down. Do you read?" She shouted, praying that he got enough of the message to pass the orders along.

"Understood. All fleets ... on Sovereign when ... receive your signal. Standing by."

Shepard kept her eyes on the scan, watching the power level climb. The readings spiked a half second later as Sovereign's transmission funneled through the Conduit. Around them, the Citadel began to shake, a deep resonating tremor that let her know the relay awakened. She opened the channel. "Now, sir. Admiral Hackett, do you read? Now!"

She ran to the edge of the platform, looking out. The ward arms had reached about a sixth of the way open, but already, ships poured through. Alliance, geth, and quarian vastly outnumbered the vessels of the Citadel fleet.

Then, like a firefly against a jet-black sky, the Normandy soared in, racing at the head of the attack wave. It strafed the Reaper with its canons and darted away, but not before the terrible, klaxon roar of the massive laser sounded. The deadly beam missed the Normandy to punch through one of the Alliance ships, slicing the frigate in half. Fire plumed in a horrible cloud, alive and fierce, the ship screaming defiantly in the face of death for a single moment before it expired.

Like a crowd willing to stand back and watch a fight until the bully took down one of their friends, the fleets opened fire, missiles and cannons tearing into the Reaper. Beautiful, terrible birds of prey darted and dove, reeling through the ether in intricate formations, sweeping in and away from that deadly but cumbersome laser. Shepard soared alongside them. The inferno of a near miss seared along her spine followed by the exhilaration of holding the attack until the last possible second, then rolling into a sharp climb along the Reaper's enormous body, guns pouring out death and destruction.

At their head soared the most beautiful of the metal avians, her silver hull gleaming in the light of the nebula, reflecting the death throes of her less able fellows in brilliant gold, amber, and crimson. Shepard clung to the edge of the platform, leaning out as her ship danced. Her heart climbed up into the back of her throat, and she held her breath as if the Normandy needed all of her, even her air, in order to survive the monster that tried to snuff her out.

Seemingly aware that the little frigate was Shepard's vessel, or perhaps merely because it proved the most vexing target, Sovereign's laser lashed out time and again, trying to carve up the nimble ship. Each time Joker worked his magic, vanishing from the laser's path.

Gradually, over the sounds of battle, Shepard registered a noise, a faint whine where none had existed before, but, captivated by the artistry of Hackett's attack, she let it build. Then Sovereign relinquished the Citadel, thrusters roaring as it fled for the opening arms and the relay beyond that.

Shepard screamed, a vicious bellow of victory, and punched her fist at the fleeing Reaper. "Run, you bastard. Run all you want, you're not getting away." She laughed as her prediction came true, the ward arms not yet open wide enough to allow the massive ship to escape. The laser roared, the terrible dragon bellow that she remembered from Feros, but this time, it provoked no superstitious terror. They'd pulled the dragon's teeth.

The Reaper opened fire at the end of one of the ward arms, trying to make a big enough hole. But, a swarm of angry bees protecting their nest, the fleets chased the dragon down, hammering away at
it until the Reaper's shields failed. The dying god's skin cracked under the deluge of munitions, flame and smoke ripping through. Great wounds erupted along Sovereign's underside, one and then another of its legs tore free, then the horrible howl of the laser fell silent.

Within that vacant aural space, Shepard realized the whine had become a piercing shrill of building feedback. "Oh crap." She grabbed Nihlus and bolted for the ramp down. "This thing is going to blow."

She didn't quite make it to the ramp before a massive hand slammed into her from behind. It threw her from the walkway, tossing her end over end to slam into the slanted walls of the canyon. Sliding upside down on her back, she careened down their length, tumbling to a rolling stop at the bottom.

"Shepard!"

She looked up at the sound of her name, wondering why Nihlus sounded so terrified. Then the entire presidium tumbled down to land on her head, and the universe went dark.

Light flashed.

Pain. Alarms of agony screamed along her entire left side.

_Sweet baby Jesus, the pain. Help me. I think my arm's been ripped off. Possibly my entire side. Ummmm ... help? Anyone? I need help here._

After calling out inside a strange, half-waking dream for what felt like a couple of days, Shepard began to climb out the rabbit hole, fingers scrabbling for purchase in the dirt, nails peeling back. Where were all the pianos and chandeliers, footstools and hat boxes when she needed them?

_Curiouser and curiouser. Why didn't I just drink the stuff in the bottle or eat the cake? Seems the door had to be an easier way out than this. If men on the chessboard get up and tell me where to go ... . No wait, that's Jefferson Airplane._

"Shepard?"

_Is that Garrus screaming at me? Shhhhh ... C-Sec, give the wounded woman a break._

"Shepard!" Crashing and banging pulled her further out of the fog. "I've found her."

Orange light burst like the sun on the other side of her eyelids. She winced away from it, the movement pulling a long, barbed moan of agony from her throat. A hundred varren sank their teeth in along that side, ripping and tearing as they fought over her remains.

"Shepard." Gentle talons brushed the hair from her forehead. "You okay? Can you hear me?"

She ran her tongue around the inside of her mouth, dragging it over the sandpaper and tar that clung to every surface. "I hear you," she managed to croak out, the words snapping like old twigs underfoot. "My left side hurts."

He bent down and nuzzled her brow. "Yeah, you have about a ton of rubble lying on it. Just keep still. We'll get you out."

Forcing her eyes open, she searched for him past the fiery light of his omnitool. His eyes, when she locked onto them, felt like a long, cool drink of water. "Sovereign?"
His mandibles fluttered hard. "A whole lot of pieces floating outside the Citadel. It tried to carve its way out through one of the wards, but the fleets tore it to pieces." A thumb caressed her cheek. "You did it, Kahri. You saved everyone. Not bad, even for a freakishly tiny, ornery, crazy … beautiful miracle."

She shook her head, a soft cry of pain answering even the slight movement. "No, not saved, just delayed." Her eyes drifted closed as she pressed into the comforting warmth of his hand. "Still lots of work to do, Garrus. Still so very much to do."
Now comes the good parts, right? Victory, parties, rambunctious napping.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Trigger warning for the third paragraph here. Graphic depiction of violence.

“Shepard?” Joker’s voice came over the medbay intercom, waking Shepard out of a fitful doze. Terrible, glowing eyes stared into her soul, consuming it in their fire. Despair. You’ve done nothing but delay the inevitable. Thousands like you. Thousands fight. Thousands fall before us, their minds enslaved, turning on the very people they struggled to save. Your god has abandoned you, Jane Shepard. It left you to the batarians—

A piercing whistle and then a vicious crack just before the lash sliced into her flesh, carving a deep enough gash into the backs of her thighs that the end snagged. The gravelly voice laughed as he tore it loose, her screams and whimpers just fueling his vicious gluttony. “That’s right, little girl. Cry out for your god. Does it answer? Does it save you?”

—and it has left you to us. We will not be as merciful as they were. The voice filled her head with a ringing that threatened both her eardrums and her sanity.

“Captain?”

Jumping up, heart hammering against her ribs, sweat beading across her lip, Shepard let out a thin moan of pain. As the medbay crystallized into focus, a trembling sigh escaped her lips, dry and futile . . . a corpse’s last breath, and she eased back down onto the bed.

“Captain? Shepard, are you there?”

Shepard scrubbed at her face with a hand. Why was he calling over the intercom? She reached up to tap her radio and found nothing. Oh right, the Conduit exploding had blown her implants. At least that explained the constant ringing. She made a mental note to get them replaced before they left the Citadel in the morning.

“Yeah, Joker. You found me, what’s up?” She glanced at the regen cage around her shoulder then over at Chakwas who sat slumped back at her desk, looking as if she’d given in to sleep as well. Well, that’s what the doc got for insisting on holding prisoners. If Chakwas didn’t let her go and soon, missing a little beauty sleep would be the least of her problems. Oh yes, rebellion loomed, becoming a very real possibility.

“The council called. I asked if they wanted to be put through, but they just demanded that you and Nihlus meet them at 1100 hours Citadel time tomorrow in the garden by the relay monument. Dress uniform.” The pilot’s tone came across as suspicious as the orders made her feel.

“They didn’t mention needing a blindfold and a cigarette, did they?” Despite the joke, she felt very
real boulders of doom rolling toward her, set to crush her flat.

“No, ma’am, but you might want to take them with you anyway. And a small squad. And your guns. And maybe the Normandy should be sitting there with our cannons locked on them.”

Shepard chuckled, but it tumbled out sharp-edged, bitter, and unconvincing. “Thanks, Joker. Shepard, out.”

A shard of dread took root, spreading tendrils of uncertainty worming through her steel, weakening it. Letting out a long, shaky sigh, she sank into the massive pile of pillows under her re-injured shoulder. What did the summons the next day mean? Good news? Bad news? She didn’t possess the faintest clue how the council would react to Sovereign’s destruction. Perhaps the vanguard’s destruction loosened the Reapers’ hold over the council. Maybe they had a chance to find the orbs, destroy them and get everyone fighting.

And maybe Reaper back up plans sprang into action even while she lay there. They’d destroyed the Conduit, but four other keys remained. What resources did the Reapers still possess, and how long would it be before those resources began to make their move?

If she was certain of one thing, it was that It would be up to her people to find and destroy the rest of the keys, or use them to stop the Reapers before they could manage their invasion. But first, her people needed a break. She’d run them ragged, and they’d impressed the hell out of her, holding up better than she could have expected. They deserved some beach time or shopping time, or whatever before they jumped back into the fire.

She sighed. But, before that, and before she risked going before the council, she had one important thing to do.

She opened a channel to the bridge through her omnitool. “Hey, Joker. Have the crew assemble in the cargo bay at 0830, please. We have some friends to send on their way. Ask Anderson and Hackett to attend if possible.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am. I’ll pass the word.”

“Thanks. Shepard, out.” She closed the channel and wriggled her shoulder. It hurt but moved just fine. “Hey, Doc, throw a battered soldier a bone, and let me out of this damned thing. I need to go get some sleep.”

Chakwas started awake, looked around and then sighed. “You’re impossible. Are you aware of that?” She grumbled as she pushed herself up out of her chair, but it was a wasp with no sting. “Of course you are. Only someone completely impossible could pull off the things you have in the past few months.” She ran her omnitool over Shepard’s side and tutted, but then turned the frame off. “Very well, but when you’re up and moving, keep this arm in a sling. You’ve tried to tear it off twice now. Give all those ligaments and tendons time to knit.”

Shepard touched two fingers to her temple, then swept them around in a teasing salute. “Yes, ma’am, Admiral Doctor, ma’am.”

Chakwas unlatched the frame. “Completely impossible.”

They both looked to the door when it opened. Garrus stepped inside, a brilliant shaft of light through the darkness. He paused, staring at her like he hadn’t seen her in a week rather than a couple of hours. Lifting her good hand, she held it out to him, .

“Hey there, hero,” she said, her cheeks heating with the intensity of his stare. Sweet baby Jesus,
she loved the way he looked at her. It incinerated the darkness and warmed her all the way to her toes.

“I think you’ve got that backwards.” He closed the few steps between them, his long talons wrapping around her hand. “You’re the hero. You and Nihlus.” He let her pull him in, mandibles spreading in a butterfly-wing fragile smile. As if the doctor weren’t there, he leaned down and kissed her . . . a passionate, eyes closed, toe curling kiss.

She returned it, the butterflies all travelling down into her belly setting off a riot as her lips caressed his mouth. “No, today you’re my hero,” she whispered, brushing her nose against the end of his in what her daddy had always called bunny kissing. “You searched for me for nearly ten hours.” Her head tipped toward her shoulder in a shy shrug when he pulled away, surprised. “Tali rattled you out before she headed back to the flotilla.”

Reaching up, she caressed his cheek. “I’m no hero, Garrus. I just told the fleets when to shoot. Today belongs to everyone who showed up.” Leaning up, she kissed him again. “Thank you for finding me. I wasn’t ready.”

He wrapped an arm around her, long talons stroking slow, soft circles over her bruised and battered back. “Today I learned how you felt on Virmire when things went to hell. I don’t know how I’m going to live through that on a regular basis.”

She rested her head on his shoulder. “I know, but it has its upsides. Like now.” Her hand slipped around his neck, holding him close. “Besides, I don’t intend too many repeats of today.” Pulling back a bit, she looked around. “Or is it yesterday by now? How long have I been languishing in the doc’s care?”

“Languishing,” Chakwas repeated, the word vinegar tart. “You’d think I run some sort of internment camp.” She walked over to a cupboard and removed a sling. Helping Shepard strap her arm into it, the doctor looked up at Garrus who’d drawn back a couple of metres. “Make sure this stays on when she’s not in bed or the shower. And, no sparring or beating up on gym equipment for a couple of days.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Garrus replied, his mandibles giving a hard flick as he looked down at Shepard. “I have her well in hand.”

Shepard opened her mouth to protest, but the doctor sliced the air with a hand, cutting it off. “Out!” Chakwas commanded. “Get out before that battle begins.” Despite her words, she snagged Shepard’s hand when the captain slid down off the bed. “Thank you, Captain. You’ve done a remarkable thing.”

Shepard ducked her head in an embarrassed nod of thanks and made a break for the door. Outside medbay, it looked like the entire crew had assembled. She stopped dead. “I sense a trap.”

“Let’s hear it, people,” Ashley called. As one, they all snapped to attention, saluting. The chief led them as they hollered out. “Here’s to us. Whose like us?”

Shepard blinked back tears and swallowed hard as they waited for her to reply. She raised the blade of her hand to her brow. “Damn few, and they’re all dead.”

“Oorah!” the crew replied as one, snapping their salutes.

She finished her salute in answer. The earlier feeling of sorrow and dread crept back, allowing no room for victory, but she plastered a brave face over chilled, stiff reality. For them, she could
spend a few moments playing pretend. They needed the win to give them heart for the long years of waiting and preparation that lay ahead.

She stepped into Garrus’s side a little, needing that bulwark at her back. “Thank you. No captain could have asked for a crew with more courage or more heart. I’m honoured that you’ve stuck with me. You’ve all performed above and beyond the call since Eden Prime . . . and we did it. We stopped the Reapers, set their timetable back long enough to give the races a shot.”

Her smile warmed as she looked from Sparky to Wrex, Shiala, and even Pressly. They had given her everything, in some cases, their lives. “I know you’re tired, but don’t worry, as soon as we wrap things up here in the next couple of days, we’re heading for the biggest beach and most fantastic resort that we can find. Massages and suntans for all.” Answering their cheers with an eager nod as Garrus’s arm tightened around her, she said, “I’ll be taking suggestions . . .” Her hands jumped up, palms slamming back the torrent of destinations. “. . . but not until tomorrow.” She managed a genuine chuckle. “Right now, I’m going to bed. Good night, everyone, and thank you, again.” She stood at attention, giving them the crispest salute she could manage considering her crushed left side.

Spying Nihlus sitting at the top of the stairs up to the sleeper pods, she saw that she wasn’t the only one feeling the cost rather than the result. He’d lost everything fighting Sovereign. A stiletto-sharp ache lanced through her. Sometimes life just wasn’t fair or just . . . or kind. She swallowed the yearning and nudged Garrus, nodding toward the Spectre. “I’m going to . . .”

He glanced Nihlus’s direction then nodded. “Yeah, I’ll see you in there.” Garrus bent down to nuzzle her cheek, grumbling at the catcalls and whistling as he pulled away. “Whatever. Move along,” he groused good-naturedly. “There’s nothing to see here you bunch of gossiping old ladies.”

“Move along?” Kaidan laughed. “Flashing back to your time at C-Sec, Officer? Going to bring out the taser and tear gas?” He puffed himself up. “You have unlawfully witnessed me kiss my girlfriend, you’re coming down to headquarters . . . after resisting arrest.”

Garrus towered over the human. “Well, I don’t know, Lieutenant, are you about to cause a public disturbance?” After a second, Garrus laughed and then started herding the wounded officer toward crew quarters. “What are you doing out here rabble-rousing anyway? Aren’t you supposed to be in your rack?”

Shepard just shook her head at the grumbling about doctors that followed. Dr. Chakwas really did have a thankless job.

Wrex stopped Shepard on her way across the mess. “Shepard. Hell of a thing you pulled off.” He thumped one ham-sized fist into the other palm and let out a small roar. “Especially considering you didn’t take me along.” He buffeted her gently then cleared his throat. “Barla Von secured me a ride back to Tuchanka. It leaves tonight, so it looks like my vacation will be cracking heads back home.” His long, slow chuckle told her that he didn’t mind in the least.

She slapped the brave smile back up and nodded, but felt another piece of herself fall away. How many empty holes would it take before she went back to the woman who’d boarded the Normandy less than three months before? God, how she hated that thought. “I’m going to miss you, Wrex. You’ve been like that uncle that everyone at family reunions warns you about.” She leaned up and kissed his cheek. “Good luck, and keep in touch. We’ve got a lot of work ahead of us.”

He held out his hand, squeezing hers in a bone-crushing grip when she took it. “I hate goodbyes, so I’ll see you later, Shepard. Thank you. The krogan might just have a future because of you.”
“Because of you, Wrex.” A genuine smile warmed her face, her head tipping toward her shoulder again. “I just gave you a lift.” She nodded toward the elevator. “Let me know when you’re ready to show me around Tuchanka. I hear it’s the must see destination on the bombed, radioactive wasteland tour.” She gave him a companionable shove. “See you soon.” She bit down on her lip and took long breaths as she watched Wrex walk over to say goodbye to Ash and Garrus.

Nihlus remained sitting at the top of the stairs, those emerald eyes watching her with a stare of almost palpable misery. The mess had all but cleared out as she hobbled up the stairs, holding her hand out as she neared the top.

“Help an old lady out, son?” She squeezed his fingers as he helped her up the last few, steadying her as she turned and lowered herself next to him. Letting out a heavy sigh of pain, she slouched into his side. “Hey.”

“Hey.” He released her hand and wrapped a careful arm around her waist. “How are you feeling?”

She took an inventory and shrugged. “Not too much pain, actually. I give her a hard time, but the doc always pieces me back together pretty well. How about you? Did you come through without being bent, broken, or spindled?” Leaning into his side, she let the sadness and the dread loose. They should be relieved. They should feel . . . maybe some pride . . . in one another and themselves. Relief would also be appropriate. They’d bought the galaxy time to prepare. Vindication also seemed like something she should be feeling. Everything they’d said from beginning had been proven true. So . . . why the dragging weight?

“You feel it too?” he asked, after a couple of seconds. He looked over at her then jumped up and held out his hand. “Can we do this somewhere the entire galaxy isn’t watching?” The pleading in his eyes set off her cruelty alarm.

“No.” She took his hand, tugging gently. “Sit back down, I can’t pull on you.” When he did as she asked, she laced her fingers with his talons. “Nihlus, we’re both mourning, and they’re both mourning. It would be a huge mistake for us to be alone. I don’t want to do and say things that are going to hurt you.” She bumped him with her shoulder and blinked back the stinging glassiness in her eyes. “And I’d have to. You know I’d have to.”

She shoved all the different longings from different sources back behind the wall and slammed the door, chaining it tight. “We can talk tomorrow after we’ve had a chance to sleep, and let the wounds scab over a bit.” Turning to face him, she kissed his cheek. “I’m sorry about Saren, Nihlus. All of it. You deserved so much better, but he came through for you in the end.” She squeezed his hand. “Thank you for being there with me through all this.” A sad tightening of her lips answered the faint ache that squeezed her heart. “We’re a team, right? Partners.”

He nodded and turned into her, drawing her into an awkward, careful hug. “Partners.” He stood and then reached back to help her up. “Until this is all done, one way or another.”

She smiled, the first easy one, as she braced herself, holding her left side as still as possible and levered her way up. “It’s a deal. Sleep well, we’ve got to deal with the council in the morning.”

“Yes, that should be . . .” He shrugged. “Interesting?”

Shepard leaned on his arm as he helped her down the stairs. “Sure, let’s call it that.” At the bottom, she drew away from his arm, stepping toward her door. “Goodnight, Nihlus. See you in the morning.”

“Keep that on,” Garrus said, growling softly as she walked in the door to her quarters.
Shepard stopped trying to wriggle out of the sling holding her arm tight against her body, and let out a long, dramatic sigh. “Fine, doctor’s pet.” She put on her best pout, but it broke when he laughed and shook his head.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he held out his arms. “Don’t worry. I’ll look after you.” When she took his hand, he pulled her in and wrapped his arms around her. He turned his face into the curve of her neck, his breath warm as it tickled the fine hairs on her skin.

Shepard grinned and sat on his thigh. “You’ll tuck me in and read to me?” Slipping her good arm around him, she leaned into his side, resting her head on his shoulder.

“Let me finish getting dressed—put some padding between you and my plates—and that’s what we’ll do.” Lifting his head, he pressed his mouth against hers, nuzzling her lips softly.

“No.” Shepard pulled away and ran the flat of her hand along the smooth surface of a chest plate. “I don’t need it. I don’t want anything between us.” She kissed him then pulled back to look into his eyes. She really did want to feel him against her skin, to feel his warmth without the safety fence between them. “Is that okay?”

Reaching up, he slipped off his visor and tossed it behind them on the bed. When she lifted her hand to caress the brow plate that remained perpetually hidden behind the visor, he closed his eyes and leaned into her hand. “You know it’s more than okay, Kahri.” He wrapped his arms around her, almost cradling her in their length. “I’m looking forward to taking a couple of days and spending a little time without the entire galaxy listening at the door.”

Letting her body melt into his strength, Shepard nodded. “Yeah. We’re going to have a long road. Give everyone a week shore leave . . . give them a chance to decompress.” Smiling, she brushed his mandible with a chaste kiss. “Give us a chance to decompress.”

“Um, Shepard?” His hand slipped under her sling to rub her back. “I sort of promised my mother and sister that I’d go back to Palaven for a few days to see them.” He ducked his head, his mandibles fluttering. “I told them I had someone I wanted them to meet.”

Shepard pressed her lips together in a deep, considering frown and nodded. “I’m sure Nihlus would love to meet your family.” She squawked as he nipped her neck, laughing at the low growl that accompanied it. After a few seconds of yelping and kicking as he nuzzled his way down her throat, she pulled back and looked into his eyes, affection bleeding through . . . oh hell, who was she kidding . . . love bleeding through the stare. “Well, I suppose we can ditch the Normandy for a few days. I think we’ve earned it.”

He held the stare, barely moving as he nodded. “Okay.” He rubbed her back. “Thank you, Shepard.”

“Oh, course.” Shepard swallowed a sudden tightness in her throat. “It’ll be fun.” She pulled in a quick, deep breath that she immediately regretted as her left side complained. Jumping up before he could see through her, she said, “Let’s get into bed. I feel like it’s been half a lifetime since I got a decent night’s sleep.” She stood, ducking out of her sling and folding it on her way to the closet for her t-shirt and shorts.

Pulling out her standard nighttime uniform, she stared at it for one of the longest minutes of her life, an entire troop of fire-breathing elcor acrobats tumbling around in her guts. After a second, she put the t-shirt back. She’d meant it when she didn’t want anything between them.

That day, she’d faced down a gigantic metal monster, taken out a rogue cybernetic Spectre, and
staved off the destruction of an entire galaxy. Surely, she could find the courage to crawl under the blankets next to the most remarkable male in the galaxy and feel the warmth of his plates against her skin.

Behind her, she heard him rustling around with the blankets, cursing the hard mattress under his breath as he did every time. She chuckled and changed quickly. Standing there, facing her closet, she struggled to keep herself from clapping her arms over her chest. He’d seen her breasts before. Granted, they had been somewhat distracted at the time. Turians didn’t even eroticize breasts . . . well, except maybe asari ones. Still, she didn’t want to open the door a crack just to slap a barrier over it.

She turned around and chuckled. She needn’t have worried about it. He lay there, his elbow over his eyes. “Garrus?” She looked down, a wide smile brightening her face.

“Mm?”

“What are you doing?” She leaned down and swatted the knee that he’d drawn up. “Look at me.” When he still didn’t remove his arm, she sat next to him and lifted her leg onto the mattress so she could face him. “Come on, Garrus. Look at me.” She reached out and placed a hand on his hip. “Please.”

So slowly that he might as well have been in slow motion, he lowered his arm and opened his eyes, staring straight into hers.

“Better.” She smiled down at him, reaching out her good hand. When he took it, his talons lacing into her fingers like a man clinging to a life preserver in heavy seas, the tempest raging inside her belly stilled. “You’re nervous?” she asked, her smile softening. Tenderness eased all the tension and even the pain, probably because she stopped holding herself mech stiff.

His mandibles dropped as he nodded. “Of course I am. I told you, Shepard. I worked. All the time. The guys at work gave me a plaque for the most women scared off.”

Shepard choked on a laugh. “Sweet baby Jesus, Garrus.” She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed the backs of his talons. “Those women don’t have a clue what they’re missing, and praise the Enkindlers that they don’t. I’d really hate to be forced to kill them.” She took a deep breath and untangled her fingers from his, turning his hand to press the palm against her stomach. “I might be about the most terrified woman in recorded galactic history, Garrus, but never of you.”

He sat up, bending to kiss her, pulling her in gently. After a second, he drew back and looked down. “Spirits, Shepard.” He chuckled and reached up to trace the pad of a talon over the mottled mass of bruises covering her left side. “You’re a mess.” Meeting and holding her eye contact for as long as he could, he bent to nuzzle the bruises on her shoulder and arm.

“Yeah, a presidium fell on me.” She grinned when he scoffed.

“A small platform and parts of a Reaper artifact. Hardly the entire Presidium.” Gentle talons combed through her hair. “Come on, get into bed.” He laid down on his side and reached over to pick up the book.

Shepard curled in next to him. “Do the voices.” She propped herself up on enough pillows to stop her shoulder from complaining and laid her head in the curve of his shoulder.

He sighed and grumbled, but she could hear the smile in his voice. “I don’t want to do the voices. Just be quiet and listen.”
“Come on, you’ve got to do the voices.” She thumped him in the side with her elbow. “Don’t be such a poop.” Chuckling, she burrowed in tight, turning to kiss him as his large, warm hand slipped around her to lay over her ribs.

“I’m not going to entertain everyone in the mess with stupid voices.” He kissed her brow and cradled her deeper in his arm. “Behave and shush.” Reaching over her, he rifled through the pages. “Where were we?”

Shepard closed her eyes to listen, his warm, rumbling tone wrapping her in a thick blanket of safety and love. She drifted, wanting to cling to the moment, to savour what the past few days had made her realize could be their last time together, but her body insisted.

His thumb caressed the hollow between her ribs, talon moving slow and gentle. “I’m falling asleep,” he whispered, his voice low and heavy on the subvocals as his reading faltered for the second or third time.

She sighed, her words chasing it out. “Me too.” Wriggling in closer, she kissed his mandible.

“Get any tighter in, you’re going to be on the inside of my plates.” He chuckled.

“I’m okay with that.” Just before she drifted off, she forced her eyes open. “Garrus?”

“Mm?” He turned his face to nuzzle her hair.

Suddenly, panic pricked her, a faint nettle sting against the heaviness of sleep. She could have died that day, and he’d never have known so many things... the most important being... “I have a baby sister. The batarians took her. If anything happens to me, promise me you won’t let Anderson stop looking for her.” She yawned. “And Martin. Someone has to look out for that kid. He’s trouble.”

He took a long, sharp breath, the air stirring her hair. “I promise.” He rolled over, his arms gathering her in against him. Pulling the blankets up around her neck, he nuzzled her brow. “I’ll look after Martin if it comes to that. Go to sleep. I’ve got you.”

She nodded. “Thank you.” The words came out slow and barely audible as she finally gave in and let sleep drag her out to sea.

Chapter End Notes

This was supposed to be the last chapter of the first act, but of course... in true Kim style, I just kept writing and writing. So this is the second last chapter of the first act. The last one will be out tomorrow. LOL I am so bad, but I love spending time with these crazy kids.
Mass Effect - Future Imperfect Chapter Sixty Four

Chapter Summary

Saying goodbye to those lost on Virmire, then off to meet the Council. (Yes, it's a long one.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shepard awoke so stiff that for a moment, her eyeballs were the only body part she could convince to move. Lifting her head from her pillow, she let out a groan that earned her a chuckle from the table.

“Feeling tough?” Garrus asked.

She closed her eyes, hearing him stand and walk over. The mattress lowered under his weight. “I feel like the presidium fell on me.” Grinning, she opened her eyes as his hand slipped over her hip to wrap around her uninjured side. Meeting his ice-blue gaze, the smile softened. “Help me up?”

Sliding both hands under her shoulders, he eased her up into a gentle hug, nuzzling her jaw and ear. “Definitely.”

“Oh I see.” She laughed but wrapped her arm around him and kissed his mandible. “Taking advantage of the poor, wounded girlfriend.” Closing her eyes again, she laid her head on his shoulder.

“Definitely.” One hand slid up her back, slowly as if he was savouring the feel of her skin, which immediately lifted into gooseflesh. He chuckled. “Why does it do that?”

She leaned into him, her hand stroking his neck along the line of plates. “Lots of reasons. Cold, being tickled . . . but with you, it’s because my body likes your touch.”

His talons brushed down her spine, the sharp points just barely grazing her skin as they caressed the long sweep of vertebrae. “That’s a very good thing, because I could do this all day.”

She rubbed her cheek against the smooth, flat layers of muscle covering the ball of his shoulder. “What time is it? I could check, but I like it here. I don’t want to move.”

“0730. I made you some breakfast. It’s just peanut butter toast and hot chocolate, but I figured with the service and council meeting looming, you wouldn’t want anything more until after.” He pulled back and brushed a talon against her cheek. “Do you want to shower?”

After a moment, she shook her head. The troupe of acrobats were back and cracking the whip, insisting that she get moving and keep moving. A shower could wait until after she got back. “I’d better just get up and get dressed then run across and see the doc for a few minutes. You know how she likes to shrink my head when it starts getting too big.” She gave him a gentle kick. “Let me out and then you can help me get into my dress uniform.”

Forty minutes later, Shepard stepped out of the elevator into the cargo bay. It appeared to be
Shepard watched the chief work for a few moments. They hadn’t spoken since their confrontation after Jenkins’s death. As much as she believed every word she’d said, the way she’d said it burned in her chest like scarfing down too many hot wings on ‘I Believe I can Fly’ all-you-can-eat wing night at the Arcturus Cantina.

Ash had been through a lot, both that day and in her life, and the last thing she’d needed was her CO jumping down her throat. A sad sort of tightening around Shepard’s lips accompanied the memory of their first chat when Ashley came aboard the Normandy after Eden Prime. She’d jumped down Ash’s throat then too.

“Captain? You okay?”

Shepard focused on the chief. “Hey, Ash. Yeah, sorry, zoned out there for a minute. Was just thinking about your first day aboard. I snapped at you for calling Nihlus a bird.” She walked toward the armoury. “And, I was thinking about what I said to you after Jenkins died.” Stopping at the last locker, she turned her back to it and leaned. “I—”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about that too, ma’am, and I wanted to thank you.” The hardened angles of Ash’s pretty, stern face softened a little into a smile. “Jenkins died for the whole team. Human, turian, krogan, quarian . . . he didn’t care. He was a great kid who cared about everyone. He didn’t hate Legion because the geth attacked Eden Prime. He didn’t hate Nihlus and Garrus because Saren was also a turian. We were his people. All of us.” She turned back to her bench, picking up a rag to wipe absently at the gun oil stains.

Shepard nodded, a short, soft sigh whispering from her nose. “He was a remarkable kid.”

“You were right both times you barked at me, Skipper. I came aboard with a pile of attitude and prejudice. I always placed the blame for not getting ahead on my grandfather, but I own that.” She set down the rag and straightened the rifles, making sure they all sat parallel to one another. “You showed me that. You gave me a chance to prove to myself that the only thing holding me back was me. No one is going to promote or give the best postings to a soldier who walks around lashing out like I was.”

Shepard smiled and nodded, just a faint bounce of her head. “We’re all our own worst enemies, Ash. I know. I’m the self—and career—destruction poster girl. You don’t want to end up where I am.”

“I could do a hell of a lot worse,” Ash said, her voice snapping like static along a power line. She spun to face Shepard. “What’s so wrong with where you are, ma’am?” She threw up her hands, stabbing them out toward the hull. “Captain of the best ship in the fleet, head of the best crew.” A scowl drew her face in tight again. “And don’t you dare try to tell me it’s because of political BS or because Anderson and Hackett are your friends. It’s bloody well because they know that if they need the job done, you’re the one to call.” Ash blushed a light red and looked away, the fire spent. “Sorry, Skipper . . . you just . . . you sell yourself short, and we all know better.”

Shepard straightened, shifting to lean on one hip, feeling incredibly touched at the chief’s outburst. She’d never thought of herself as a role model, certainly not one a career-minded soldier like Williams would want to emulate. Too many mistakes. Too many wrong moves and missed opportunities. Too many dead. But what Ash said was true. She’d been put into a position of remarkable trust. She must have done something right, somewhere along the line. As much as Udina railed against her, the Alliance didn’t make a habit out of putting massive screw ups in charge of major missions.
“Anyway, ma’am.” Ashley went back to setting her already impeccable work space to order. “I’ve decided to honour Jenkins and this crew by infiltrating Cerberus. They’re a galactic wild card and a dangerous one if that tech is any indication. We need people on the inside.”

Admiration and affection swelled inside Shepard’s chest until she thought she might explode out of the sling. Sweet baby Jesus, they didn’t come braver than her crew. “I think that sounds like a great plan, Ash. We’ll take our time and find you a solid way in.”

The elevator opened, drawing her attention. Anderson and Admiral Hackett stepped out along with Nihlus and Garrus. She turned back to Ashley, reaching up to lay her hand on the chief’s shoulder. “And we’ll be there for you, every minute. My standing orders for all of you ruffians are: wherever you are, whatever you’re doing, you’re still my crew. You call, I’ll be there. No matter what. Understood?”

Ash nodded. “You bet, Skipper.” She raised a hand, gesturing toward the growing crowd. “But for now, I guess we have other business.”

Shepard released a long breath and nodded. “Yeah.” She allowed her shoulders to drop for a second and closed her eyes, letting the sorrow wash through her and away. Maybe, while she was on the Citadel—if she didn’t end up in stocks having rotten vegetables tossed at her—she’d see about picking up a meditation pond. Being able to literally and metaphorically wash the stresses and emotional turmoils away had saved Tashac in the end. Well . . . meditation and Merol.

Shepard opened her eyes and squared her shoulders, picking up the burden and settling it as comfortably as possible, then headed over to the others. She grinned at the expression on Anderson’s face when Garrus intercepted her, his arm sliding naturally around her waist. There was a chat waiting to happen. Oh well. Dads had to be dads, even self-appointed ones. She gave Garrus a wink and stepped out of his embrace. Official work to be done.

“Good morning, Admiral,” she said, greeting Hackett with a wide smile. “Nicely done bringing that thing down, sir.” She shook his hand. “Everything came together like a well-oiled machine.”

He nodded. “It did, but I can hardly take the credit for that.” His expression remained serious. “The base on Ilos is gone.” She saw genuine regret as he shook his head. “The things we could have learned from that place . . .”

“Yes, sir, but I’m pretty sure there is more to discover out there. The Protheans were fiercely dedicated to making sure that the younger races were ready and able to take on the Reapers.” She glanced over at Nihlus, wondering if he felt the same pull toward Thessia that she did. Something about the way Tashac had looked up at the mountain that last day told her that it would be worth trying to find where she and Merol had lived.

“So, the rachni queen helped you decipher the information from the beacons?” Hackett asked, shooting a dubious glance over at the queen, who’d just emerged from her corner. He shook his head. “This is all insane, you realize that, Shepard? I should be sending you to Arcturus for a mandatory psych eval.”

Oddly, for the first time in thirteen years that threat caused no fear whatsoever. A small smile tweaked the corner of her mouth. “If you think it’s warranted, sir, absolutely. They’ll tell you the same thing they’ve always told you, however.”

“Batnuts,” Kaidan said from the elevator.

“Completely mad,” Nihlus’s rumble overlapped Sparky’s voice.
“Should never be allowed to operate large machinery,” Garrus added.

“Oh, definitely,” Ashley replied, nodding sagely as she tapped a finger against her chin. “That’s a good one.”

Shepard just waved them away. “Go find somewhere to stand, ungrateful ruffians.” When they moved off, she looked back to Hackett. “I wish it was all crazy, sir. I wish I was crazy, but you’ve seen the evidence. You were right there at the forefront of the battle. You know Sovereign wasn’t just some geth dreadnought.” She held her hand out to usher the captain and admiral to stand at the head of the growing crowd of crew and team members. “We have a hell of a fight coming yet.”

Hackett stared at her, silent and thoughtful, for almost a minute then nodded. Shepard wished she knew what that nod meant, but she trusted the years that she and Hackett had known one another. She trusted his gut and his sense of duty. He’d come through and then help bring the Alliance on board. Eventually.

Five minutes later, the crew stood in neat lines at parade rest, their turn out impeccable. Not that Shepard had expected anything less. She stepped up onto a low crate, meeting each set of eyes that stared back at her. Now, with the lull in the storm, she’d have time to get to know the stories behind each one. That, she very much looked forward to.

She cleared her throat, easing the tightness. “Richard Jenkins was one of the first people I spoke to when I came aboard the Normandy. He tickled me with his eagerness to serve. He worried me with his lust for high adventure. Then he impressed me with his ability and level-headedness under fire. A fine soldier, and a bright kid, he would have no doubt gone on to have an impressive career.”

She ran the inside of her top lip through her teeth. “But Richard was more than a good soldier, he was a remarkable young man, brimming with good humour, kindness, loyalty, and courage. No one on this ship went a week without him saying or doing something to brighten their day. Because Richard’s courage and dedication to this crew, three friends stand here with us today.” She looked past her crew to where the salarian captain, Kirrahe, stood, still bandaged and leaning awkwardly from pain. “Thank you for your selfless heroism, you extraordinary young man.” She swallowed hard, trying to block out the letter she’d written to his parents earlier. Even though she could feel Garrus’s eyes on her, she didn’t look over to meet that stare. Instead, she pressed her eyes closed.

“I’ll miss the hell out of you, kid.”

Shepard stretched her shoulders back, her spine making a cricket chirping sound as she steadied the weight balanced there. “Harvey Gladstone prided himself on never being caught without a prank or bad joke . . . or two, but under the groans, we always smiled. Well, except for the dish soap in the coffee incident. He should have known better than to mess with the coffee, but it was good to discover that the lower part of the refrigerator unit can be used a stand-by brig if need be. And that it can take more than twenty minutes for someone to hear you pounding to be let out.” Pressing her lips together in a smile that felt more grim than amused, Shepard acknowledged the crew’s soft chuckles. “Still, when it came down to a fight, you couldn’t ask for a more solid or capable soldier. I sent him with the non-combatants, a trust I knew he would not betray, and he got them through. Every one.”

The shades of the dead weighed more heavily every second. If she’d been paying attention, if she hadn’t been so intent on . . . No, she didn’t get to beat herself with that flail any longer. Self-pity was a luxury for other people to indulge in, just as she’d told Ashley. She needed to let the dead rest. They didn’t want her guilt. Believing that she could have somehow saved them . . . it was arrogance. She smiled, a thin expression of understanding. It was arrogance, and it diminished them. Taking a deep breath, she shrugged off the weight.
“Abishek Pakti,” she continued, “didn’t miss a single ground mission after Eden Prime. There was no such thing in his strict creed as too injured or too tired. He was one of the most dedicated and solemnly vigilant Marines I’ve ever met.” She eased into parade rest, her good hand held loosely behind her. “When I asked the Alliance about his family, wanting to send a letter to his parents or wife, the clerk told me that all of his recent information listed the units he served in under family, emergency contacts, next of kin. We were his family, and he demonstrated his devotion to that ideal by fighting for us to his very last breath.”

She hadn’t known the last Marine very well, a mistake she didn’t intend to make with her remaining crew. “When I cleaned out Isabelle Turner’s locker, I opened the door and just stared for the longest time. Frankly, what I saw was harder to believe than the Reaper threat.” She smiled at the chuckles. “Ah yes, you few have seen what she kept hidden away in there. Tiny, ancient stuffed toys full of beans. As I boxed up over seventy of them, I couldn’t understand why one of my Marines had brought so many useless items along on a mission.” As she remembered the last thing she’d taken out of the locker, her throat tightened forcing her to clear it.

“Then I found a framed picture of two little girls . . . twins. One in a hospital bed, surrounded by those same silly stuffed animals. When I did the research to send a letter to her parents, I discovered that Isabelle Turner was an identical twin, but her sister had died when they were ten.” She blinked back tears. “Her mother said that Isabelle was never quite the same, as if half of her had died with her sister, but now they would be together and whole again. It seems a fitting and beautiful reward for a young person who dedicated her life to defending and protecting families from a cold and dangerous galaxy.”

She stretched her neck a little. “I’m honoured to captain a crew so dedicated to each other and the mission, a crew with such tremendous heart and courage, so willing to sacrifice. We all know what comes along with the life of a soldier: the long stretches away from loved ones, the loneliness, the unforgiving hours, the physical rigours, and the specter that hangs over us all. It’s a life that can wear us down, make us thin and easy to tear apart, but the camaraderie of our fellow soldiers, knowing that we stand shoulder to shoulder with extraordinary men and women makes it bearable. It makes it an unbelievably rewarding life.”

She nodded. “Today we say goodbye to four friends, but even more than that, we say thank you. Thank you for the gifts given during their lives, and the gifts given in death. It is a sacrifice that I intend to honour every moment.” She stood at attention and raised the blade of her hand to her brow. “The Lays of Ancient Rome said it best. ‘Then out spake brave Horatius, the Captain of the Gate: To every man upon this earth, death cometh soon or late. And how can a man die better than facing fearful odds, for the ashes of his fathers, and the temples of his Gods.’” She glanced over at Admiral Hackett, holding her salute.

Admiral Hackett took one step forward. “From the stars our bodies are formed; to the stars we return. From the infinite our souls are born; to the infinite we commend the souls of Richard Jenkins, Harvey Gladstone, Abishek Pakti, and Isabelle Turner and ask that they be granted rest.”

Shepard snapped her salute, the rest of the crew following suit. She cleared her throat, feeling the sadness lift. The dead had their peace and hopefully a new home in a better place. “Dismissed.”

She accepted Anderson’s hand to help her down off the crate, giving it an affectionate squeeze before she released him. Checking her chrono, she saw that they had about two hours to make it to their meeting with the council. Enough time to stop by Dr. Michel’s clinic and get new implants.

“I’ve got a little shopping to do before I meet with the council,” she told the small group of people who gathered. “Anyone have the burning desire to shop for aural implants and personal products?”
Nihlus sighed. “Can’t say I have a burning desire to watch you pick out toothpaste and soap, but since we are heading to the same location, and none of us should go anywhere alone, I’ll suffer through it.”

Shepard clapped her hand over her heart. “Your sacrifice is duly noted, Spectre Kryik.” She sniffed and aped wiping a tear. “So touching.”

“I’ll come along as well,” Ashley said. “I could use toothpaste that doesn’t feel like 180 grit sandpaper in my mouth, and a few other things that the military has had over a hundred years to get right and still hasn’t.” She smiled. “I’ll grab a shower, change and meet you at Dr. Michel’s.” She hurried to the elevator.

Shepard looked up into Garrus’s face as he stepped beside her. His mandibles fluttered in a soft, almost secretive smile. “I have an appointment at C-Sec, so I won’t be joining you until later.”

Shepard frowned. “You going back to work?” Her heart dropped at the thought of that. She’d come to rely on his constant, steady presence at her back. He was a piece of her that she hadn’t considered losing once Sovereign and Saren went down. Shepard and Vakarian . . . she’d just assumed they’d become an unstoppable unit.

But then he shook his head. “I’ve found a new job.” Rolling his eyes, he let out a long-suffering sigh and shook his head. “The pay sucks. I mean really, really sucks, but it’s good work, and I get along pretty well with my co-workers. I figured now that my contract was up, I’d see about applying for a permanent position, but that means quitting my old job.”

Shepard slipped her hand into his, a tsunami of relief and gratitude washing over her to leave her feeling dizzy and a little stupid. Of course he wasn’t leaving her. Garrus was far too good a torin and too loyal a companion to abandon her. She squeezed his talons before letting go. She screwed her face up into a dubious, considering scowl. “I know the boss and she’s . . . well, she’s a bit of a pill, but I could maybe talk to her about the really, really sucky pay.”

He held up his hands in a defeated sort of gesture. “Good luck, but dealing with that woman . . . I won’t hold my breath.” Grinning, he backed away. “Time for a tactical retreat, I think.”

Shepard aimed a kick at his backside as he strode away.

Hackett approached her. “I need to get back to the fleet, we’re still running S&R on the ships Sovereign carved up. The council wants me at your meeting later, so I’ll see you before we head back to Arcturus.” He held out his hand. “Whatever I might think of Reapers, you’ve done a hell of a job here, Shepard. When you have your ducks in a row for a planning conference, let me know. I’ll be there.”

She shook his hand. “Thank you, sir.” When he brushed past, she glanced over to where Kirrahe and Rentola stood talking in low voices. “I’ll be right back. I want to see how the STG are faring.” She spotted Kaidan and beckoned him over. “Hey, Sparky, how are you feeling?”

He nodded, but she could still hear a lot of rattling when he breathed. “I’m okay, Shepard. Be back to normal in a couple of days.”

She squeezed his shoulder. “Don’t rush things. All we’ve got for the next week or so is vacation. Rest up.” Nodding toward the salarians, she asked, “Can you take care of making sure the STG gets where they need to go. If you call Barla Von, he’ll be able to secure transport for them if they want to keep a low profile. We just might need to bug out of here in a hurry if the council meeting doesn’t go well, and I’m not sure they want to become fugitives.”
Alenko nodded. “Sure. I’ll get them squared away this afternoon. The doc might want to send those two to a clinic for a couple of days, so I’ll check with her first.”

“Good man.” Giving him a tight-lipped smile, she stepped past him.

“Captain Shepard,” Kirrahe greeted as she stepped up to them. “Thank you for your hospitality, although had I known about the geth, rachni, and krogan, I may have gone ahead with the council’s kill order.”

A humourless, gallows smile cut across her face. It felt like a wound. “That would have been unfortunate, because even now Reapers would be killing or enslaving everyone on the Citadel before spreading out from there.” She studied his expression, praying that he wouldn’t prove to be a liability after all.

The salarian shuddered. “I saw that thing myself and can’t believe it existed let alone that it’s one of thousands. That the council, and possibly even the dalatrasses, would be involved in aiding those abominations . . ..” He shook his head. “Once my people have healed, you may be assured that we’ll investigate this fully, Captain. Anything we learn about these Reapers will be passed along to you.”

Shepard held out her hand, waiting patiently as he seemed to debate the wisdom of so friendly a gesture. In the end, he gripped her fingers for a moment then pulled back. “I have Lt. Alenko seeing that you have covert transport anywhere you need to go once the doctor clears you. Thank you for your assistance, Captain.” She looked to Rentola. “And you, as well, Commander. You saved my life.” She backed away a couple of steps. “Take care, gentlemen. I hope with the STG’s formidable intelligence capabilities, we can save a lot of lives.”

“We shall see, Captain Shepard. We shall see.” Kirrahe herded Rentola toward the elevator.

Shepard grinned and shook her head. She hoped that Kirrahe’s investigation convinced him to help prepare. The STG were unparalleled at intel gathering and espionage, and she suspected that the salarian approach to war, while not considered entirely correct by Alliance standards, would serve them well fighting Reapers. She waited until the elevator had time to take the salarians to the crew deck, then headed over and palmed the control.

Anderson stepped up beside her as the doors opened. “Mind if I hitch with you? Udina wants me at your meeting with the council.” He winked at her. “Hell of a job pulling all this together, kid. Can I buy you some dinner, maybe a chocolate milkshake?”

Shepard grinned and slipped her hand through his elbow. “Absolutely, so long as you don’t mind me bringing my boyfriend along.” Her grin widened at his sigh then faded. “Well, providing we aren’t on the run from the council by dinner time.”

An hour later, the small group of Normandy personnel made their way toward the lower market in the wards, just chatting about stupid things, relaxing before the inevitable doom of the council.

“Captain Shepard!” an eager, young female voice called across the common area.

Shepard stopped and looked, seeing a hand waving above the crowd of C-Sec and civilians. Some of the C-Sec officers turned to look at her as if they recognized her name, but then moved on. She smiled, proud of herself for the way she’d arranged things. Anderson would be the hero of the attack on the Citadel. Well, he and Garrus’s father. Hackett would be the hero in the skies along with the geth and quarians. And she could continue to spin the webs in relative obscurity from Omega, overseeing it all while avoiding public recognition.
A pretty, black-haired young woman hurried over, her hand still waving above the crowd as if afraid Shepard would forget her and move on. “Captain Shepard!”


His laugh came out deep and throaty. “You’re telling me.”

“Don’t make me kick you in public.” She looked back to the young woman as she stopped, chest heaving from the run. “Hello. What can I do for you, Miss . . .?”

“Emily Wong. I’m a reporter.” She wrung her hands a little, as if expecting a less than welcoming reception when it came to that revelation, but she soldiered on. “My sources say that you were up on the Presidium directing the fleets working to take down that ship. I can’t get any information from anyone on what the ship was or what race it belonged to.” She shrugged. “I saw krogan all over the Citadel fighting against C-Sec and Alliance soldiers. Was it krogan? Can you help me out? I—”

Shepard cut her off with a raised hand. “Whoa, slow down a little. Yes, I know what that ship was and who it belonged to, but it’s a very long story, and one I’m not sure your publishers will care for.” She activated her omnitool. “I’ll send you my information so that you can contact me in a week or so. I’ll let you decide whether it’s a story you want to tell then, okay?”

The reporter grinned, practically bouncing on the spot. “Thank you, Captain. I’ll be in touch.”

“You’re welcome, but wait on the thanks. I’m not doing you any favours inviting you into this mess.” She held out her hand. “Pleasure to meet you, Miss Wong.”

The handshake just about popped Shepard’s elbow. “And you.”

Shepard sighed, watching the reporter dash off. “Ah the eagerness and folly of youth.”

Nihlus shook his head. “I don’t know, Shepard. A kid like that, she’ll get herself killed if she believes our story.” He shrugged and turned back toward the markets. “Or get herself laughed out of the profession.”

“She could, or with a little wisdom and discretion, start seeding the idea of a threat in people’s minds.” Shepard shrugged and began weaving through the crowd. “I don’t intend to dump the information on her and walk away, Nihlus.” She scowled up at him. “You know I don’t spend lives cheaply.” Stopping, she looked around. “Is it just me, or is this place insanely crowded today? Don’t people know that the Citadel was attacked yesterday?”

“People are out precisely because it was attacked yesterday,” an accented, male voice said from a couple of feet away. “Did I hear correctly? You’re Captain Shepard? Is that Jane Shepard, hero of Elysium?”

She crossed her good arm over her sling. “Who’s asking?”

He closed on her fast, his hand coming out in the single, smooth motion that only politicians and car salesmen knew. “The names Charles Saracino of the Terra Firma party. It is an honour to meet you, Captain.”

Shepard pulled her hand back and wiped it on her trousers. “I can’t say the same.” She jutted her chin out toward the crowd. “You’ve brought these people out here? Why? They should be at home letting C-Sec and maintenance get things put back together.”
“I’m sure you’re aware that Armistace Day is coming up, and with the attack yesterday . . . krogan killing humans in the street . . . Alliance soldiers dying to help protect aliens . . . well, it seemed like a good day to come out and get our voices heard by the alien appeasers on the Citadel. The First Contact War taught humanity a lesson that some might forget. Yesterday just drove that lesson home, Captain. If humanity doesn’t stand up for itself, no one else will.”

Shepard laughed, hard and angry. “You’re saying that in front of a turian council Spectre who was up there fighting at my side. Geth and quarians helped the Alliance and Citadel fleets bring Sovereign down.” She shook her head and waved him off. “Go spout your nonsense somewhere else. I’ll just pray you don’t get a seat in Alliance parliament.”

Ashley stepped forward. “He’s got a point, Captain. I mean, would we even be here if Saren hadn’t attacked Eden Prime? Everything we’ve been through the last few months, it’s because of aliens thinking they have the right to govern how the rest of us live.” She grumbled and shrugged. “Or even if the rest of us live.”

“And who might you be?” Saracino asked, holding his hand and a leaflet out to Ash.

“Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams.” She shook his hand and took the paper. “I was on Eden Prime when Saren attacked it. Watched my squad and a lot of good, innocent people gunned down.”

“Ash . . ..” Shepard stepped in between them. “This isn’t the time or place.” She nodded toward the doors into the market. “Let’s go.”

“Williams?” Saracino stepped around Shepard. “You wouldn’t be related . . .?”

“To General Williams, yes. His granddaughter.” Ash backed away, giving Saracino a little salute with the leaflet. “Have a good day.”

“And you, Chief. And you.”

Shepard could feel Sarcino’s eyes following them the rest of the way to the doors. His stare felt like eels inside her dress blues. “That was risky, Ash,” she whispered, giving the chief a worried scowl. “They’re a bunch of crazies.”

Ashley nodded. “Yes, ma’am, but I bet you anything Cerberus is hip deep in Terra Firma. It might just be a way in if I play hard enough to get.” She grinned and shrugged. “Never thought of myself as the covert type.”

“Just be careful. These guys aren’t playing.” Shepard herded her group through the market, feeling Nihlus’s eyes on her the whole time. His stare felt like the sun through a magnifying glass, and left her feeling as though she should be checking to make sure her uniform wasn’t on fire.

“Captain Shepard?”

Shepard stopped and looked around. “What is this? Does everyone know who I am?” She spotted a blonde fellow waving a paper. “Yes? You are?”

“Oh my god! It is you! I can’t believe it.” He ran over, stopping just short of mowing her down. Ash didn’t make out as well and Nihlus had to catch her and set her back on her feet. “Captain Shepard,” the fellow crowed. “Hero of Elysium and Eden Prime. They say you saved the Citadel yesterday.” He thrust a paper and pen at her. “My name’s Conrad Verner. Could I get your autograph?”

Shepard let out a braying laugh, but then let it die when she saw the intense, earnest expression on
his face. “Oh, you’re serious. Well, I’m glad to meet you, Conrad.” She shook his hand, but warded off the paper. “Autographs are for pop-stars and baseball players, not soldiers.” Patting him on the shoulder, she attempted to step past him, but he blocked the way.

“You’re even more beautiful in person. No one is going to believe that I met the Captain Shepard.” A wide, beatific grin spread across his face.

“Sure they will, everyone seems to be meeting me today. You take care of yourself, Conrad.” She managed to duck past him that time and ran down the stairs. “Good grief. If they start a Captain Shepard fan club, I quit. The Reapers can have the galaxy.” She glanced back at Anderson, shaking her head at his attempts to stow his grin. “Don’t you start, sir.”

Anderson just gave her his best innocent expression and shrugged as if he had no clue what she could possibly be talking about.

In the alley behind the wards, Shepard sent the others on their way and called a cab. “I’ve had enough of being grabbed and hollered at like a sideshow attraction for one day,” she grumbled, barely giving Nihlus time to get in before she slammed the top down.

They landed in the exact spot where she’d jumped up on the C-Sec car. “Ah, the memories,” she said and glanced back at Nihlus, grinning. She caught the glare Anderson shot her way, but it just made her cackle. “Aw, come on, sir. Like you aren’t used to my antics by now?” She popped the top of the car open. “You knew what I was doing the moment you saw that footage.”

Anderson got out, answering only with a shrug as he led the way. The council, Udina, and Hackett awaited them in the center of the bridge that spanned the lakes. It was a good choice for a meeting. The battle that had scarred the presidium metres away hadn’t touched the bridge and the breeze coming off the fountains in the lakes kept the reek of smoke to a minimum.

“Captain Shepard,” Tevos said, her voice as calm and gracious as ever, “Captain Anderson, Spectre Kryik.” She stood between Sparatus on her right and Valern on her left as she did in the chambers, and Shepard wondered if it became a conditioned response after time. The asari straightened, lining herself up with a halo of foliage and flowers from the balconies across the bridge. Shepard had to give her points for staging and presentation. At least if it was an execution, it was going to prove an impressive one.

Anderson and Nihlus nodded and murmured non-committal greetings. For her part, Shepard didn’t feel good about wishing anyone a good afternoon who might be sticking her in front of a firing squad within an hour. It wasn’t a hard and fast rule, more of a guideline, but it worked for her. The elcor acrobatic troupe in Shepard’s belly brought in a guest lion tamer and three performing elephants. She really hoped the council didn’t try to kill her. Things existed in her life that she wanted to see through.

“We are gathered here,” Tevos continued as if she hadn’t really expected them to say anything, “to recognize the enormous contribution of the Alliance in the battle against Sovereign and Saren’s forces.”

Shepard blinked a couple of times, her belly flopping as the elephants rolled around on giant balls, but then the councillor’s words made it through her preset panic over having Garrus and the Normandy snatched away from her. Glancing at Nihlus, she saw his mandibles and brow plates working as he struggled through to the same conclusion and looked at her. They were being thanked. Not prosecuted. Thanked. For a moment, Shepard thought she might faint dead away from dizziness, but managed to wrestle her relief under control. Everything she’d done . . . all the plans and safety nets . . . they’d actually worked. No. There had to be a trap waiting somewhere ahead.
She found herself holding her breath until that also threatened to make her pass out.

Valern drew her attention as he gave a soft little cough and then said, “Many humans lost their lives in the battle to save the Citadel, brave and courageous soldiers who gave their lives so that we, the Council, may live.” His tone sounded sincere, as if he actually regretted the loss of life on the Citadel’s behalf. She still didn’t trust it . . . couldn’t trust it. Sharp barbs of warning stabbed up and down her spine.

Sparatus gave a little nod and held her stare as he spoke, “There is no greater sacrifice, and we share your grief over the tragic loss of so many noble men and women.” His *familia notas* and bearing gave her the impression of an eagle poised, circling overhead waiting for her to try to run. When she straightened in response, his mandibles fluttered ever so slightly. A smile? From Sparatus? Maybe she had died under the rubble after the Conduit blew.

Tevos’s hands returned to fidget ever so slightly for a moment, before she dropped them back to her sides. “Spectre Kryik, Captain Shepard, the council also owes you both a great, personal debt. One we can never repay.” She ducked her head in a conciliatory manner that came across embarrassed, as if she had seen the error of their ways. Maybe Sovereign’s death had taken the whammy off them. “You saved not just our lives, or the lives of the people on this station, but billions of lives from Sovereign and the Reapers.”

Shepard felt Nihlus burning a hole through the side of her head with that stare of his, but didn’t dare take her eyes off the council. If it wouldn’t have caused everyone to look at her strangely, she would have pinched herself. It had to be a dream.

Valern was speaking again. Something about heroic and selfless actions. “. . . serve as a symbol of everything that humanity and the Alliance stand for.”

Reality started to settle in a little, the dizzy fog dissipating in the bright, fake sunlight.

Sparatus took over, the little play acted out seamlessly as if they’d practiced it beforehand. “Though we cannot bring back those valiant soldiers who gave their lives to save ours, we can honour their memories through our actions.” The councillor straightened, looming even taller over her.

“Captain Shepard,” Tevos said, her voice suddenly firm, “step forward.”

Shepard’s eyes tried to jump over to Nihlus, but she forced them to stay facing front even as her heart started hammering against the inside of her ribs, demanding to be let out before the bullets started flying. Her hands shook and her palms began to sweat. God, she’d hoped to be a lot braver facing her own demise.

_Take a deep breath, get those shoulders back, and face whatever comes like the warrior you are. For pity’s sake, you weren’t this afraid of Sovereign._

“It is the decision of this council,” Tevos said, her voice fighting its way past the diatribe going on inside Shepard’s head, “that you be granted all the powers and privileges of the Special Tactics and Reconnaissance branch of the Citadel.”

Was that birds chirping? Shepard was pretty sure she’d never heard a bird on the Citadel before that moment.

“Spectres are not trained, but chosen,” Valern continued. “Individuals forged in the fires of service and battle; individuals whose actions elevate them above the rank and file.”
No, not birds, just the ringing in her ears. Shepard’s knees began to tremble, and suddenly it took every ounce of control she possessed not to break into giddy, hysterical laughter. They were making her a Spectre? Sweet baby Jesus, they were making her the first human Spectre. She forced herself to listen, to actually be present in the moment rather than swirling around inside her head. Breathing slow and steady, she calmed her heartbeat and stilled the trembling.

Tevos tilted her chin up, looking haughty for the first time, perhaps it, like standing between her fellow councillors, could be attributed to habit. “Spectres are an ideal, a symbol. The embodiment of courage, determination, and self-reliance. They are the right hand of the council, instruments of our will.” The asari’s face hardened rather than softening, as if those olivine eyes attempted to drill the importance of the moment into Shepard’s head. Although surely wasted effort, Shepard awarded her a handcart of points for trying.

Sparatus seemed to think he could accomplish the same just by being huge and impressive. Shepard had to admit, it sort of worked. “Spectres bear a great burden. They are protectors of galactic peace, both our first and last line of defense. The safety of the galaxy is theirs to uphold.”

Tevos softened again as she said, “It is a duty for which you have already shown both passion and ability, Captain. You are the first human Spectre, a great accomplishment for both you and your entire species.” Then the asari smiled. “Congratulations, Captain. And thank you, to both you and Spectre Kryik. Your dedication to duty has saved us all.”

Shepard bowed from the waist a little. “Thank you, Councillors for this honour and for your trust. I will endeavour to uphold your faith in me in all things.” She straightened, then stepped back, smiling a small, tight-lipped smile as Anderson patted the back of her shoulder. Of all the ways she’d thought events would transpire when the council called her there, being made a Spectre had never entered her mind. Unbelievable.

“Humanity,” Tevos continued, “has shown that it is ready to stand as a defender and protector of the galaxy. You have proved you are worthy to join our ranks and serve beside us on the Citadel Council.”

Udina puffed up and stepped forward. “Councillor, on behalf of humanity and the Alliance, we thank you for this prestigious honour . . .” He nodded his head in a stately, practiced way. “. . . and humbly accept.”

Anderson smacked Shepard in the back of the head before she even thought about saying anything. She scowled at the injustice. He could have at least given her a chance to formulate an insulting comment before the preemptive smack.

Valern glared at her as if he also expected some sort of commotion. “We will need a list of potential candidates to fill humanity’s seat on the council,” he said, those huge eyes blinking at her.

“Shepard, as the first human Spectre and the driving force behind bringing down Saren and Sovereign,” Tevos said, her dainty blue hands clasped loosely before her, “we’re certain your endorsement will carry a great deal of weight when it comes to choosing humanity’s representative.” She smiled, showing no signs of discomfort or the slightest twitch that might indicate deception. “Would you care to recommend anyone for our consideration?”

Shepard gave the council a curt bow, just her head that time, snapping down then back. “Madam Councillor, I believe this council couldn’t find a better compliment to your number then Ambassador Udina.” She bit down on her lip to stifle a grin as Udina stumbled, turning a baffled, ridiculous stare to gape at her. “He knows the nooks and crannies of Alliance and Earth politics better than anyone, and has cultivated favour with the colonial authorities as well. I believe that
he’ll prove to be an exceptional fit.”

Anderson gave Shepard a sideways glance. “You sure about this, Captain?” he whispered under his breath.

Shepard nodded, glaring at him in a way that she prayed stopped him arguing any further. “I definitely recommend Ambassador Udina to take the seat on the Council. No one is more deserving of the council’s company. He’ll do humanity proud as we move on into this new era of peace.”

Tevos looked to the councillors on her left and right, then nodded.

Shepard turned to face the ambassador and held out her hand, but he just stared at it, his mouth hanging open in a way that filled her with an indecent amount of joy. She leaned forward, grabbed his hand and shook it. After a second, he let out a yelp and yanked it back as if her hand was made of slimy squid. Cackling at his expression of combined disgust and shock, she said, “Good luck, sir.” She bowed stiffly to the other three. “Thank you for the honour of becoming humanity’s first Spectre. I will dedicate myself to doing both this council and humanity proud.”

They each gave her a dismissive nod.

Shepard started back toward the ward’s access, but stopped when Nihlus went the other way. He bowed to the council, stiff and formal.

“Thank you, councillors. We will endeavour to continue to be of service,” he said, then brushed past them, walking up the arc of the bridge and then a little ways down the other side.

Shepard followed, her face slowly creasing into a scowl as he stopped and raised his hands to his mouth. Seeing what he was doing the moment he did it, she felt fire race up her neck to set her face aflame.

“Humanity’s first Spectre,” Nihlus shouted to the crowd gathered along the balcony on the other side of the bridge. In answer, what looked to be the entire crew erupted into a boisterous cacophony of cheers, hoots, and ear-shattering whistles.

Clapping a hand over her mouth to stifle a ragged sob, Shepard blinked back tears even as a wide, embarrassed, grateful, honoured, stupid grin spread across her face. Meeting Garrus’s gaze across the distance, she gave a little shrug, then held out her arms, dissolving into helpless laughter as her boatload of idiots just kept hollering. Love and gratitude filled her until she felt as though her feet would lift off the cement and carry her out into the nebula. Their support, their joy at the moment . . . it meant everything, and she loved them for it.

“Okay, okay,” she bellowed, sweeping a deep, dramatic bow. Straightening, she threw impatient swats their way. “Get out of here, and stop disturbing the peace before I have C-Sec arrest the lot of you.” She couldn’t manage to force the grin off her face though, and gave them a slow, sincere bow of her head. “Thank you. Now git!”

Nihlus walked back to face her and reached out to take her hand, giving her a half-apologetic smile. “The Spectre induction was one reason I thought they might want to see us. I told the crew, they wanted to be here . . . .”

Shepard punched him in the arm, then grinned and tugged him into a hug. “Thanks. It wouldn’t have been the same without them.” Drawing back, she nodded back to where Anderson waited. “Let’s go relax for a while, shall we?” She led the way, looking back over her shoulder as she
walked. “I think we should take Anderson on vacation and then turn him over to Hackett. I don’t want to leave him here. If Udina decides to keep him on as his attache, he’s going to end up indoctrinated.” That thought almost made her throw up her peanut butter toast right there. She’d be seven days dead before she left Anderson to that fate.

Nihlus nodded, jogging a couple of strides to catch up with her. “I agree. He’s too valuable an asset to risk.” He grinned, his mandibles flicking hard. “Loved what you said about Udina. Stirring, really.”

She just grinned and shrugged, deadpanning, “I meant every word.”

The council and Udina had moved off toward the taxi stand, conversing in low tones. Hackett had already gone, but she’d see him when they got to Omega. Shepard swallowed the fire breathing gymnast that climbed up her throat, and slipped her hand through Anderson’s elbow as she passed him. When he resisted, she shook her head, leading him with a forceful hand toward the elevator to the wards.

“Come on, Anderson, it’s time to party. You know, I’ve never seen you drunk. I think I should.” She grinned, tightening her grip on him as he dragged behind. “I promise not to take more than three minutes of vid if you start singing.” She looked into his eyes, meeting the confusion with a broad wink. “Okay, five . . . tops.”

Anderson pulled her to a halt on the stairs down the wards access then took her by the shoulders, staring into her eyes. “Have you lost your mind, Shepard? Udina? All he did was throw you to the sharks, and then stab you in the back when you managed to climb out.” He shook his head as if he couldn’t even fathom the depths of insanity she’d plumbed. “He will actively try to pull you and the entire war effort down, Shepard.”

She nodded. “Lost my mind? Yeah, I think I have, Anderson. I really think I have. But . . . on the upside, I’m now a crazy Spectre, which is nice.” She gave him a smile that attempted to tell him to stop arguing with her. “Come on, old friend. We have a lot to talk about, but let’s do it on the Normandy.” She started back down the access, hoping the elevator at the end was empty.

“The crew want to meet at Flux for a drink before we take the party back to the Normandy, Shepard,” Nihlus told her. He followed a good five metres back, looking casual and relaxed although Shepard felt the tension radiating from him, even from that distance. He’d taken rear guard. “Although, according to Pressly, there is enough alcohol being delivered to the ship that he’s starting to feel as though allowing it on board is a dereliction of duty.”

“Then to Flux we shall go. It’s on the way back to the ship anyway.” She herded Anderson onto the elevator. She didn’t think the council would make her a Spectre one second just to drop a piano on her head the next, but she wouldn’t feel relatively safe until they bunkered down on Omega.

The Captain stood beside her, glaring at the side of her head, but didn’t say anything.

She turned to smile happily at him. “We’ll have a drink at Flux, head to the Normandy, crack a bottle and get shit-faced in celebration.” She shot her eyes quickly toward the camera, then just leaned casually against the wall. “Crazy few days, huh?” She opened a comm channel, feeling the empty space at her back like an open wound. “Hey, Garrus, I hear we’re meeting at Flux before going back to the ship. Can you pick up something dextro that Tali can drink? She’s still with the fleet here, isn’t she?”

“Are you worried?” was all he asked.
“A little bit. Certainly wouldn’t argue with seeing your handsome mug a few alleyways early.” She closed her eyes for a second. Thank the mighty powers that be. He just knew.

“Okay. I’ll meet you at the elevator door before that long alley into the common area. See you in a minute.”

Feeling more settled knowing Garrus was on his way, Shepard smiled at Anderson again. “I think Udina will do a fine job as humanity’s representative. It’s what he’s been spending his entire career working toward. He knows the players and the stage inside out. He should be fine. The Alliance parliament won’t let him go too power mad.”

“I concur,” Nihlus said. “He knows his way through the labyrinth of power.”

Anderson folded his arms and cocked a hip, staring at one then the other like he’d been taken hostage by lunatics and hadn’t decided whether to start screaming for help. Shepard grinned when she saw the jury vote for not screaming. “So, Shepard,” he said, giving her that adopted father scowl. He turned a raised brow glare to Nihlus. “Not one, but two turian boyfriends?”

Shepard swallowed hard, a thin trickle of spit making for her windpipe, slithering down like it had been clever finding new ground until she started to choke. Eyes streaming tears, bronchi burning, she bent over, hacking helplessly until drowning in her own snot became a very real danger. Sucking in a ragged, stuttering breath, she started to gain a little control.

Nihlus rubbed her back. “Actually, Captain, I’m not her boyfriend, I’m just in love with her. Well, and we were bond-mates in prothean memories that the beacons stuffed into our heads . . . had two kids . . . spent a lifetime together.”

Anderson’s expression morphed into worried and confused, but he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and passed it to Shepard without looking away from Nihlus. “Prothean bond-mates? Had two kids?” He shook his head. “That one is going to take a little explaining.

Shepard wheezed as the choking eased up then blew her nose. Shooting Nihlus a scowl that should have left a half metre hole coming out the other side, she stomped on his foot. She pointed at Anderson as she leaned on a knee, trying to catch her breath. “No. Get those thoughts out of your head, sir. You don’t get to pull your, ‘Son, come help me decide which shotgun to take on this mission’ stunts any more. I’m not an eighteen year old cadet.” She straightened as the elevator stopped at the wards.

Anderson’s chuckle affirmed how proud he’d been pulling that move. “You’ve got to admit, having the suitors help me choose my weapons got you a lot of extra study time.”

Shepard led the way down the corridor, the access nearly deserted. Praise the Enkindlers that at least some people on the station seemed to think that the day after a monstrous machine tried to destroy everything was an excellent day to stay home. She slipped her arm through Anderson’s. “Yeah, my name became, ‘No, not that one, her guardian is a madman’.” Grinning, she bumped him with her shoulder as he laughed.

Garrus waited outside the last elevator, a liquor store bag in hand. He held it up. “I got the good stuff for Tali.”

Shepard grinned and stepped out, slipping her arm through his. “Excellent. Now we have the makings of a first rate party.” Her smile widened as he put his hand around her waist, pulling her in tight against his side.
Glancing up as the elevator at the end of the hallway opened, letting a few civilians out, Shepard leaned into her boyfriend’s side. Boyfriend . . . how crazy was that? She bumped him with her hip. “Relax, Brother C-Sec. I’ve got you.” Crazy, but wonderful.

His mandibles fluttered. “Yeah, I guess you do.” He bent to nuzzle her temple. “You okay?”

A soft smile brightened her face. “Yeah, I am now.” The heat of a heavy blush crawled up her neck as his voice set off that very warm flutter deep in her belly. “You know, Garrus, something just occurred to me,” she said, lowering her voice to a husky whisper. The blush deepened.

She hesitated and glanced behind them, not really keen on Anderson listening in as she hit on her turian boyfriend, but the captain and Nihlus were discussing whether Udina should be assigned bodyguards. On that, she’d vote no.

Her smile returned, beaming with love and more than a little heat. “After today, you aren’t really on my crew any more.” She purred a little, deep in her throat. “You know what that means, don’t you?”

He made a show of thinking about that. “Um . . . I never have to suffer through you driving the Mako again?”

She chuckled and elbowed him. “You are such a poop!” God, she loved how still and centered he made her feel. “But okay, I give you that, but it also exempts you from my ‘never with my crew’ rule.”

His response came out only as a rumble in his throat that cut straight through her, making her skin lift in gooseflesh. A shy smile brought her eyes back up to the civilians. Most of them passed her by without any notice.

A man tripped, stumbling into Shepard’s side and grabbed her arm inside her sling, dragging a thin cry of pain from her lips. He didn’t seem to notice, his eyes riveted on hers, his face far too close. “Hey wait, aren’t you Captain Shepard?”

Shepard frowned and jerked back, ignoring the pain. “Who . . .?” She pressed back into Garrus’s side, but as she pulled back, the man pushed in. The alarm at the base of her skull shrieked.

Something slammed under her jaw, cold and hard.

Her name tore, raw and bleeding, from Garrus’s throat.

Thunder roared, shattering her like a dropped mirror.

Fin Act One

Chapter End Notes

Mostly ... at this point, finishing the first act . . . thank you. Just thank you to everyone who has stuck with the story from its start as a sort of running joke to now. I love you. I hope you’ll stick with the crew as we move into Act Two tomorrow. *hugs*
Chapter Summary

Shepard has been shot and the second act begins.

Act Two - Future Complex

Prologue

Shepard died three days ago.

I can still recall those last moments in perfect clarity.

I can feel the softness of her hip bumping against my thigh, the warmth of her hand on my waist, even through my tunic. The curve of her waist under my talons.

I can smell her soap, the ever-present undertones of sweat, gun oil, the underlayer of her armour. The slight tang of fear. The indoctrinated council has made her a Spectre for stopping Sovereign and Saren. It fills me with respect and awe. It fills her with fear.

I can see the curve of her lips as she smiles, the slight blush on her cheeks as she teases me about my not being a member of her crew any longer. We can be together. Her bright emerald eyes laugh into mine as she tells me not to worry.

I can hear the ever-present hum of the life support systems in the alley, the sound of our footsteps, hollow and ringing, on the floor. Anderson and Nihlus debate whether or not to provide Udina with extra security now he is a councilor. The husky warmth of Shepard’s voice makes my hands tremble ever so slightly as she tells me that she has me.

Then everything goes to hell, and suddenly nothing felt present or real any longer.

A human male bumped into her, stumbled, his arm grabbing hold of her. He asked if she was Captain Shepard. Something warm splashed against my face and neck. It took exactly three heartbeats for me to realize that it was blood, her blood. Anderson and Nihlus opened fire. The man’s head disintegrated, but my arms were full of her, and her blood was everywhere.

Nihlus yelled at me to pick her up, and I held her in one arm. She weighed nothing. My other hand pressed against the massive wound at the base of her skull, trying to staunch the blood. I don’t recall the flight back to the Normandy, just having the doctor and Kaidan pull her from my arms once we reached the ship. They tore her away and worked on her even as others pushed the gurney toward the stairs.

Nihlus shoved by me, rushing to get to the bridge, commanding Joker to call back all hands and then take off without clearances. I believe we took fire on our way to the relay.

I followed the gurney to med bay. I held her hand while they explained to me why there was nothing they could do and encased her in a stasis field. I held her hand while Nihlus and Anderson stood over her body, arguing about what to do next. I held her hand while Anderson stood, head bowed, his hands gripping hers between them, a father’s hellish grief kept tightly reined in. I held
her hand for three days until they placed her in a casket to fire her into space.

I couldn’t leave her. She was afraid of being alone in the dark.

Then I had to say goodbye, before getting a chance to know anything. And there were so many things I wanted to know. What side of the bed she favoured if being trapped against the wall didn’t enter into it. Every single smile she had to share when she woke in the morning, hair tussled, the imprint of her pillow on her cheek. All the places she liked to be touched. The noises she made when I loved her. Every memory she had yet to confide in me. Every line that appeared as time passed. Every single detail that I could have learned over the course of the cycles.

And then I said goodbye. I don’t think I breathed from the moment the assassin’s gun went off, as if the universe froze when the blood and bone of the woman I had just started to love splashed across my face.

Because only two thoughts kept cycling through my head.

“Shepard—the woman I love—is dead.

Now what?”

Chapter One - Farewell, Kahri - 3 days ASD

“Garrus?”

The hatch of their second brand new Kodiak creaked open. The sound broke through his envelope of misery, and he made a mental note to lubricate the hinges.

“Garrus? Are you in there?” A small, dark shape appeared—a hooded silhouette in the dim light coming through the opening. “There you are. I’ve been looking everywhere.” Tali hopped up and stood over him. “They told me you’d be hiding in here.” She nudged him with her elbow. “Sit up and scoot over. Come on, Brother C-Sec, I came a long way for this.”

Garrus flinched, a sharp keen catching in his throat at the familiar nickname said by the wrong voice. “Don’t,” was all he managed to gasp through the claws digging into his throat.

Tali let out a tiny, hiccupping sob. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t . . ..” She pulled in a long, hard breath that whistled a little, even the sound stabbing through him, dull and jagged.

“C-Sec, your nose whistles when you sigh. Did you know that?”

Garrus didn’t move, letting the whisper diffuse in the heavy air, and waited for the accompanying bayonet buried in his chest to dislodge. His eyes stared through the leather backrest of the bench he used as a bed. He knew that Shepard chose him to pick up her banner and keep fighting because she believed he possessed the strength to hold the team together, to be there for them . . . to keep them from succumbing to the horrible enormity of the war to come. No one had ever believed in him with such complete faith. She’d made a mistake. All he wanted to do was crawl into the deepest, darkest hole he could find and cover himself over.

He couldn’t, of course. Damn Shepard and her bloody faith in him. She’d painted him into a corner, leaving him no choice but to pick the banner out of the mud, wash her blood from it the best he could, and carry on.
Sitting up, he let gravity do most of the work as his feet dropped to the floor. “Have Liara and Wrex arrived?” Heavy, humid air pressed in on him from all sides, a thick layer of sweaty plastic wrapped so tight he couldn’t breathe. When he did draw in air, it stank of defeat, and fear, and the copper tang of her blood. No matter how hard he scrubbed, the smell of her death clung to him: an accusatory specter.

He’d just let the bastard shoot her.

Tali perched on the edge of the bench. “Wrex has. Liara is ten minutes out yet. She found some fascinating piece of information that couldn’t wait.” The quarian chuckled. “Some things don’t change. Legion and Kal are talking to Captain Anderson.” She slipped her arm through his. “I’m so sorry, Garrus. I keep thinking that maybe if the rest of us had been there . . . .”

He cut the air with his hand, dismissing that idea before it finished forming. “You were where she wanted . . . needed you to be. She had three of the galaxy’s best shots, most experienced soldiers . . . We got careless. They’d made her a Spectre. They wouldn’t kill a brand new Spectre who’d just saved everyone. All I had to do was push him back . . . step between them. My arm was wrapped around her, Tali, and I just let him shoot her.”

Fuck reason. Fuck not having a chance to even realize she was in danger before she was dead. He’d just let that bastard shoot her.

Tali nodded and kicked her feet a little, brushing the soles of her boots against the corrugated rubber matting. “Anderson said that you only left her side a couple of hours ago.” Her hand stroked his upper arm, but comfort felt like barbs of geterr cactus burrowing under his hide to fester. It threatened to undo the frail equilibrium he’d finally discovered after three days of snapping back and forth between wanting to scream at everyone to just fucking fix it and wanting to lie down next to her.

Jumping up, he yanked his arm loose. He regretted the rough action as soon as he pulled away. “Sorry, Tali, I just . . . .” He held out a hand to usher her from the shuttle.

“I understand, Garrus. We’ve all had our suits shredded.” She slipped her fingers into his talons. Neither of them spoke until they arrived at the bridge.

“Just in time,” Joker called, glancing over his shoulder at them. His mouth opened to say something further, crack wise maybe. Instead, his eyes shuttered over, his mouth closed, and he turned back to his work. “Liara just arrived,” he said. “Who knew our shy little researcher would turn out to be queen of the asari?”

“Who would have thought I’d be surveying my home world with a team of quarians and geth? Or that Wrex would be king of the krogan?” A thin, flat sigh whispered through her suit’s speaker only to get cut off by a hiccoughing sob. “Well . . . I guess Shepard knew, didn’t she?”

An asari cruiser pulled up alongside, drawing Garrus’s attention away from the conversation. He closed his eyes, mandibles fluttering a little as the cruiser’s massive engines set the deck plating thrumming, deep and powerful, under his feet. He could barely recall the last time he’d felt that sensation. The citadel might as well be on a planet but for the constant hum of the life support systems, and the Normandy vibrated on a higher, lighter frequency, almost like a tickle.

“When we arrived at the Citadel after Eden Prime,” Nihlus said from behind Garrus, alerting everyone to his presence, “Shepard was the only one who didn’t gawk and admire the Destiny Ascension. She said that it looked like something that should be trying to eat us.” A tremulous, low-pitched keen whispered under the Spectre’s every breath.
“Asari ships are creepy as hell,” Joker grumbled in agreement. “The cruiser requests permission to dock with the Normandy.”

“Permission granted,” Anderson replied, appearing beside Garrus to look out the port at the other ship. The captain glanced at Garrus, his face a stoic mask that accentuated rather than downplayed his grief. “I’m heading down.” He averted his eyes and straightened, snapping his back and shoulders taut and square. “You’ll bring Dr. T’Soni and her companion down when they’re ready?”

Garrus recognized the hasty wall of military distance and how close Anderson was to losing that composure. He nodded, glad Anderson had given him something to do other than fidget and wait to say goodbye. If he kept busy enough the varren braying and snapping away in his guts might not get a chance to tear him into tiny pieces.

When Anderson spun and strode from the cockpit, Garrus followed, ducking around Nihlus. Alcohol wafted from the other turian’s pores and breath, shrouding him in a cloud of noxious stink. Garrus stopped and met the Spectre’s eyes then whispered, “Go to Dr. Chakwas and get something. You don’t want to stumble through this.” His mandibles dropped and flicked hard. “Then take a shower and put on something clean. You reek.”

Nihlus blinked a few times then nodded and turned around, his shoulder bouncing into the bulkhead. He stumbled, Garrus catching him before he went down.

“Do you want me to have someone take you?” Garrus asked, keeping his grip on Nihlus’s arm.

The Spectre yanked his arm free. “I can manage.” He strode down the length of the CIC, his trajectory wobbling a little. Cursing, he fell down the ramp, catching himself at the bottom. Pressly stepped forward, an awkward hand held out in a surprising offer of assistance, but Nihlus barked something that backed the Alliance officer off.

“Permission to come aboard?” a soft voice asked, pulling Garrus’s attention away from Nihlus. Liara stood at the inner hatch, Aethyta and a half dozen commandos right behind her.

Garrus nodded. “Permission granted. Welcome back, Liara.” He nodded to the other asari.

“Thank you.” Liara stepped forward, her hand held out, hanging hesitant and awkward in an offering of ineffectual empathy. When Garrus gripped it, she squeezed his talons. “I’m so sorry, Garrus. I barely knew her, and I feel like someone’s stolen something precious from me.”

He cleared his throat, unable to completely stifle a soft keen as the ghost of Shepard’s limp body played along the nerves in his arms and closed his larynx. Three strangled breaths later, he got enough control to speak. “Your quarters are as you left them. Do you want to take some time to freshen up?” He ushered them down the CIC toward the stairs.

“Thank you, that would be welcome. I found some information in my mother’s files about a secret prothean archive on Thessia, so I spent every last second I could decrypting the data.” Liara chuckled, but it came out bitter. “My mother certainly didn’t want anyone to access her intel without a fight.”

“The asari have a prothean archive that they’ve kept hidden from the rest of the galaxy?” Garrus asked, fury incinerating his sorrow. No wonder the damned asari ran the galaxy. How dare they hold all their high ideals over the rest of the races and then . . . He took a deep breath and shook it off. The anger was just a distraction. He didn’t want to spend those moments distracted. They could deal with the asari archive when they reached Omega.
“So it would appear,” Liara replied. “I haven’t decrypted very much yet, but I’ll keep working on it. Where and when are we meeting?” She glanced back at him, her big, blue, watery stare of empathy tearing a ragged gash through his control. “I assume we’ll need to coordinate our war preparation.”

“Yes. When we’re finished with . . .” He swallowed hard and let that thought drop, holding tight to the anger. “I’ll go through Shepard’s computer, and we’ll figure out the details.” He nodded to the Alliance soldier as they passed through the door to the crew deck.

“We might as well stay aboard for the next few days if that’s the case. I’ll ask Captain Anderson if that’s all right with him later.” Liara stopped outside the med bay door. “We’ll grab a quick shower and be ready to go in fifteen minutes.” Her hand drifted back to his, squeezed his talons, then she turned and walked through the door.

For a full thirty seconds after the med bay door closed, Garrus just stood, staring at the bulkhead. A terrible realization forced its way through his mind, a weed tearing a crack in the pavement on its way to the light. They all expected him to have the answers . . . all the answers.

“Damn you, Shepard,” he whispered. “Damn you for leaving me with all of this.” Pivoting on his heel, he strode across the crew deck, shoving the enormity of the task aside, using the anger to keep his sorrow at bay. If he allowed himself to focus on the big picture, he’d end up curled into a ball under a table somewhere. One step at a time. One problem at a time. That moment, he needed to get Nihlus sobered up as much as possible, dragged through a shower, and down to the cargo bay.

One problem at a time.

* * * * *

Nihlus braced his hands against the door frame leading out of his tiny quarters. “I can’t do it, Vakarian. You can’t understand. After the rachni queen unravelled the beacon messages . . ..”

“I know what happened, Nihlus. Shepard did her best to explain it.” Garrus pushed against the Spectre for a moment, then let out a long, growling version of an explicit turian curse. “You’ll hate yourself if you don’t say goodbye. It won’t be more than a half hour then you can disgrace her memory by drowning yourself in another couple of litres of brandy.”

“I have nothing left, Vakarian. The council has taken everything from me. First Saren and then being a Spectre. Now with Shepard, they’ve torn out my heart . . . taken away a mate for the second time.” He shook his head as if trying to shake off that thought. “It’s impossible. Shepard and I never did anything more than kiss, and then she ran away from me and back to you.” He gave Garrus a shove, knocking him back hard enough to slip past and slump onto his cot. “And yet, I can feel every emotion . . . the joy and awe when our children were born . . .” He keened and covered his face. “It never happened. I have nothing.”

Another exasperated curse cut the air, the subvocals behind it knife-edged. “You have your honor. You have your duty to the galaxy.” Garrus cuffed Nihlus in the side of the head, hoping for a reaction, but the Spectre just slumped a little further. “Even if the Reapers walk here from dark space, we still won’t have enough time to prepare properly. She needed you. Now she has left this all on the two of us, Nihlus, and I need you. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and help me.”

Garrus let out a long breath through a clenched jaw and sat on the end of the cot. “We’re both not very good turians, are we?” He shook his head. “Yeah, not good turians at all. You giving the turian military so much hassle that they were glad to get rid of you when Saren put you forward for
Nihlus let out another wavering keen. “I met her before coming to the Normandy, you know, but if she remembered it, she never said.”

Garrus turned from the door, leaning his shoulder against the frame, curiosity cutting through his annoyance and grief. “When?” The hollow core of him reached out, clutching greedily at the unknown, unexpected tidbit. It wanted to gobble up every tiny fact and picture of Shepard, stuffing them all down into the void she’d left behind. Later he could curl up and examine the small treasures at his leisure, keeping her alive and close for a few moments more.

“I became completely obsessed with her after hearing about Elysium, but our paths never crossed until just after she entered the N program. It was some ridiculous political affair. Sparatus wanted Saren and me to act as his bodyguards for the evening. Pointless posturing. One upmanship at its best. Saren was furious, but what could we do?” Nihlus’s mandibles flicked, a wistful sort of half-smile. “Udina had pulled in Shepard as his golden example of the Alliance military.” He closed his eyes. “She wore this silky black dress that let her leg peek out the side, and her hair was all gathered on top of her head, just these long copper curls hanging around her face. I’d only ever seen the Shepard from the news footage—armour and the severe, regulation appearance—more impressive than attractive. That night, she was so beautiful that she took my breath away.”

“Long hair?” A sliver of jealousy slipped between Garrus’s plates, stabbing him straight in the gut. He scowled, chiding himself for coveting Nihlus’s memory . . . that single moment of an exquisitely dressed, long-haired Shepard. It was a Shepard he’d never get the chance to see. Sorrow pummeled him, knocking the wind out of him as it drove the shard in deeper. Versions of her that he’d never see fought to break through his thoughts, but he beat them back.

Nihlus nodded and opened his eyes, locking stares with Garrus. “I tried to work up the courage to talk to her all night. Couldn’t do it. Even just rehearsing what I’d say, I botched it so completely that I knew I’d end up looking like a blathering moron.” He straightened, bracing his hands against the edge of the cot. “Put a gun in my hand and aim me at a hundred outlaw mercs or gunrunning underworld types, no problem. Ask me to talk to a female I’m attracted to . . . forget it.” He stared down at his hands. “I was just starting to yell at myself for wasting the only chance I’d had to speak to her when Sparatus sent me to the bar to get him a drink. While I was waiting, Shepard stepped up beside me. Spirits, she smelled good, like the highland breeze on Palaven when the rylamia is blooming, or the algae plume on Oma Ker.”

Nihlus paused, then his mandibles spread and fluttered in a smile. “She looked up at me and said, ‘Spectre Nihlus Kryik, right?’ I nodded, too busy gawking at how tiny and perfect she was to answer. ‘Lt. Commander Jane Shepard, pleased to meet you.’ She looked over at Saren glowering behind Sparatus. ‘Glad to see the council spending the galaxy’s credits so wisely.’ Her laugh completely wiped away what little brain function remained to me. I think I managed to get out the word politicians before Udina grabbed her and dragged her off to speak to someone else.”

“A notable first meeting. I’m sure you made quite the impression.” Garrus nodded toward the door.
“Come on, the others will be waiting for us.” He palmed the door and stepped through, trying to see past the picture in his mind of that Shepard smiling up at him. She was gone. No amount of wishing things were different could change that. Forcing everything but surviving the following half hour from his mind, he waited for Nihlus then followed him down to the cargo bay.

The rest of the team and crew had already assembled around the simple casket, waiting for them as he’d guessed. When they stepped off the elevator, he hung back. He really was a terrible turian. Raised from birth to release the dead, they learned not to fear death or lament the lost. Those who died in the course of their duty deserved celebration, not endless keening tears. Why then was it taking all his strength to fight down the need to run to the casket, fling it open and demand that Shepard stop playing at being dead? She couldn’t really be gone. Not Shepard. She’d cheated death so many times. She’d made a lifestyle out of it.

Tali gripped his hand when he finally managed to wrestle himself across the bay to stand at Shepard’s side for the last time. A storm brewed in his chest, the black clouds rolling up into his head until its thunder drowned out the voices around him. His heartbeat kept time between flashes of lightning that seared along his nerves and made his jaw clench.

It wasn’t fair. Nothing in life was, of course, but that brushed-steel casket in front of him made up the most cruel injustice of them all. An entire career dedicated to rooting out wrongs and setting the scales right . . . and what damned good had he been when it most mattered? He clenched his fists, loosening up when he felt Tali flinch.

He’d just let the bastard shoot her.

The moment Shepard burst into Dr. Michel’s clinic, guns blazing, that smart mouth and razor sharp wit taking people down faster than her bullets, she’d grabbed him deep down in his gut. His free hand drifted up to press against his keel, fighting back against the growing pressure building there. His eyes began to feel too large for his sockets, and he realized he’d been staring at the hateful box without blinking.

“Shepard gave the quarian people the most precious gift . . .” Tali’s voice trailed off into quiet sniffles. “And for a little while, I remembered what it felt like to have someone’s complete faith and trust . . . their admiration and respect . . . their protection and nurturing. Shepard believed in me and because of that, I discovered belief in myself.” She swallowed, the sound coming out her speaker thick, a faint whine of sorrow threaded through it. “Thank you for my home, Shepard. Thank you for everything. Keelah se’lai. I’ll miss you.” She let go of Garrus’s hand and stepped forward to lay a single white lily on the casket.

One of many . . . had everyone put one there? How did he miss that?

“Garrus?” Anderson asked. He extended his hand toward the casket, his stare expectant, as if Garrus should know what he asked.

Garrus frowned, confusion sparking a sharp, prickling anger. What? What did he want? Just get it over with and eject the casket into space already. Eject her body into the star and maybe then he could just move on. Maybe then he could stop remembering the way that same body felt cradled in his arms four nights earlier, so soft and warm pressed against him that his chest and throat ached with the beauty of the moment. She nuzzled her head into the curve of his neck, her fingers caressing lazy patterns over his hide while he read her Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*.

“Do the voices.”
“I don’t want to do the voices. Just be quiet and listen.”

“Come on, you’ve got to do the voices. Don’t be such a poop.”

Spirits, but life cut cruelly with its penchant for tragedy. A taloned vice grabbed hold of his keel and started ripping it from his body, white hot agony lancing through him to strangle his heart. His heartbeat slowed, sluggish and laboured. His lungs struggled to pull in air but it didn’t make it past his throat. Dizzy, he clung to Tali’s hand, praying she could keep him on his feet. If he fell, he didn’t know how he’d manage to get up again. He couldn’t fall. He needed to keep the panic and the pain buttoned down . . . had to keep it locked up.

“Would you like to say something, son?” Anderson asked, pulling Garrus from the memory. The Captain stepped back to stand between Admiral Hackett—when had he arrived?—and Dr. Chakwas.

Garrus opened his mouth to refuse, but what came out was, “The worst sin anyone could commit was to ignore Shepard. I’ve seen her kiss total strangers, molest an asari’s scalp crests, and blame a krogan for giving her some sort of communicable rash spread by varren all as punishment for that ultimate transgression. Of course, she didn’t always have to be ignored in order to do something completely insane. Our last leave before Virmire, she got into a bar fight with Earth’s ambassador, jumped off the C-Sec executor’s balcony and climbed up on a skycar, screaming praise for the Enkindlers so obnoxiously that a small mob of hanar dragged her down.”

His mandibles fluttered. “One of the first things I asked her after we met was whether her lunacy was real or an act. Even though I know most of it was a tactical facade, I’m still not sure of the answer to that question.”

He stepped forward and leaned down to press his talons to the cool metal. “She was a complete mystery. She could spout random quotes from the most obscure books and ancient movies, but have no idea about anything that had been released in the last ten cycles. Her heart . . .” His voice cut out, his throat closing. He blinked, taking a long breath, forcing himself to maintain control. When he could swallow, he cleared his throat, shoving aside the panic . . . the need to throw open the casket and hold her, shake her, will the life back into her, demand that her god give her back. He couldn’t have her, not yet. They had so much to do. He’d planned to . . . He drove away that thought, all his plans for the future. What good would wallowing in them do him?

He managed to suck in a rasping breath, and let the words roll out. “Her heart had been battered more than any one individual should have to bear, but somehow she managed to keep it open, reaching out to anyone who needed her. She was the first to know if someone was hurting, exhausted, needing a bracing word, a hand to hold, or a kick in the ass. Every mission, she stuffed her pockets with enough rations to feed the squad and slapped trackers on us so she’d never lose us. She was always the first into the fight and the last one out.”

He stroked the smooth metal as if caressing her back. “Shepard was brave. Loyal to a fault. Infuriating. Terrified. Honourable. Strong . . . so much stronger than she believed. Perfect in her flaws . . . and I loved . . . love her.” He swallowed again, closing his eyes. “Rest easy, Kahri, we’ll carry your banner forward and get this done. You deserve to rest. One day, we’ll get a chance to finish what we started.” He dropped his voice to a breathy whisper. “Wait for me.”

He straightened and squared his shoulders. Liara passed him a lily, but instead of laying it as the others had, he broke the stem an inch away from the flower. Placing the stem at the head of the casket, he whispered. “You can have the rest when we meet again.” He stepped back beside Tali, the quarian wrapping her arm around his waist.
“Nihlus?” Anderson called. “Would you like to say anything?”

Nihlus stepped forward, touched his lily to his brow and placed it on the casket. “Farewell, Sister Shepard, may the light that shines on you be as bright as the one you shone on all of us. Glory hallelujah . . . .”

“. . . And praise the great, glowing asses of the Enkindlers,” the team said as one, soft chuckles breaking through clenched jaws and tear streaked faces.

Arms wrapped around Garrus from both sides as the thrusters under the casket flared to life. Teeth clenched so tight that pain shot through his jaw, he watched the Normandy’s ramp open. The system’s star—what system were they in?—poised on the brink of going nova and flared a riotous gold and orange against the black void of space, fighting its inevitable collapse and death.

Admiral Hackett took one step forward. “From the stars our bodies are formed; to the stars we return. From the infinite our souls are born; to the infinite we commend the soul of Captain Jane Shepard and ask that she be granted rest.”

Garrus closed his eyes as the casket cleared the ramp, unable to bear watching them send her out into the dark alone. “Don’t worry, Kahri, it’ll only be dark and cold for a few minutes. Then everything will be warmth and light. I’m with you. I’ll always be with you. You’ll never be alone again.”
If the funeral was the end . . . now for the beginning and moving on.

Ashley moved first after Shepard’s casket disappeared from sight, speeding through the black toward the star. The chief cleared her throat and clasped her hands before pointing both index fingers toward the elevator. “There are refreshments and food up in the galley. Shepard once told me that when she died, she wanted people to drink too much, eat too much, dance too much, and then remember her in their hangovers the next day. I for one intend to comply with her wishes.”

The group broke up as the ramp thumped into place, the pressure causing Garrus’s ears to pop even though the barrier kept the pressure almost perfectly even. Instead of following the rest of the crew, Garrus hung back feeling the ship, her ship, alive and present around him. The new shuttle sat where she’d helped him tear apart and rebuild the Mako after the thresher maw incident. He’d barked his knuckles, and she’d forced him to sit down and let her look after them. He stroked the pads of the talons of one hand over the faint scars. He’d never felt anything to compare with her light, cool touch.

The memory of her hand stroking along his plates dragged a hoarse moan from his second larynx that he covered with a cough. For so many weeks, ever since they’d first kissed in the Mako, he’d held his desire for her behind tight reins. Some days the pressure behind his plates and the thumping of his heart nearly made him scream, but he knew she wasn’t ready. Spirits, he hoped his body stopped aching for her before the longing drove him mad.

“Vakarian . . . Garrus,” Anderson called, striding over to him. Garrus shook off the heavy cobwebs of memory and hopeless wishing, brushing the backs of his talons across his face. The captain held out his hand. When Garrus gripped it, Anderson said in a thin, hoarse voice, “Thank you for making her happy in her last days. She cared about you very much.”

Garrus just nodded. There wasn’t much he could say to that. He’d hoped to make her happy for the rest of her days. He just hadn’t expected there to be so few.

Anderson released him. “I tried to get into her computer earlier, but it will only unlock for you. Could you go through it? Flag anything that you think needs my immediate attention.”

Garrus nodded, grateful to have something to do. “I’ll do that now, sir.” He needed to get to Omega and get the wheels turning. Keeping busy might save him, whereas too much time to think would drag him somewhere ugly.

“I know she asked you to run this rodeo, Vakarian, and I’ll try not to step on your toes, but I’m here if you need me, and so is Hackett.” Anderson slapped his shoulder, then spun and strode for engineering.

Garrus headed for the elevator, skirting around the still somber beginnings of Shepard’s wake when he arrived on the crew deck. He didn’t see Nihlus amongst the others. No doubt the Spectre hid in his closet swilling back his third or fourth bottle of the day. Despite the obvious pain the other turian was going through, Garrus envied him the connection he’d shared with Shepard
through the Prothean memories. No matter what Garrus and Shepard would have become to one another if she’d lived, she and Nihlus would have always had that.

Garrus stepped through the door into the Captain’s quarters and stood, staring at Shepard’s bed—their bed—for several moments before gathering the strength to step past the threshold. That damned, stupid impossibly hard bed. He complained about it every night, and it hurt like hell most of the time, digging his plates into his bones.

“I’d sleep on that thing happily for the rest of my life if you’d just let me have her back,” he whispered without knowing whom he was talking to. Turians didn’t have gods. Would Shepard’s god, the one she felt such anger toward, listen to a turian prayer?

_Please, just let me wake up there with her arm flopped over me._

Anderson had yet to move anything, leaving her few possessions organized and aligned either parallel or perpendicular to the edges of whatever surface. “Always so tidy and regimented,” he whispered, looking around the room. “So afraid for anything to slip out of place.” Sitting at the desk, Garrus activated her computer, but a wall came up.

“Voice print identification required to access records,” the artificial female voice informed him.

He frowned and glanced over his shoulder toward the door, suddenly feeling like a prowler who’d broken into someone’s home. “Garrus Vakarian.”

“Good day, Officer Vakarian, please enter user password.”

“Password?” he asked, frowning. She’d been worried enough to password protect it even after voice printing it?

“That is not correct.”

He keened softly, low in his throat as he struggled to get the words—her words—out. “Sweet baby Jesus.”

“That is not correct.”

It became harder to get his primary larynx to override the keen coming from his second as the singularity trying to form in the center of his chest pulled all the air out of the cabin. “Glory hallelujah, Brother C-Sec.”

“Access granted.” Shepard’s image appeared before him, that cocky smile forcing him to look away. Maybe it had been a mistake to try to look into her affairs without a few days worth of distance. He nodded and took a deep breath, straightening his spine and pulling his neck back, arching it slightly. Maybe, but he’d made her a promise, one that he intended to keep. Spirits, she was beautiful. He didn’t need to see Nihlus’s version of her beauty—all dressed up and coifed. Short mop of curls, freckles, no make up . . . she would always be the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. His hand lifted to touch the holographic image, but he forced it back to the desktop. He couldn’t touch her. She’d become light and memories.

The image smiled, a sad smile, and he wondered which time he’d entered the room to find her sitting there had been the time she’d recorded the message to prepare for her death. Why hadn’t she said anything? “Hey, Garrus. Sorry about this. I know the last thing you want to do right now is face the million details of this war, but as much as people will want to believe that Nazara was a single entity, we know the truth. There is still a hell of a war coming, and we . . .” She looked
down, then back. “...you need to be ready to fight it.”

She sighed, and he heard the weight of an entire galaxy in that breath. She hid how much it cost her so well that sometimes he forgot just how heavy it must have gotten... how afraid she must have been. Good thing for them she proved so much stronger than the fear.

“Okay,” her matter of a fact tone drew his attention back, “first things first. I have included here a detailed accounting of the financial resources available to you. As soon as I died, they were all transferred into your name. Both Barla Von and... your father have copies of everything.” She chuckled, meeting the sudden stiffness and questioning in his gaze as surely as if she could see him.

“By the way, hope you don’t mind, but I’ve been in touch with your father pretty much since you told me about him under the Mako that day. I knew he’d worry, so mostly I just let him know that you were okay after missions. But that day you guys left me at C-Sec Academy, I met with him and brought him up to speed on everything.” She shrugged, just that quick, marionette pop up and down. “I figured that since you trusted him—oh, don’t look at me like that, you know you trust him completely—he was the one to help you keep going.”

Garrus shook his head. “You meddling pain in the ass. Couldn’t just leave anything alone.”

“And stop grumbling at me, I’m dead.” She softened the words with the sad smile. “He put it all together and came to the same conclusions we have. He’ll make a hell of an ally, Garrus. He begged me not to tell the council what we’d learned about Saren, knew it would get me killed, but we needed their blessing to attack Virmire.” She glanced away from the screen, furtively as if someone had approached her door, and she didn’t want to be caught. A moment later, she looked back. “So, if he needs it, tell him to go ahead and get his ‘I told you so’ moment out of his system.” She affected a stern frown. “Then tell him it’s not nice to rub the mistakes of the dead in their face. So rude.”

A spreadsheet appeared on the right of the monitor. “Congrats, you’re a billionaire, and sorry, you have to spend it on things other than your own tropical planet. Okay... to business: Barla Von has started salvaging as much of Nazara as his people can get their hands on. Build a weapons testing area out in the terminus somewhere. Make sure everyone who comes in contact with the wreckage is inoculated. The geth, rachni, krogan, and hopefully the Alliance and Hierarchy will need somewhere to test weapons against Reaper materials. I really hope I’m right about their vulnerabilities.

“Contact Barla Von, do whatever you need to in order to keep the communication with the Shadow Broker open. He owes us right now, and no one in the galaxy has more feelers out there.”

The spreadsheet vanished, leaving her sharp, pretty face sitting dead center again. “Work with Nihlus, Anderson, and your dad, Garrus. I’ve set everyone else up to take credit for our victories. Tali and Legion for the peace between their people and the return of the pilgrims; Wrex for the freedom of Saren’s krogan slaves and genophage research; Anderson and Hackett for the battle of the Citadel.” Her smile warmed. “Even Shiala and Liara are positioned to do what they need to do. As are you. You know where to go and what to do. Win the war.” Her head tilted. “I know you’ll do amazing things, Garrus. I know it. I’ll be watching.”

Her smile broke and tears slipped from the corners of her eyes just to be swiped at by an impatient hand. Her head tilted. “I’m sorry for so many things, but more than anything, I’m sorry that I never got a chance to give you this.” She gestured at her body. “Because this...” She pressed her hand over her heart. “...belongs to you. Thank you for being the one person in my life I could trust enough to love. I love you, Garrus, and I’m sorry I never told you that.” She smiled sadly. “Take
care of yourself and our people.”

Her hand reached out. “Good bye. I love you. You know what to do next.”

Garrus lifted his hand to those delicate fingers, his breathing hoarse and laboured again. “Good bye, Shepard. I love you.” He sat like that for a moment, then took a deep breath and closed the screen. For a moment, he felt as though someone had sucked all the air out of the room, but gradually, the choking lack of her receded, and he began to breathe again. He opened up the comm relays and keyed in routing information.

His father’s head and shoulders appeared on the screen. After staring at him for a second, Herros nodded. “Garrus.” His mandibles fluttered and dropped. “I’m so very sorry, son. She was a remarkable woman.”

Garrus stared at his father’s image for a moment, then let out a long, tremulous, bitter keen of grief. It climbed out of the very center of him, a living beast held caged too long and finally seeing a safe passage out. It went on and on until that horrible, empty place at his core fell silent: hoarse, scraped hollow, and dry.

When it ended, his father gave a soft cry of his own, one of empathy and love for a son in pain. For a few moments, Herros tried to speak, but then he flailed his mandibles a little, frustrated. “I’ll meet you at the location in three days. We have a lot to talk about.”

Garrus nodded. “I’ll be there. Thank you, Pari.”

“She really was a most remarkable young woman,” Herros said, shaking his head.

Garrus spent the next several hours pouring over the details of the massive organization Shepard and Barla Von had managed to put together in three months. The volus hadn’t dawdled in moving the art and other relics they’d confiscated from Donovan Hock’s home. The enterprising financier had even sent a platoon of the Shadow Broker’s private army to clean out the mercenary leader’s home on Beckenstein. The total received from finder’s fees, rewards, and sales to private collectors amounted to over ten billion credits. Savvy investing and private short term loans swelled the accounts by another two billion.

The real estate folder surprised him even more than the bank balance. He’d known about the buildings in Kima District that Aria had given Shepard, but they made up just the peak of the mountain. They owned mining, metal fabrication, weapon fabrication, and assembly plants on ten planets. The geth had just begun reporting their mining, construction, and manufacturing stats, but even after the first week, Garrus had to give Shepard far more credit for foresight than he’d guessed at. The whole time he thought she’d been playing it by ear, just racing to catch up. Turned out she’d been ten steps ahead the whole time.

“Spirits, woman, why couldn’t you have been ten steps ahead of that gunman?” He closed his eyes and leaned his head in his hands.

“I was, Garrus. I started preparing you back on Feros.”

He prepared datapads with the information pertinent to all the key players. He’d hold a brief meeting in the morning to set the gears moving, start organizing for a large planning conference on Omega in three days time.

The door opened. Garrus straightened and turned to face Anderson. Allowing only the deep lines around his eyes and mouth show his weariness, the captain strode over, straight and square, the
very picture of buttoned down. Anderson should have been born turian.

He settled himself on the edge of the bed, forearms on his knees. “Any luck?”

“She didn’t make it too hard to get in. The resources and network she orchestrated is amazing. We’ll still have to keep a tight grip on the credit chits, but it’s a very good start.” Garrus gathered up the datapads. “If it’s all right with you, sir, we’ll get everyone together in the comm room at 0800, get ourselves organized, decide on the other players we need to bring in, then head for Omega.”

Anderson nodded. “Will do. Hackett was going to return to the fifth fleet, but I think he’ll be a useful ally. I’ll invite him to Omega.” The captain straightened, tilted his head back to one side and cracked his neck. “He’s still not convinced of the Reaper threat, but he had a front row seat for Sovereign, so I don’t think it’ll take much to bring him on board.”

Garrus nodded and stood. “It’s surprising how easy it becomes to believe in the two kilometre long monsters after you’ve seen one try to carve its way out of the Citadel.” His omnitool beeped, alerting him to an incoming message. He opened it, skimming down the header to the decryption information. “It’s Barla Von. Has to be. He and Shepard went to absolute ridiculous lengths to ensure their messages didn’t get intercepted.”

It took all his decryption talent—which was considerable—everything he knew about Shepard, and some wild guesses before the message opened. When it did, he knew why the financier took such elaborate precautions. “Von reports that they’ve been able to collect five scows worth of salvage from Sovereign, and they’re still working. They’ve found several large pieces. He figures he should be able to bring eight to ten scows worth to Omega. We just need to provide an escort.”

The captain nodded. “We need to know how to hurt them, especially if as many of them are coming as you believe.” Anderson stood and held out his hand. “Get some sleep, son. We’ve got a hell of a lot of work ahead of us.”

Garrus stood and shook the offered hand. “We do. Goodnight, Captain.” He strode to the door, but stopped at the threshold and turned back. “Um, sir . . . the book on her nightstand there . . .” He ducked his head, mandibles dipping and spreading in a bashful grimace. “I was reading it to her.”

Anderson scooped it up and strode over, placing it in Garrus’s hands. “I read to her when she was in the hospital as a teenager. She used to hound me to perform all the voices, and god help me, I gave in every single time.” He chuckled and shook his head, his throat working. “She was so broken back then, but so strong. She never stopped amazing me.”

Garrus palmed the control and stepped through. He held up the book. “Thank you.” Turning, he fled before Anderson could call him son again. It made him uncomfortable. Replacing Shepard as Nihlus’s partner in the war already hung from him with the weight of all those who’d yet to die in that fight. He couldn’t bear the extra weight of being Anderson’s last tie to Shepard.

“Garrus.” Anderson called after him. When he turned back, the captain held a pillow. Anderson shrugged, his eyes red and glassy. “She spent her first sixteen years as someone else’s daughter.” His eyes looked to the deck plating, his voice thickening and going tight with the cost of maintaining his iron clad emotional control. “But she spent the last thirteen as mine.” He held out the pillow. “I can’t even move her things.” When Garrus didn’t make a move to take it, Anderson tossed it to him, but it landed short. “Someone left me once. It was all that helped me sleep. You haven’t slept in nearly four days.”
Garrus glanced toward the crew, but the wake had progressed to the point where they sat around in groups telling heavily slurred stories. He considered refusing, saying that he was fine without it, and letting it lie there. Damn it. He bent down and snatched it up, nodding his thanks before he spun, practically bolting for the elevator. Not that he didn’t appreciate the empathy, but the more professional everyone kept things, the better.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he made it into the elevator without notice. Not that he begrudged the crew the outlet, but he needed silence and time to get his head straight. He’d indulged himself long enough. Judging by Nihlus’s dedication to maintaining a minimum .15 blood alcohol level since Shepard’s death, it was going to fall to him to take the wheel. Which suited him fine. Over time he’d get to where the emptiness calloused over, and until then, preparation efforts for the Reapers couldn’t help but benefit from him pouring every ounce of his energy into them.

He left the elevator and headed straight for the shuttle. He’d throw the bench cushions on the floor, lock the hatch and go through the information in more detail until he fell asleep. Anderson was right about him not having slept since Shepard died other than dozing for a few hours that morning. He should be completely exhausted. He was completely exhausted, he just didn’t know how he was going to manage to sleep.

“Vakarian.”

He jumped, a hand slapping against his keel as he spun to face the voice. “Wrex.” A harsh, embarrassed rumble rolled through his second larynx. “I thought everyone was up drinking.”

The krogan chuckled, that deep rolling cough of sound. “You’re getting jumpy in your old age, Garrus.” He shook his massive head and held up a bottle. “I have my own. Parties are for the gloriously deceased. Shepard . . .” He shook his head again. “Shepard was bushwhacked by cowards. All that sort of death deserves is vengeance. I’ll remember her when I thrust my blade into those pyjaks’ hearts and their blood pours over my fist.”

He upended the bottle, chugging down almost a hand’s width to finish it off, then let out a roar encapsulating the collected anguish of the entire crew as he smashed it in the corner. “Shepard was the first hope the krogan have known since the genophage, the first alien . . . hell, the first person to stand up and say that the krogan are worth saving . . . that they can stand with the rest of the galaxy as equals.” He slumped. “Now . . .”

Garrus strode over and laid his hand on the pauldron of Wrex’s armour. “Now we pick up what she started and keep going, Wrex. We stick with the plan and show the galaxy that the krogan are ready . . . that their courage and ingenuity helped save us all. And this time, we don’t let them forget it.” He sat on the crate next to Wrex’s. “You weren’t back on Tuchanka long. Get anything happening back home?”

Wrex harrumphed. “The female shaman has distributed just about all the krogan artifacts. That got me meetings with the female clan leaders. They nearly killed me to get the genophage cure data, but agreed to setting up a lab in Urdnot territory as long as I declare it neutral ground and make a protected area for the females who want to be involved.”

Garrus frowned. “Your females live separately? Have their own clans?”

The behemoth nodded, his whole body dipping and swaying with the motion. “They have to. For their own protection.” A harsh chuff followed that. “And ours. Nothing is more precious than a fertile female. Males fight over them, blood rage sets in, someone ends up hurt or killed . . . sometimes females or young. Things were different before the genophage, but since . . .” Those huge, red eyes looked up at Garrus full of what looked like regret. “We can change that over time.
Tuchanka’s not a safe place, keeps you sharp and strong, but females and young shouldn’t have to worry about getting killed by the males.”

Garrus nodded. “I know Shepard gave what data you managed to get off the computer to Dr. Chakwas, and she’s working with a couple of other people she trusts to put the rest of it together. You just worry about unifying the clans and wrestling thresher maws.” He grinned and tipped his head a little. “And rebuilding the rachni into a cooperative race.”

Wrex nodded toward the back corner. “I see she’s still here.”

“Yeah, although Shiala says that after Omega, the queen wants us to revisit Ilos and see if there is any chance of settling her there.” Garrus let out a long breath. “It would be a good fit if we can make certain there’s no Reaper tech. No one knows how to get there but us. They’d get a chance to rebuild in peace.” He gave the battlemaster a hearty slap. “Well, we’ll discuss all that when we get everyone together on Omega. Get some rest, you have a people to unite, rachni to help rebuild, and thresher maws to tame.”

“Ha!” Wrex bellowed out a sharp laugh, the sound like grinding boulders. “I should have all that done by midday.” He stood and stretched. “She didn’t look it on the outside, but inside, Shepard was all krogan.”

Garrus stood. “She was something. I don’t think any of us will meet anyone like her again.” His throat closed again, the pain behind his keel forcing him to take shallow breaths as he backed away, heading for the shuttle. Exhaustion proved an intractable enemy when dealing with his emotions. He’d made it fifteen cycles into being an adult without having to worry about getting his heart broken. Now, he seemed to be making up all those cycles in a single shot.

Would you trade it? Would you give back the last couple of months to avoid feeling this?

Wrex grumbled, not seeming to notice Garrus retreating. “Yeah, she was all krogan.” His massive shoulders slumped. “See yah, Garrus.”

Garrus headed over to the shuttle and opened the hatch, placing the pillow and book on one of the front seats while he made the crew compartment comfortable. He dragged the bench cushions onto the floor and threw a couple of blankets over them. Try as he might to relax his throat and breathe . . . to wrestle the mournful ache back under control, each breath just drew the strings tighter.

He stripped off his tunic and boots, then retrieved the pillow and book. Maybe he could read for a while. His human common was getting pretty good. That last night Shepard had only had to tell him the definition of one word. He held the book up, staring at it. Did it matter? As much as he enjoyed the whole hard-boiled detective tale, he’d done it for her . . . to take her mind off the million worries pulling her in as many directions.

“If you stop reading those stories, I’ll kick your ass, Garrus,” her voice whispered through his thoughts. His mandibles dropped, and he let out a low keen. “Don’t throw me away just because it hurts. I’ll be closest in the moments you’re doing our things.”

He set the book down at one end of the cushions and laid down. Damn, even paper thin cushions on the floor of a shuttle was more comfortable than that bed. He spread a couple of blankets over himself, then tucked her pillow between his head and his cowl. Closing his eyes, he breathed in, her scent enveloping him and suddenly he became certain that if he opened his eyes, she’d be there, curled in next to him. It became so real that his front side warmed, her slight weight pressing into his plates.
“I had so many plans for us,” he whispered to the air. “I didn’t want to scare you by laying out everything I saw for us, but I never intended to let you further than an arm’s length away. If we died in flames, fighting Reapers, we’d die together, wearing one another’s coillasi. If we survived, and ever saw the end of war, I thought maybe we’d live somewhere quiet, put down the guns, and who knows . . . maybe even have a family.” The soft keen broke the air again and he curled around the pillow, pulling it in against him.

“I’m sorry I let you down, Kahri. I got careless, and I destroyed the lifetime we could have spent together. Spirits, I hope you’re okay wherever you are. I hope your family is there with you, and you’re happy.” For long moments, he just held the last remnants of her close, the pain of the hollow place where she should be escaping as a soft cry, low and deep in his throat. Eventually, it died away as exhaustion won, and he slipped into a light, fitful sleep.

**Coillas (Coillasi - plural)** -- The chains that hold turian bonding robes closed. After the ceremonies, they are wrapped and fastened around the wrists of both bond-mates. They are traditionally made out of the shell of a mollusk analogue that dwells in the shallow tide pools along the rocky shores of the equatorial oceanic areas. The chains are carved already linked and are nearly unbreakable.
Chapter Summary

Time to start getting on with life . . . if the council allows it.

“You look like you spent the night stuck under the shuttle rather than sleeping in it,” Tali said, slipping into the chair across from Garrus at breakfast. She listed sideways until her head propped up in her hand was all that kept her from slithering down onto the floor.

“And you look like you spent the night drinking up my entire stash of incredibly expensive triple-filtered brandy.” He raised his brow plates and his volume, some amused, sadistic part of him chuckling as she slid lower and lower in her chair. If anyone pulled that on him when he’d overindulged, they’d find themselves unable to talk for a few minutes. Amazing what a quick blow to the larynx could do. “Or am I mistaken about that?” he shouted.

“Ow! No,” Tali squawked as she winced, her elbow slipping. She banged her forearm on the edge of the table. “Owww. Garrus, that was mean.” Rubbing her arm, she stood and stomped over to the cupboards, grumbling about mean turians.

Guilt walked up the back of his neck like fingers, setting off a prickly sort of tingling along his nerves. Tali couldn’t be held responsible for his misery. “Better head over to see the doc soon, get something for the hangover. Drink lots of water. I expect to see you at 0800 in the comm room,” he called after her. “Don’t come half dead.” He finished his meal, picked up his dishes and a small stack of datapads. He walked over to wash his dishes. “Pass the word . . . at 0801, I trigger a shipwide fire alarm if everyone isn’t there and functional.” He wouldn’t feel the slightest guilt over that, although maybe he should.

Maybe the rest of them needed a couple of days recovery time. He’d lose his mind if he had to spend even half a day sitting still, but the rest of them . . . Shepard had intended to give them all a week off. He let out a sharp sigh; he’d bring it up at the briefing and see what everyone thought.

She flipped both hands, shooing him. “Yes, sir, Officer Grouch, sir.” She shooed him again, more forcefully that time. “Go, let us suffer in peace until your meeting.”

Garrus glanced over his shoulder, his attention snagged by Ashley stumbling around the divider, her toes dragging with every step. When she reached the table, she collapsed against it. “Uuuurrrgggg . . . God, someone please tell me that my alarm was a lie, and I can go back to bed until my head shrinks five sizes. Where’s the coffee?”

“Ashley,” Tali wheedled, her pathetic tone making Garrus smile despite himself, “Officer Grumpy is being mean to me.”

“Mean? Show up late to the meeting, and you’ll discover mean.” Garrus chuckled. He stacked his clean dishes in the rack then turned to face Ash, shaking his head at the gunnery chief’s miserable state. “0800, comm room. Be functional.” Snatching up his datapads, he strode for the stairs to the CIC. “Remember, anyone isn’t there, fire alarms will be tripped.”

Ashley shot a rueful glare at him from under her tussled mop of black hair. “I hate you a lot right
now, sir.” Looking over at Tali, she scratched her stomach through her t-shirt. “Do I have to call him sir?”

“Yes, Chief Williams,” Anderson’s voice boomed out even before he strode around the bulkhead, “you do.” He looked over the two young women and shook his head. “I hope this isn’t the best that we can expect from this crew today.”

Ashley pulled a passable if a little wobbly salute. “No, sir. We’ll be right as rain after a couple cups of coffee and a bowl full of aspirin bran cereal, sir.”

“Aspirin bran?” Tali asked, cocking her head a little. “But one is a grain husk and the other is an analge . . . analges . . .” She pressed a hand to the side of her hood. “. . . pain . . . thing.”

“Yeah.” Ashley started adding sugar to her coffee, pausing a couple of times and then apparently deciding it was a day for a little coffee with her sugar. “It’s like Raisin Bran, but with aspirin instead of raisins. It tastes gross, but the relief is nice.”

The med bay door opened and Kaidan shuffled out, the heel of one hand pressed to his temple. “Speak for yourself, Williams. Someone shoot me. Please, put me out of my misery. It’ll be a kindness.”

Garrus shook his head and took the stairs two at a time as he heard what sounded like a stack of mugs falling out of the cupboard, the clatter followed by a chorus of very imaginative curses.

What’s a whorebinder?

The comm room stood empty when he walked in, but he hadn’t expected any different. With nearly an hour until the meeting, and considering how much alcohol everyone had consumed the night before, most people would be slow starting. He wanted to have a chance to prepare, to steel himself against the gut twisting emptiness of stepping into Shepard’s shoes. Luckily, that morning, they just had to go through a quick run down to make sure everyone had what they needed before heading to Omega.

“Garrus?” Joker’s voice came through the room’s comm system. The pilot didn’t sound hung over, but his voice lacked any of its usual snarky crackle. “Barla Von calling for you. It sounds important, he’s almost not pausing to wheeze between words.”

Garrus chuffed. “Put him through Joker. And, Joker, considering that it’s going to be Von paying your salary if the Alliance kicks you out . . .”

“Understood. Suck up to the volus. Roger that, sir. Patching him through.”

A wry smile made his mandibles flutter once.

Kahri, this group of misfits you put together might just save my sanity.

As he waited for the call to connect, he wondered when exactly he’d undergone the transition from being a loner. In the military, even in C-Sec, he was the one who volunteered for extra shifts rather than going out with the gang. He had a few close friends, but now suddenly, he was part of a big, really unusual family.

The little volus appeared in holographic form, cutting off that line of inquiry. “Officer Vakarian. I thought you’d want to know.” He paused for a quick intake of breath. “The council is holding a memorial this evening for Captain Shepard. They are posthumously granting her a medal for valour in defense of the citizens of the galaxy.” After rushing through the last two sentences, he
sucked in a long, gasping draught of ammonia.

Fury burned through Garrus like a spark touched to flash paper. His jaw locked tight as he fought to stamp out the flame enough to speak. Those bastards. Those cowardly, indoctrinated cloacas. “When?” he managed to grunt between his teeth. The sound of heavy footsteps on the deck plating let him know he wasn’t alone. He hadn’t heard the door.

“They’re trying to claim her as their hero?” Nihlus roared from behind Garrus, his voice echoing off the bulkheads. “Those bastards.” He opened his omnitool. “They can’t get away with this. I have my hardsuit recording from the alley. I can . . ..”

Garrus turned from Von, an emotion very like gratitude flowing through him as dealing with Nihlus allowed him to wrestle his own anger under control. “Nihlus, stay calm. However we respond to this, we have to deal with it rationally. If we fly in there half-cocked, we’ll all just end up arrested.” He nodded toward the chair Shepard had used. “Sit down. Calm down. The others will be here in a few minutes.” Holding the Spectre’s stare, he waited until Nihlus nodded and walked over to take his seat. “Don’t worry,” he said. “We won’t let it go unanswered.”

Turning to Von, Garrus said, “Thank you for letting us know, Barla Von. We’re meeting in a few moments to start planning the war council on Omega. Once we know how we intend to go forward, I’ll call you back.”

“Very good.” The volus gave him a little bow. “The memorial is at 1500 Citadel time in the gardens at the Asari Cultural Center. Security is expected to be high, as is attendance.”

Garrus glanced behind him as he heard the door open. Anderson strode down the ramp. Giving the captain a quick nod, he turned back to the volus. “The council still hasn’t sworn out warrants for us?”

“No,” Von answered and then sucked in a wheezing breath. “In fact, they’re repudiating all claims that they were responsible for Shepard’s assassination.”

“What’s this about?” Anderson asked, sitting next to Nihlus.

Garrus let the question go, focusing on Barla Von, and it took focus to speak. His mind raced, trying to figure out a way to stop the council from hijacking Shepard’s memory. Spirits, she’d hate being paraded around by the enemy as the hero of yet another battle she’d been forced to fight. She’d probably haunt Udina, throwing him down stairs and tossing the contents of his home and office at him until he died of heart failure. “I’ll call you back within the next couple of hours once we’ve had a chance to discuss our options. Thank you again for letting us know.”

The volus disappeared, and Garrus turned to face Anderson. “The council is holding a memorial for Shepard, awarding her a medal for saving their asses.” Surprising him, Anderson laughed, and his anger flared again. How could Anderson be so cavalier about such a massive insult?

“Take her and turn her into a propaganda campaign to pull the wool over everyone’s eyes.” Anderson shook his head and leaned forward with his elbows on his thighs. “Pat everyone on the head. Don’t worry, Sovereign was a single case, a dreadnought controlled by Saren.”

Nihlus bristled, turning on the captain. “We can’t let them get away with it. They’ll lead the entire galaxy to the slaughter.” The Spectre lunged out of his seat and paced across the room and back. “There has to be something we can do.”

“The fact is that we aren’t going to be able to stop them, Nihlus.” Anderson shrugged, a rumbling
sigh following his words. “We can’t be there every second. If we are, we’ll either end up indoctrinated or dead.”

Nihlus growled low and dangerous through his second larynx, but nodded. Garrus took a deep breath of relief. At least he wouldn’t have to fight Nihlus over everything. The foundations holding the Spectre together had been obliterated, but Garrus saw that the spine of him remained.

“We won’t let this go unchallenged,” Garrus said. He sat down in his usual chair, using the familiar perspective to anchor himself. He needed to stay calm, the steady hand on the thrusters to steer the ship through the minefields spread before them. “We just need to figure out what shape the challenge will take, and for that we need the team.”

He leaned back in his chair, watching Nihlus in the peripheral of his vision. The Spectre swayed ever so slightly even then, either still under the effects of the previous night’s drinking, or having gotten an early start. Still, his stare looked bright and focused, and his movement didn’t appear erratic. The question whispered through Garrus’s thoughts: how much experience as a functional drunk did Nihlus have? Maybe the drinking amounted to the return of an old behaviour rather than the formation of a new one.

“Barla Von could get us onto the Citadel,” Anderson said after a few minutes of silence. He braced his forearms on his knees and clasped his hands, looking up at Garrus without raising his head. “Wouldn’t take him more than a couple of hours to secure fake ID’s for as many as wanted to go ashore. We could meet one of the Shadow Broker’s ships a couple of relays out and switch ships.”

Garrus nodded, the ghost of a plan starting to come together. “We need more information.” He frowned, mandibles dropped. “We need other sources of information. Barla Von and the Shadow Broker do well by us, but I want to open up our sources, cast a wider net so to speak.”

“Agreed, although it’s a little late to do much about today.” Anderson looked over as the door opened and the rest of the team started filing through. Garrus watched him, trying to see what hid under the political savvy and resignation, but Anderson proved inscrutable. Surely, he had to be furious over the council’s attempted hijacking. Still, Garrus gave up without discovering anything. He hoped he gave as little away as the human did, but he doubted it.

“Take your seats,” Garrus told the others, turning his attention to them. “Something urgent has come up.” He waited until everyone sat. As he did, the room—even the ship—settled around him as he felt the mantle of leadership transfer. For a moment, he sensed what Shepard must have seen in him all along, but then it faded. He let out a resigned sigh. Maybe one day it would return to stay.

He cleared his throat. “Okay, everyone, let’s have quiet.” When only the Normandy’s background hum competed with him to be heard, he leaned forward, bracing against his knees. “Barla Von contacted us to let us know that the council is holding a memorial for Shepard in about ten hours. They’re giving her a posthumous medal for saving them and the Citadel.”

Ashley collapsed back into her seat. “I think my hangover is coming back. I feel sick.”

“That’s not the hangover,” Kaidan replied, sitting straighter in his chair. “What are we going to do? Sneak aboard, crash it?”

“Crashing it isn’t going to make any difference in the end,” Ashley said. “They’ll forget her in a couple of weeks, create a legend that works for their agenda.” She let out a harsh bark of bitter laughter and jumped up out of her seat. “Trust me, the truth doesn’t get in the way.” She paced to the door. “Damn it.” She slammed the heel of her hand into the metal. “But not her. They shouldn’t
be able to have her.”

“Ashley.” She spun to face him, her mouth opening to shout, but she stopped when Garrus met her angry stare with a calm one. He tilted his head toward her chair. “Shepard doesn’t want your bitterness. Don’t burden her memory with that.”

“There’s nothing we can do to stop their revisionist history,” Tali said. She stood, her hands wringing for a second. “Ashley’s right, they’ll turn Shepard into what they need. In the end, that doesn’t matter. What matters is that when we had the chance, we stood up and did the right thing.” The silvery reflection of her eyes turned to Garrus. “We need to get a plan in motion now if we’re going to make it there in time.”

“Agreed,” Legion said, drawing Garrus’s attention. The geth turned toward Tali. “Creator Zorah, we believe that together geth and the creators can make a statement that honours Shepard-Captain’s memory.”

Looking around the room, Garrus saw agreement in every set of eyes. None of them could live with Shepard being hijacked by the council. They all loved her, and they’d all lost her. He, Nihlus and Anderson weren’t alone in that. He felt it bond him to them. Before they had all been her people . . . her team. They’d become his. Even Nihlus and Anderson.

“All right.” He stood and opened a channel to Barla Von. They could hold their meeting on the way to rendezvous with their transport.

* * * * *

“Keep your eyes open for Nihlus,” Garrus called over the nervous mutters and shuffling. He understood their discomfort: an airlock full of military personnel going into battle dressed in civvies. He felt just as naked as they did without his guns and armour, but he needed them to maintain military discipline. Armed or not, his people were headed into enemy territory.

“Eyes front!” he called, drowning out the noise this time and bringing silence. “Somehow Nihlus got off the ship before us. He’s been drinking. Depending on how much he’s had, he could be showing little to no caution. Keep your eyes open.” His hand rose to his hip, but found only fabric. The compulsion hit him again, some twitch deep in his brain demanding that he never go anywhere without a gun. Damn, why couldn’t he stop checking for a weapon that wasn’t there?

He forced his hand to stop halfway to his hip the next time. “Stay together. We’ll take transport to the Citadel tower transit station and walk from there.” He stretched taller, using his height to see to the back of the transport’s airlock, every eye looking to him. “Remember, we’re here to make a peaceful statement. Shepard wouldn’t want any of you to get hurt or end up arrested on her behalf. Pay her tribute the best way you know how . . . follow her example.”

“So, we should start a bar fight, then leap off the balconies in the embassy, and start praising the Enkindlers in the square?” Kaidan asked. His eyes sparkled as everyone around him laughed, but the emotion on his face wasn’t humour. The lieutenant brushed away tears with a quick swipe of his hand and held Garrus’s gaze.

Garrus smiled and nodded slowly, both appreciating Kaidan diffusing the tension and how much it cost him. “Exactly,” he replied, “except the opposite.” He looked to Anderson.

Anderson straightened and squared his shoulders. “Everyone here knows what Shepard wanted. As far as those of us assembled here are concerned . . .”
Pressly pushed through the crew to stand at their head. “We were her crew, Captain . . . her sword and her shield.” He stood at attention, rigid and implacable. “She may have made us wonder about her sanity and her methods from time to time, but she never steered us wrong.” The older officer looked up at Garrus. “She pointed us to Vakarian here and made him the general at the head of this fight. That makes us his sword and his shield.” He saluted Garrus.

After a moment of stunned surprise, Garrus saluted him back. “Thank you, Navigator Pressly.”

Anderson gave his XO a hard smile and nodded. “You heard the general. We’re here to pay respects, not cause a riot. Don’t give C-Sec any reason to move against us.” The captain turned to the door as the decon cycle ended and the outer hatch opened. “Let’s move.”

The general. Garrus hesitated at the threshold, staring out at the dock. Somehow he’d gotten on a ship and flown away from that place as a senior investigator for C-Sec, returning a few short months later as the general in charge of the galaxy’s smallest army. All because a praela roared into his life upon a gestallan wind and completely changed his fate. Those sorts of things only happened in the great legends. They certainly didn’t happen to torins like him.

Anderson glanced back over his shoulder, pulling Garrus over the threshold with a nod as if he’d read Garrus’s thoughts. Fine. If they needed him to be a general, he would find a way to be the best damned one he could. He jogged to the head of the line, striding at Anderson’s side.

“General Vakarian,” the Captain said, casting a quick smile his way. “You know wherever she is, Shepard’s grinning like a fool over that. Particularly over Pressly giving you the promotion.”

Nodding, Garrus remained silent, the warmth of her presence flaring through him then settling like a low burning candle in the pit of his gut.

They made it to the nearest transit station without attracting any attention at all. It surprised Garrus, and set his heart thumping a little harder and faster. His body felt something off in the very fabric of the Citadel and it kept pricking his nerves, keeping him poised to run or fight. Still, the C-Sec officers in the area glanced over the crew without any particular notice, dismissing them as just a few more faces amongst the press of people crowding through on the way to the Presidium.

Kaidan, Anderson, and Tali rode with him. Traffic clogged the airways, moving more and more slowly as they neared the Presidium. Although he saw the odd tendril of smoke curling into the air, the presidium clean up had moved along a lot more quickly than he would have thought.

“The Citadel looks pretty good,” Kaidan said, echoing Garrus’s thoughts when they finally landed. The lieutenant got out of the car and turned a slow circle. “At least the Presidium does.”

“Sovereign tried to carve its way out through Tayseri Ward. The rest of the Citadel managed to avoid taking more than small arms fire and missile damage,” Anderson said, looking around as well. “It seems like more than four days . . . six since Sovereign.”

“Let’s move off so the others can land.” Garrus walked over to the base of the tower. The Citadel had been his home for a lot of cycles, but in his time with Shepard it had transformed into something both foreign and dangerous. He could scarcely believe how much the galaxy had changed in those three months . . . how much his life had changed. How much he’d changed. Maybe it all boiled down to the changes in him and seeing all the old, familiar things through a new lens.

He forced his mind away from the melancholy. He needed to stay sharp and alert, not brooding inside his head. When the last taxi dropped off its passengers, he started for the park a couple of
blocks further up the Presidium.

They’d just about arrived when Garrus’s inner alarm went off with a shriek, stopping him so abruptly that Kaidan ran into his heels. He frowned, his heart hammering against his chest wall, and the sting of nettles prickling down his spine. C-Sec had alerted to something. Despite the huge crowd that filled the gardens and spilled out past the entrance, Garrus could spot every single C-Sec officer, even the plain clothes ones. All the ones around the park became restless at the same time, their hands rising to their ears, which meant a bulletin or dispatch over their radios.

“Something going on?” Kaidan asked, stepping up beside him.

Garrus nodded, his heart slowing a little as none of the officers in the area seemed the least bit interested in the Normandy crew. In fact . . .. “Yeah. C-Sec just went on high alert.”

“Think it’s about us?” The lieutenant turned to watch their backs.

“No.” Garrus nodded toward the closest officers, all of whom had looked up. He followed their stares, his heart leaping into his throat, choking him as it ached, torn between beauty and sorrow.

“Oh my god,” Ashley gasped, a startled combination laugh and sob escaping as the chief shaded her eyes against the bright, artificial sunlight.

The sun warmed the side of Garrus’s face as he lifted a hand to his brow, his heart trying to bludgeon its way out through his plates.
above image was painted by CuriousCanvas as part of our MEBB14 submission. It is inspired by this scene. Check her out on Tumblr. She does amazing work.

Shepard stopped halfway through pulling her nightwear from her closet and turned to look at him, an incredulous grin slowly spreading across her face. “Sweet baby Jesus, Garrus . . . we’re taking the first landing party down to Rannoch. Over three hundred years of exile . . . and in the morning, it ends. When I was a kid, I wanted so badly to get off Mindoir and have adventures, but this . . .
“This is a whole other level.”

One hand flopped a little as she tried to put her awe into words. He loved when she did that—her emotions so strong that she had to beat them down into words, but she could never seem to find ones big enough to fit. “Our little Tali will be remembered for as long as there are quarians.”

Shaking her head, she blinked back the shine of tears and turned back to her closet.

He nodded, watching her with an incredulous awe of his own. How the tiny, crazy, impossible woman managed the miracles she pulled off . . . He wanted to say that she would be remembered just as long for being the driving force behind it all, but he knew she’d just blow it off. No matter what she did, she parcelled up the credit and gave it away to others. Wrestling aside his emotions to find words, he said, “It’s extraordinary, and it all started with one of the best shots I’ve ever seen.”

Shepard laughed. “One of? Oh, Officer, you will pay for that one. You know . . . one day when you aren’t covered in bullet holes and blast damage.”

A double line of ships moved along the length of the Citadel, flying between the ward arms toward them. Each pair consisted of a geth and a quarian ship. The line stretched as far as he could see, the ships moving slowly, the emergency lights along their hulls blinking the ‘Missing Sailor’ signal. He closed his eyes, listening. The engines of the ships thrummed low and deep, adding a back rhythm to the moment as the crowd started to realize something incredible was happening right before their eyes, and a tangible sense of awe burst into being.

The shockwave of a tiny nova of hope, reverence and gratitude rolled toward him. He turned back toward their destination as it washed over him.

“That’s all the memorial she’d ever need, right there,” Garrus whispered as he opened his eyes, watching the crowd rather than the ships moving past. Eyes of every kind and colour turn to watch the very real hope of peace and cooperation fly past. Whispers of wonder accompanied smiles and then laughter and delight as reality registered in every mind and heart there. A couple of days before, they’d almost been snuffed out, but then a tiny woman, her partner, and the unlikely alliance of people she’d formed had saved the day.

When he’d watched Tali and Kal’Reegar step onto the surface of Rannoch ten days before, Garrus felt the most remarkable sense of being a part of living history. He’d never experienced anything to compare with it, and through it all, he’d watched Shepard, wondering how the galaxy had come to rotate around her. However it happened, he’d been honoured and humbled to be a part of it. Standing there, the proof of her life flying past, signalling its grief at her loss, he felt that sense return again. At that moment, he realized that the galaxy hadn’t just tilted around Shepard’s fulcrum, it tilted around him as well. For whatever reason, he’d been chosen to take a place on the leading edge of changing the galaxy forever. “No pressure,” he whispered under his breath.

He looked back up at the line of ships and said, “No matter what the council and Udina do to her memory, that’s her legacy.”

Wrex grumbled, a small thunderclap of sound rolling up the line of crew. “A part of it.” He chuckled, the sound almost more fierce than his growl. “Now we just need to get together a parade of rachni riding thresher maws.”

Garrus laughed along with the rest of the crew. That sight would keep the fools awake at night.

A hand slipped into his, gripping his talons tight. He didn’t need to look down to know who it was. “Is this what Legion meant?” he asked, keeping his voice soft and his subvocals flat.
“Yes. He and I called the ships that remained after the attack,” Tali replied. She tugged at his hand a little. “We should keep moving and do this. She’ll be disgusted if we get ourselves arrested.”

“She would have loved this, Tali,” Garrus said, starting back toward the garden. The glow of Shepard’s presence that resided in his gut began to brighten, filling him with confidence. “Your courage impressed her, and not just the charge headlong into danger kind. She considered your willingness to give the geth a chance, risking everything to take that first scouting party to Rannoch, the bravest thing she’d ever witnessed.”

Tali’s fingers gripped his talons tighter, but she didn’t answer that. Instead, she nodded toward the crowd. “They feel it, Garrus. They may not understand exactly what it is or why they feel it, but they do. They know what she did for all of us, and one day they’ll understand the rest . . . what we’re going to do for them in her honour.”

He nodded and squeezed her hand. “Okay, let’s keep moving before we all end up in . . .” He stopped, scowling as the sound of crashing, glass breaking, and people shouting erupted ahead of them.

“They’re lying to you, and you’re all too stupid or indoctrinated to even know!”

“That’s Nihlus’s drunken shouting, isn’t it?” Alenko asked, then cursed under his breath.

“She didn’t save you from Saren!” the Spectre cried out. “She saved you from these vipers. There are a thousand more like Sovereign on the way, and these so-called representatives of ours intend to trade all of you to save their own hides!”

C-Sec officers began to tear their eyes off the sky, moving in toward the park. Garrus let out a growling sigh, his gut dropping. Damn that idiot Spectre. After everything Shepard went through to save his stupid, grieving ass.

Frustration and anger shoved aside Garrus’s grief. If the council didn’t kill Nihlus, in that moment, Garrus couldn’t guarantee he wouldn’t save them the trouble and do it himself.

**Praela(s)** -- The name for ancient warrior spirits who were believed to ride great beasts (or forces of nature) into war at the head of their tribe’s legions. Spirits of great bravery, tenacity, and a fearsome beauty.

**Gestallan** -- (particularly in reference to the wind or other force of nature) Of encompassing change. A change of fate or fortune. In turian mythology, it was believed that Praelas rode such winds as their steeds, charging into battle to change the fates of individuals, tribes, and whole planets.
Chapter Summary

Shepard's council memorial. It was a simple plan. Go in, play their respects... look the council in the eye.

**Fratrim** -- Brother, but one of honour, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus.

**Karifratrus** -- a blood oath made between turians, bonding them as siblings in honour rather than blood. It has its origins in ancient tribal culture. Clan members swore oaths before going into battle. If one of them died, the family and all dependents of the other would be adopted into the survivor's family. While the oath-swears are alive, they are bonded as close or closer than blood. If bond-mates are involved, the bond can be a three (four) way romantic or platonic relationship. Children of one are considered the children of both. Although no longer as common as it once was, karifratrus is accepted and honoured both socially and legally.

“Let’s get in there.” Garrus shoved his concern and anger aside and looked to the captain walking at his side. “Anderson, you and I will grab Nihlus and get him back to the alley to the wards. Alenko, Wrex, Tali, and Williams stick to the plan, then come take custody of our inebriated Spectre.” At the garden’s gate, he stopped and turned to face the line of crew. “Hold him there, wait for the rest of the crew. Once everyone has gone through, we’ll get him back to the transport. Be careful. Nihlus likely has a contract out on him. No one gets within a half klick. Keep sharp.”

“Roger that,” Alenko answered, his jaw set in a grim line.

“Okay, let’s go.” Garrus turned and struck out into the crowd, Tali dropping back to walk next to Liara. Bodies pressed close, but most people seemed to have settled into their places, and he wove through their numbers with greater ease than he’d expected. Having crowd control experience didn’t hurt either. It was amazing what the threat of a turian elbow jab could do to gain a little room.

“Nihlus hasn’t stopped drinking since she died, has he?” Anderson asked as they started forward, hurrying down the street.

Garrus just shook his head. Something cracked inside Nihlus when Saren tried to kill him, but being betrayed by the council, the body and ideal that he’d dedicated his life to serving... that had broken him. Shepard’s loss just reduced the pieces to dust.

“Don’t let them play you all for—”

Garrus and Anderson stepped up, hurrying down the left hand aisle toward a podium decorated lavishly with large arrangements of the same flowers—lilies, he believed they were called—the crew had placed on Shepard’s coffin. He stared at them for a moment, brow plates lowered, as his hand lifted to press over the pocket where his resided, wrapped in paper. Was it some sort of tradition, or did everyone, even Udina, know that she liked the elegant, white blossoms? Not that...
floral preferences had a place in battlefield banter, but it was just one more unpainted corner of Shepard’s canvas.

“Garrus!” Nihlus’s yell dragged him out of his self-pity as the Spectre spotted them. Staggering, Nihlus plowed into the front row, sending an asari diving for cover in the lap next to hers. “Garrus! Anderson! Tell them. You know what a lie this is.” Both arms stretched out to his sides and he spun, nearly falling through the large hologram of Shepard. “Look how many people came.”

Garrus grumbled as a vase of the frilly, white flowers smashed on the ground, knocked aside by a careless arm as Nihlus tried to regain his balance. Damn it. The idiot might be smashed out of his mind, but he was right about the attendance. Thousands sat and stood throughout the large green-space, but that just made it harder to get to the Spectre before he trashed the entire memorial.

Garrus winced as another flower arrangement perished, feeling both a profound sympathy and a wrenching embarrassment on the Spectre’s behalf. “Nihlus, stop!” he called. “You’re not honouring her like this. You’re turning her into a joke to be told at their parties and around water coolers.”

At that, Nihlus stopped dead, swaying drunkenly, a soft keen vibrating through the air. It trembled, lost and despairing. A fist punched through Garrus’s throat, icicle fingers wrapping around both larynges.

 Damn it, Shepard . . . look what you’ve done to him.

Garrus breathed through the choking pain and forced himself forward, an intense need to protect the other torin transforming ice into fire. They needed to get Nihlus out of there, give him time to grieve. In his current state, if C-Sec got ahold of him, the Spectre would be lucky to last the day.

Anderson pushed past Garrus to grab ahold of Nihlus’s arm. Twisting it behind the Spectre’s back, the captain used it to propel the inebriated turian down the main aisle. Garrus caught up about half way to the entrance and slipped his hand around Nihlus’s upper arm. All fight drained out of the Spectre, and he slumped, legs dragging.

“Spirits, Nihlus, stand up. Walk out of here with some damned pride.” Garrus yanked him up onto his feet, and whispered, just a low hiss at Nihlus’s aural canal, “Get up. You wonder why she chose me? Why she loved me? When you act like this?” He winced a little as he drove the knife in, but desperate times called for a cold slash of cruelty. “How could she love a torin who gives in, folding and tearing like wet paper at the slightest sign of difficulty?” He jabbed Nihlus with his elbow. “She must have found you so pathetic.”

Nihlus stiffened and spun on Garrus, yanking his arm free. “You . . .”

“What about me?” Garrus tilted his head, his mandibles fluttering a little in challenge as Nihlus looked into his eyes.

Come on, get angry. Curse me out. Try to kick my ass. Prove me wrong.

The Spectre cursed, some dim light of comprehension igniting in the depths of that stare. “Damn you.” He took a swing, but the blow sailed a foot wide of Garrus’s head. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know that you loved Shepard, and that you shouldn’t drink. That’s enough to start with.” Garrus took hold of Nihlus’s upper arm again. “Come on. Let’s get you out of here before you end up shot.”
“Why the hell do you care what happens to me, Vakarian?” Nihlus tried to wrestle free and just ended up going down on one knee.

Garrus lifted him back up, leaning closer so that his words wouldn’t go any further than them. “Because she loved you. That makes you my *fratrin* and my responsibility.”

The Spectre stopped, his wavering stare locking onto Garrus with alarming desperation. “*Fratrin*?” He gripped the lapels of Garrus’s tunic and pulled him in. “*Karifratarus*? What? Would you have . . . ?”

Garrus shoved Nihlus toward the alley. “We swore no oaths, Nihlus, and now she’s dead. Just keep moving.”

Between them, Garrus and Anderson kept the staggering Spectre on his feet and headed in the right direction. Scattered here and there throughout the crowd, C-Sec agents closed in. He pressed on, hoping they could get Nihlus to the alley before the net closed . . . a hope that died a moment later as a tall, blonde human stepped in front of them.

The man looked from Anderson to Nihlus then Garrus. He sighed, his rugged face creasing into a frown. “What’s going on here, Vakarian? I just got a call to arrest Spectre Kryik.”

“Bailey.” He leaned toward the man. Having known Bailey for years, he respected the human for his tough, but even-handed approach. Garrus just hoped he’d lean toward compassion when presented with the truth behind Nihlus’s situation. “Kryik had a thing for Shepard. He’s drunk. Let me take him back to our ship. You won’t see him until he’s sober.”

The human glanced in the direction of several of the incoming officers, then shook his head. “I’m trusting you on this, Vakarian.” He stepped aside and jerked his head toward the alley. “Get him out of here, and make it six months. I don’t know what’s going on, but the council wants his head. Keep it away from them, or they’ll cut it off.”

“Thanks, Bailey.” Garrus ducked behind a small cluster of onlookers to avoid another officer he knew, one he didn’t think would give them a pass. When they hit the stairs, he let out a long breath of relief.

“We’re not clear yet,” Anderson grumbled, stumbling backwards as Nihlus threw his head to the side, smacking the captain directly in the forehead. The hollow-melon thock echoed down the corridor. “Damn it, Kryik.”

Nihlus turned on him. “You. You were like her father, and you just let—”

Garrus cut him off, elbowing him under his lowest chest plate, knocking the wind out of him. “You’ll want to shut up now.” He stopped just before the elevator to the ward. “We had a plan, Nihlus, and you nearly screwed it up for everyone.”

“Someone had to say something. Your plan . . .” Nihlus shoved Garrus back, but the blow didn’t even stagger him.

Garrus grabbed the cowl of Nihlus’s tunic, sympathy going up in frustrated flames. “Listen to me. In a few minutes her crew is going to start showing up here to keep you from getting killed. They have just lost a commanding officer they loved and respected. You were her partner. They are going to be looking to you for strength and courage.” He shook Nihlus hard enough that he heard the Spectre’s teeth rattle. “Pull it together for them and for her.”

Nihlus shoved him, managing enough force to hurt. Garrus pushed him away, but stared him down
with a gaze that promised to end anything Nihlus started. After a few seconds, he heard Kaidan and the others jogging down the stairs.

“The relief has arrived, but um . . . we have a new problem, Garrus. Ash . . . .” Kaidan nodded back to where Normandy crew members continued to trickle down the stairs. “You should get up there and fast. She wouldn’t let me drag her out of there. Go ahead. We’ll keep him out of trouble.”

Garrus’s heart slid down into his lower intestines. What the hell was going on with everyone? The galaxy was going to believe that the entire coalition against the Reapers was comprised of lunatics.

Wrex grunted. “We could just take him back to the transport.”

Garrus bolted for the stairs without waiting for Anderson, but called back, “No. I don’t want us strung out across the wards access. Stay here, stay sharp. We’ll be back in a few minutes. I wouldn’t go at all, but damn it, I want those bastards to look me in the eye.”

Garrus headed up the stairs, able to hear Ash even though he couldn’t tell what she said. Damn it. Ash sat at the bottom of the list of people he expected to lose their shit, and now he had to drag another one of his insane, belligerent people out of the council’s face. The council didn’t know who he was, and for a reason. Shepard had worked hard to keep him clear of any meetings or communications. Now, because her people had learned far too well from her example, all that was getting flushed down the drain.

He grimaced. If she knew that he was drawing their attention, she’d probably kick his ass. At least she’d kick Nihlus and Ashley a lot harder.

Garrus shoved that concern into the drawer with all the others and picked up the pace. The weight of the Citadel pressed down heavier every moment he remained there . . . every moment his people remained there. He needed to get them out of there and quickly. As soon as he cleared the stairs, he heard what Ashley was shouting.

“. . . are supposed to be humanity’s ambassador, and you just fed her to these alien wolves for the sake of gaining a little bit more power.” The chief gripped Udina by the front of his suit jacket, their noses less than a centimetre apart. “Shepard might have brought aliens into the fight, but she was there for humanity. She refused to let these bastards sell out our entire species to save their own.” She threw him away from her, shoving him hard enough that he stumbled backwards over a flower arrangement, sending it smashing to the ground. The flowers were losing ground in the battle. “And she would have never sold us out for a bigger office and a fancy title.”

At that rate, none of the Normandy crew would ever be invited to any formal, fancy affairs. Garrus almost laughed, but then Ashley went after Tevos and Sparatus stepped between them. The old torin had been a hell of a warrior in his day, and Garrus knew that the chief would end up splattered all over something if she went up against him. At least, she would if Tevos didn’t warp her into a ball of human goo, first.

“Chief Williams!” Garrus barked, pulling her attention away from the council. “Stand down and get your ass back with the rest of the crew.”

She turned back to stare into Sparatus’s eyes for another moment, nearly growling as she said, “I’m not afraid of you, turian.” After a breathless moment Garrus spent praying that Sparatus and Tevos maintained their diplomatic calm, Ash spun on her heel, shoving past him. “Back off, Vakarian. You’re not my CO. You’re just as bad as the rest of these bastards. Where were you when Shepard needed you? Huh? Would she be dead now if she’d been a turian?”
Garrus staggered back from that blow, Anderson moving in to confront the chief. Ashley held her hands up, palms facing the livid captain. “Never mind, sir. I’m out of here. I don’t expect anyone here to understand honouring or standing up for one’s own people.” She shoved by them, lifting into a jog as soon as she got clear of the crowd.

Garrus watched her until she disappeared into the wards access, then let out a long sigh and turned toward Anderson. The two of them strode for the front side by side, arriving just as Udina stepped forward, calling for order.

“Everyone calm down,” the newest councillor called. “You all know that the geth and quarian fleets helped defend the Citadel against Saren’s dreadnought during the attack.” He waved for people to take their seats. “All of this has been part of the ceremony.”

Garrus chuckled as he stepped up to face Udina and Tevos, but it felt January-iron-cold in his mouth. “Even the drunken Spectre and the pissed off Marine, Udina?” He leaned in close. “I can’t stop you from taking her memory and distorting it, but know that one day, she’ll be proven to have been right all along. When that day comes and you run to us for shelter from the storm . . . remember this moment and that it was your hand on that gun just as it was yours, Madam Councillor.” He looked into Tevos’s eyes for a moment before turning on Sparatus and Valern. “And yours.”

Feeling a vague prickle down his spine and a tug on his hand warning him to retreat, he spun toward the holo of Shepard and snapped to attention.

He gave her image a turian salute, lifting his elbow to shoulder height, then touching the knuckles of his fist to the point of his keel. Turning to leave, he spotted his father in the crowd, seated next to the Executor, and hesitated. They locked stares, but then Herros shook his head, a subtle twitch to either side. As much as he longed for the comfort and solemn understanding promised in his father’s eyes, Garrus felt the wisdom of waiting. It surprised him, and he swore he saw surprise in the elder Vakarian’s eyes as well.

Garrus touched the backs of his talons to his brow before turning away and striding down the aisle between the seats. He didn’t possess anything he wished to say to the crowd. He could feel what Shepard had always said about the place and people. They all hid the truth: a magnificent fortress made fragile by termites gnawing their way through every wall and beam; bright, bleached smiles hiding teeth hollow and decayed. That truth pressed in on him, making it hard to breathe, and even though he would have never thought it, Omega beckoned, promising an honest freedom under the filth and despair.

As he followed Anderson down the aisle—every eye in the park focused on him, thousands of laser sights burning through his plates—Garrus felt Shepard walking beside him, her hand gripping his tight. Her essence, the fire and determination that had been smouldering deep in his belly flared up, burning through him with its certainty.

“You can do this,” it whispered through his thoughts. “You can lead these people and win this war. I know you can. Take care of my people . . . your people, General Vakarian.”

Garrus pulled in a deep breath and nodded. He stopped at the entrance to the park and turned back to look at the hologram of Shepard standing amidst the floral arrangements and pillars.

“Spirits, you would have hated this memorial, Kahri.” He laughed as the council returned to the podium, trying to look as if the Citadel hadn’t been invaded by a flotilla of geth and quarians, a drunk Spectre, and Shepard’s indignant crew. Imagining the chaos Shepard could have sown had she been there made him laugh, low and deep.
“I thought I’d lost you,” he whispered, staring at her image, “but you’re right here. You’ll always be right here.” He backed up, following Anderson, but not quite ready to look away. “Let’s show them.”

Taking a deep breath, he turned, striding quickly after the crew. They needed to get Nihlus aboard the transport and out of there.

“Square protection detail,” he called as he and Anderson trotted down the stairs into the alley. “Wrex, Alenko, Williams take point. Anderson and I’ll walk drag. Keep your eyes open. The council doesn’t get to bushwhack us twice.” He grabbed Nihlus’s arm and pulled the Spectre toward him. “No more, right?” he whispered, the words for Nihlus alone. “You want to drown your pain in brandy, fine, but you don’t risk what she died to build, ever again, right?”

Nihlus nodded and yanked his arm free, stalking after the double line of Normandy crew that formed the leading edge of the square.

“I’m worried about his stability,” Anderson said. The captain’s brow furrowed.

Garrus started off. “I’m not. At his core, he’s a turian, a soldier, and a Spectre. He’ll be all right once we get going. He just needs something to focus on.”

Keeping to back alleys and secondary elevators, they managed to make good time to the docking bay while avoiding C-Sec. Garrus considered using transport, but didn’t want to break the group up and have people waiting around taxi stands when they’d made such a distinct impression upon the council. He hovered halfway between bursting into a volley of colourful curses and hysterical laughter. The plan had been so damned simple. Go in, pay their respects, look the council in the eye, and get out.

“I’ll have a talk with Williams,” Anderson said as they exited the elevator into the public dock where their transport awaited them. “I have no idea what she was thinking. From Shepard’s reports, I thought the chief was overcoming her prejudice.” The captain looked up, his gaze moving over the balconies and walkways above and beside them.

Garrus mirrored him, watching their other side. The space remained only sparsely populated, leaving him feeling exposed as they mounted the series of ramps to the massive ship’s personnel hatch. “She was getting along very well. I’m not sure what that was about, but I’ll leave it to you to sort.”

“Garrus!”

Garrus turned toward the call, wincing at the fury in the voice. Martin raced down a long set of stairs from the waiting lounge above, a huge backpack and a duffel slung over his shoulders.

Damn, he should have contacted Martin. He wondered if Anderson had. Probably, but still, he should have as well. Bracing himself for the coming storm, Garrus turned to the others. “Go ahead and board. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Anderson shook his head. “I told him we were coming, thinking maybe he’d want to go through the memorial with us.” He stepped up to the railing on the docking arm. “But, he looks like he’s planning on coming along.”

“Why?” Martin screamed, pulling Garrus’s attention back to him as he ran up the docking arm. “Why, Garrus?”

Garrus nodded toward the hatch, his gut twisting as Martin shouted his own question at him. He
didn’t have an answer . . . for either of them. He glanced at Anderson. “Go aboard, Captain. He wants me.”

Anderson shook his head, his jaw jutting out in an impressive demonstration of stubbornness as he squared his shoulders and turned to face the angry youth. “I’ve known the kid forever. I can help calm—”

“He loved her,” Garrus said, cutting the captain off. “He doesn’t want to be calm. He wants to beat the injustice out of the universe.” He stabbed a talon toward the hatch. “Go ahead.”

Martin didn’t slow, charging straight into Garrus, hands raised to shove the much larger turian. “Why?” he demanded again, the heels of his hands slamming into Garrus’s chest. The momentum behind the blow staggered Garrus back into the railing, his keel letting out a creak as one of the cartilaginous menisci popped. He winced, but didn’t say anything. That appeared to suit Martin just fine. The youth pounded on him three more times, shouting with each blow, “Why?”

Garrus didn’t move, speak, or try to subdue Martin’s fists, letting him exhaust his fury and grief until he reached a level of anger that allowed for coherence. Garrus understood, he just didn’t have the luxury of beating the crap out of someone to vent his emotions, nor that of drinking himself into oblivion. Not if his Kahrī was looking on. She expected so much more from him. She expected everything from him, and letting her down . . .

Finally, panting heavily, Martin threw himself back, one hand digging into his hip as he struggled to regain his breath. He staggered a few steps toward the transport, then back to lean on the railing.

“Why?” the young man whispered a last time, looking up at Garrus.

Garrus sighed and stared into the sensors that covered where Martin’s eyes had once been. “Why what, Martin?” He stepped away from the railing and smoothed the front of his tunic. When he continued, he kept his voice kind and low. “Why did they kill her? Why didn’t I save her? Why wasn’t it me? Why wasn’t she as immortal and indestructible as she appeared?” He shook his head and shrugged. “Why what?”

Martin tensed, fury etched in every line of his face. He blamed Garrus, that much was certain. “All of them. You were with her when it happened?” He flung away his pack and duffel. “You and Anderson were with her?” Shoulders braced and bristled, jaw and fists clenched, Martin shifted from foot to foot, finally finding an outlet for grief that he’d borne alone for almost a week.

Spirits, he should have called the poor kid.

“Yes,” Garrus said finally, on a long breath out. “We were with her.” He walked over to Martin and placed a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Even though we knew she and Nihlus would be in danger if they stayed, the council had just made her a Spectre. We didn’t think they’d move against her so soon. We grabbed Anderson and were on our way to meet the crew at Flux.” Releasing him, Garrus turned to the railing, leaning into it.

For more than a minute, he just stared out at the people. Life flowed through the terminal, coming and going without the slightest clue that their worlds had all become more fragile than they could imagine.

“I had my arm around her,” he said at last, his voice just a whisper. As his mind drifted back to the moment, his body followed in kind, drifting down the dock a couple of meters as if it could distance itself from the reality. “I keep thinking I could’ve done something . . . should have done something, but it happened so fast. We weren’t wary enough.” Bracing his arms against his sides,
Garrus gripped the railing in his talons and leaned out. “She was dead in my arms before I knew
she was in danger.”

Martin followed and leaned against the railing a half-metre away. “She didn’t even see it coming,
did she? If she didn’t, how could you?” He let out a sigh that sounded as if it originated in his feet.
“She let her guard down, and it got her killed.”

Garrus turned to face the young man, his hand settling back onto Martin’s shoulder. “We all did, so
now all we can do is carry on the best we can.” Stepping away, Garrus nodded toward the Citadel.
“Go, keep training. Live your life. Become the best damned C-Sec officer on the force. Make her
proud, kid.”

Martin shook his head. “This has never been my home. This is where I waited for her to come back
to me. She’s never coming back, Garrus. I don’t have any reason to wait for her here any longer.”
Stepping closer, he looked up, his entire body changing from rigid to solid under Garrus’s hand.
“You’re taking up her fight? You and Anderson and the Spectre?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then I’m coming with you. She was my friend . . . my . . .” He shrugged in a disappointed but
resigned way. “. . . sister. I love her, and her fight is mine.” Chin jutting out, he met Garrus’s
skepticism with a determination that made the turian shake his head. Martin’s face formed a smile,
but a cold, vengeful one. “You know you can’t stop me. The best you can do is take me with you
and hope to keep me out of trouble.”

Garrus’s smile came naturally, his mandibles flicking with both genuine amusement and
admiration. He should have known. Shepard didn’t attract anything but guts and an impressive
level of stubbornness. He considered refusing for about half as long as it took to decide it would
prove futile, then flicked a thumb talon toward the hatch.

Martin’s smile turned even more fierce as he nodded then turned to grab his packs.

A dozen warnings and vague half-threats pushed their way to the fore of his mind, but Garrus
dismissed them all. With all the fire burning through Martin’s blood, the kid wouldn’t hear
anything, anyway. Just as he hadn’t heard his father’s warnings and predictions of disaster years
before. He’d keep the kid close, where he could watch him, and make as sure as he could that
nothing happened to him. He could keep that promise.

Garrus glanced over the docks, just checking to see if they’d drawn any sort of attention, then
followed Martin into the ship.

Three hours later, he clapped an arm around the kid’s shoulders and escorted him through the
Normandy’s airlock onto the CIC. “Welcome to the Normandy, Martin. You can share the cargo
bay with me, Wrex, and the rachni queen.” He grinned at the wide-eyed look he got—amazing
how it translated even past the implants. “Don’t worry, the rachni queen has a nice little nest set up
in the far corner and mostly just sings. I bite, but I sleep in the shuttle. Wrex made himself a cozy
little room out of crates. I’m sure if you ask nicely, he’ll help you make one too.” He saluted the
guard at the door and ushered Martin through first. “You’ll be fine for the two days to get to
Omega.”

The kid stopped dead, nearly falling when Garrus slammed into his back side. Garrus caught him
by the strap on his duffel and hauled him back onto the stair. “Wait? What? We’re going to
Omega?” He paled. “Isn’t that some sort of criminal outpost?”
A wry grin crossed Garrus’s face as he shrugged. “Welcome to the other side of the straight and narrow, Martin. In order to prepare for the Reapers, we’ve had to do a lot of colouring outside the lines, and there’s a whole lot more to do. If you’re uncomfortable with bending the rules, you’ve joined the wrong organization.”

“Did the council kill her?” Martin demanded, trudging down the rest of the stairs on stiff, wooden legs.

Garrus shook his head, just a slight tremor to either side. “I don’t know. Part of me wants to say definitely, but then the other part asks why. They’d just heralded her a hero, made her a Spectre. Dying like this, she becomes a figurehead.” A low, strained rumble rolled from his throat, tightening as his memories pressed at him. He slapped the elevator control and pushed Shepard away. The time for keening and tears had come and gone.

Martin cocked his head off to one side, his eyelids narrowing over the sensors as he stared up into Garrus’s face. “You really loved her didn’t you?”

The question shot a missile into the wall holding Garrus’s emotions in check, weakening it enough that it took all his focus to slap enough rebar and mortar up to stop it from collapsing altogether.

After staring for another second, Martin put him out of his misery and looked away. “She loved you. I could tell. She looked at you the way I always wished she’d look at me.” The elevator door opened and the kid led the way inside, leaning against the back wall. “I was jealous at first, but then I realized that I was happier that she could love someone than I was angry it wasn’t me. I thought losing her family had smashed that part of her completely.”

Garrus froze, his hand raised to the elevator control. Spirits. Shepard’s family.

*Sweet baby Jesus, Garrus, you forgot, didn’t you?*

He hit the control. As soon as he got Martin settled, he’d go to Anderson. “Did she tell you anything about her family?” he asked.

“No. She kept it pretty buried. Hurt too much.” He pushed off the wall and straightened, shifting his duffel in front of him like armour. “What I learned, I dug up on my own. There’s quite a lot in the public record if you know where to look, and more in the not so public record if you don’t mind hacking through a lot of security.” He shuddered. “I don’t know how she survived.”

The elevator opened, but both of them took a moment to notice, looking inward, buried in thoughts. When he finally realized that they’d arrived, Garrus looked down the length of the cargo bay. Ashley wasn’t at her station. Perhaps Anderson called her up to discuss her sudden return to racism. Garrus’s gut rolled, the hateful words she’d shot at him hitting like polonium rounds. Betrayal. The poison behind those shots amounted to betrayal. He believed them friends. Just one more thing to shake off and push past. How many more before the wall came down, and he disappeared under the avalanche?

Until then . . . . He took a deep breath, wincing as the scents of no fewer than fifty memories smacked him in the face at once. Straightening his back until it cracked, he spun on his talons, looking over at Wrex’s corner of the hold. “Hey, Wrex? You in there?”

“No.”

Garrus chuckled and shook his head. “Come on, kid, I’ll introduce you.” He led Martin over to where the krogan sat in his little shelter, cleaning his shotgun. “Don’t let the old guy intimidate
“Come a little closer and say that, Garrus,” Wrex said then laughed, looking up from his work as they stepped into his doorway. “Who’s this pyjak?”

Garrus stepped aside when Martin didn’t show any inclination to move forward. “This is Martin Weaver, one of Shepard’s oldest friends. Could you help him set up a place to bunk while he’s here?”

Wrex set down his gun and stood, towering over the human. Garrus hid his smile behind his hand as Wrex shrugged his armour up his massive shoulders and tilted his head to crack his neck. “One of Shepard’s friends?” Wrex asked, harrumphing a little. “Must be more to you than it appears.” The krogan bent down to level an appraising stare straight into Martin’s face, one eye narrowing as he tilted his chin up. “What happened to your eyes?”

“Slavers cut them out,” Martin answered. He drew himself up to square off with Wrex, his gutsy attitude squashing the sick lurch of empathy that twisted in Garrus’s gut. The kid cocked his head and stuck out his jaw a bit. “They also took out part of my tongue. Would you like to get a close up of that, too? I can open wide, but I can’t say ah very well.”

Wrex stared at the kid for a second then laughed and clapped him on the back. “I knew you’d have some guts.” He nodded toward a wall of crates. “Let’s build you some place to sleep where Williams can’t stare at you. She likes scars.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Garrus said, backing away, but Martin was already asking Wrex about the massive scars across his face. He chuckled and turned back to the elevator.

*You sure knew how to pick them, Kahri.*

Two minutes later, Garrus stepped around the side of the elevator, then stumbled back, spinning a little as someone slammed into his left side, barreling straight through him.

“Stay out of my way,” Ashley said, her voice rolling through a low growl as she stumbled. She took a step sideways, something flashing across her expression that he couldn’t define, but he didn’t think it looked like hate. If he had to put a name to it, he would have called it regret.

Garrus reached out. “Ash, what’s happened since this morning?” She slapped his hand aside and kept going. When Garrus looked up, he saw Anderson standing in the door of the captain’s cabin. After looking back to watch Ash disappeared behind the elevator, he turned to face Anderson. “What was that?”

The captain just shrugged and turned back into his cabin. “All she’ll say to me about it is, ‘If you don’t like my attitude, reassign me.’”

“Actually, Captain,” Garrus called, hurrying after him, “I need to ask you about something.”

Anderson’s shoulders dropped, and he didn’t turn back. “Can it keep until tomorrow?”

Garrus almost let it go, but then who knew what would distract him from asking the next day and then the day after that. He cleared his throat, shrugging a little even though Anderson wasn’t looking at him. All he had left of his love was the promises he’d made. “I made her a promise, sir, and then I forgot about it.” He prayed his tone told the human everything he’d never be able to say.

Anderson’s shoulders sank lower for a second, but then he straightened and squared them, reaching up to close the collar on his uniform. “Come in, then.” The captain sat at the desk and didn’t invite
Garrus to sit. “What did you promise her?” he asked, cutting straight to business.

Garrus stood at parade rest, feeling a profound relief at Anderson’s professionalism. “She asked me to make sure you never forget about her little sister, sir.”

Anderson let out a sharp, bitter laugh. “Forget?” He rubbed his fingers across his brow a couple of times. “Small chance of that.” He flipped a thumb toward the chairs at the table. “Pull up a chair.
Mass Effect - Future Complex Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Where is Shepard's little sister? And what awaits them all on Omega?

4 days ASD

“Did Shepard ever tell you how I found her?” Anderson asked. He shifted in his chair, looking uncomfortable, as if he both needed to talk about it and worried that doing so broke some unspoken confidence.

Garrus lifted one of the chairs to within a couple of metres of the captain, turning it as he set it down. Stepping around it, he shook his head and then sat. “Not really. Hints here and there. She . . . we didn’t have a chance to get that far.” Trying to set Anderson at ease, he settled into the seat, taking the position they called the ‘relaxed inquisition’ back at C-Sec. Slightly slumped, hands on his thighs, the foot furthest from the door slid forward a bit to give the perp the illusion of a clear path to the door.

Anderson leaned with his elbow on the desk, his fingers braced against his temple. “Her family lived in a small agricultural community a couple of hours from the capital, so it took us almost twelve hours to make it out there once we landed. The slavers had been gone for about fourteen or fifteen hours by that point.” He scrubbed his fingertips across his brow. “In the middle of the cluster of houses, we found a bunch of empty cages, couple dozen corpses including a few batarians. The slavers had been clubbed to death. I found out later from Shepard that her father led a revolt. Brave, but doomed, and Jane paid for it in the end.” He shook himself as if trying to rid himself of a thick layer of muck.

Garrus nodded and shifted a little, opening his posture a little more. “She mentioned that they used her as a weapon against him.” His mind conjured that image, a shadow of the helpless rage, agony, and guilt Shepard’s father must have felt settling down in the chair with him. Being a father, trapped and caged, unable to give in because doing so meant damning everyone, but his resistance damning the person most precious to him . . . . Garrus doubted he possessed a sufficient level of selflessness to endure it. He would have broken.

“In the center of the space, we found a bloody body covered by a corpse that was missing most its head. There was so much blood on the ground that our medic barely slowed down. He checked for a pulse at her wrist. Her skin was ice-cold, so he moved on.” The captain looked up, not needing to say how badly Shepard had been injured, the grief and weariness in his eyes speaking volumes. “I’ve never seen anything like it and pray I never do again.” Strong fingers reached up to unsnap his collar, reefing it open as if the thing choked him.

Garrus fought off the urge to copy the other man, but it wasn’t his collar coiled and tightening around his neck like a garotte.

“God help me, sometimes I still wake up with that stink suffocating me.” A jagged oath accompanied pressing the heel of his hand to his brow. “Sorry.” Anderson drew in a deep breath, visibly composing himself. “Sorry.” His sadness and loss disappeared back behind that inscrutable stoicism once more.
Garrus just shook his head, dismissing it, knowing from experience the ghosts that had followed Anderson since that day. More than a few tracked him like a pack of varren. The galaxy progressed, politicians claimed their corners of that galaxy safer than ever before, but the cops . . . the cops knew how unsafe people truly were. They stood over the raped and murdered, looked into the tear-stained faces, and then tried to set it all aside to do their job. It never really worked, but the emotional distance helped. Anderson didn’t have that buffer.

The captain cleared his throat and shifted in the chair. “Something told me to stop and take a closer look, so I pulled the corpse off her. It was her father, although I didn’t know that at the time, of course. They let him loose then shot him in the head while he knelt over her, trying to comfort her.

“I thought I heard a sound from the corpse on the bottom and pulled off the hood. I undid the blindfold, and these big, beautiful, green eyes stared back at me, blinking in the light. For about a minute, she just stared, but then she let out this scream . . . .” His hand returned to his throat, rubbing at the two day growth of beard. “The pain and terror and heartbreak in that scream just about killed me, but underneath the rest, I felt a strength like I’ve never witnessed anywhere else. I knew then why she’d survived.” Anderson cleared his throat and let out a grumbling sigh as he pushed himself up in his chair, straightening.

Garrus closed his eyes for a second. He’d seen that strength for the first time on Therum.

“I couldn’t get her out of the shackles, so I dragged the stakes out of the ground and hammered on the chains until they broke. She spent months in the hospital recovering physically, then they shipped her off to a mental institution. I broke her out of that hellhole after three months.” He growled low in his throat and shook his head. “They locked her in the dark, telling her that there was nothing there that could hurt her. Morons.”

A deep, growling subvocal sharpened the edge of Garrus’s words as the protector Shepard railed against roared with rage. “They locked her in the dark?” For a moment, he lamented the lack of existing time-travel technology that thwarted his need to go back and kick the hospital staff in the ass. “They took a traumatized kid and locked her in the dark?”

Anderson let out a derisive cough. “Called it immersion therapy.”

Garrus’s foot twitched. “I’ll give them immersion therapy. They can walk around with my foot in their cloaca all day.” He forced himself to throw wet sand on the blaze. He was just using the anger to keep the harder crap at bay.

At least she had Anderson to pull her out of that place. Garrus felt a bond of affection form as he imagined the scene that must have ensued. If it hadn’t been for the man in front of him, his Kahri would have died a teenager, not even making it off Mindoir. Suddenly, he didn’t mind so much if Anderson called him son.

“It took weeks before she’d talk, months before she told me anything significant. When she did finally open up a little, Shepard told me that the last thing she remembered before her father’s death was her mother and sister being taken away by the slavers. For some reason, she believed that her mother had been killed.”

“Wait.” Garrus leaned forward, his heart jumping up into his throat. “Are you saying that her mother is alive?” The moment of hope and joy shattered as his memory shot a rocket straight through his gut. It didn’t matter. Yes, it mattered for the woman, and it made reuniting half of Shepard’s family possible, but Shepard . . . she’d never know.

“As far as I know.” Anderson leaned back and crossed his arms, that hard part of the tale complete.
“I searched for a couple of months before I found a slaver who’d transported the slaves from that part of the colony. They were all taken to Karshan, which complicated things. It’s easier to get access to slaves out in the colonies, but at least with slavery being legal in batarian space, they all keep excellent records.”

The captain activated his omnitool and opened a file. “Took me years to find out what breeding facility Shepard’s mother had been taken to, and I’m still trying to get someone in there to find out if Lucille Marie Shepard is still alive.” He sent the file to Garrus. “The bastard who purchased her, nearly ten years ago now, is a paranoid son of a bitch. Huge operation including weapon smuggling, eezo mining and smuggling, drugs, even breeding varren for pit fighting. The authorities, especially the Alliance is always trying to nail him to the wall, so I’ve found buying my way in impossible.”

“Did you ever tell Shepard about her mother?” Garrus asked, pretty sure of the answer even before he did. He opened the file and skimmed the information. Anderson had done a thorough search. Maybe some of his C-Sec contacts, especially the agents in the anti-trafficking squad, could give him a hand to get ins where Anderson hadn’t been able to.

“No.” Anderson stood and paced to the door as if the question surpassed the quota of emotional turmoil he could tolerate while sitting still. “I didn’t want to get her hopes up and then crush them again if I found out Lucy was dead. I always hoped I’d be able to sit her down some day soon and give her some unexpected good news.” Stopping next to Garrus, he hooked a thumb toward the file. “Anyway, that’s everything I found on both of them.”

Garrus’s stomach threatened, rolling like thunderheads building along the horizon as he formed the next question, but he forced himself to say it. The truth was the truth. “Says here that she’d be . . . fifty three now. If they’ve been using her as a breeder, she’s rapidly coming up on the end of her usefulness.”

Anderson returned to the door, the speed of his pacing becoming more and more rapid. “I know. We’re coming up on deadlines with both of them. I have an asari acquaintance who has been attending all the batarian slave auctions since Bunny hit puberty.” He returned and perched on the edge of his chair. “She was sold to a very wealthy batarian family on Karshan. I have never been able to find out who they are, just that she was sold privately as a house slave.”

Garrus nodded, understanding. “Yeah, batarian mistresses don’t usually keep female household slaves past puberty.” He scrolled to Shepard’s sister’s information. “She’s nineteen this year. The mistress will be moving her along if she hasn’t already.” He growled through his subvocals as he cursed. “If she looks like Shepard . . . Damn it.”

Anderson nodded, looking like he wanted to vomit. “I had the Alliance do an age projection holo and sent it out with my contacts, but they haven’t seen her. I can’t let her end up in some carnal hole somewhere. I made a promise.” He rubbed his throat again.

Garrus closed the file. “Well, there are two of us looking now. We’ll find them.” He stood, sensing Anderson had reached his limit. He chuffed. Hell, he’d reached his limit. Time to disappear into the shuttle and look through the file, send out feelers on the way to Omega. He offered his hand. “Thank you for going through all of this with me.”

Anderson just gave one, firm nod and shook Garrus’s hand. “You promised her, just like I did.” The captain let out a long, heavy breath. “Goodnight, son.”

“Goodnight, sir.” Pivoting on his talons, Garrus strode to the door and out. As soon as he cleared the door, he saw Martin and Wrex in the galley, throwing together something that Garrus was
pretty sure had started on fire.

“What are you two doing?” he called, afraid to get too close.

“Thresher maw pancakes,” Wrex bellowed back. “With grape jelly acid.”

The two idiots and their burning thresher maw pancakes seared away some of the dank fungus-like chill that dealing with Mindoir and its aftermath had planted in his gut. “You okay if I hit the rack, kid?” he asked.

Martin looked up for half a second, then turned back to working two spatulas under his pancake. “Yeah, Wrex got me all set up and showed me around. Thanks.”

Garrus watched them for another moment, amazed and gratified that Martin had just jumped right in. “You know where to find me if you need anything,” he called, turning toward the elevator.

“Yeah,” Martin replied, “but by your own admission, you bite.”

6 Days ASD

Garrus stepped out onto the docks and looked around: Omega. Nothing had changed in the weeks since he’d last been there. The station still looked disgusting: filthy, poor, and miserable. The noise level still felt like an industrial mining laser drilling into his brain. The stench of feces, vomit, urine, and a thousand other sorts of rot and waste kept sucker punching his gag reflex. Still, something had changed. Through all the grime and stink, he saw something he hadn’t before. It blew through the station like a wind off the ocean, and all he could think to call it was freedom.

Certainly, he didn’t see it in the eyes of the station denizens around him. They lived under the heel of the gangs and Aria. He housed the change within him, projecting it everywhere he looked. He smiled. Given a few months, the rest of the station would start to see it too. Their tiny army wouldn’t just make Omega their home, they’d clean it up, make at least parts of it home for those who wanted it.

We’re here, Kahri. We made it. Your grand plan, your dream for us and the war effort, starts today.

He nodded. While they built their resistance to face the Reapers, they’d leave Aria alone—he harboured absolutely no desire to run the station—but the gangs, the gangs he didn’t mind wiping out. It would be good practice for their recruits.

“What are you grinning about?” Nihlus grumbled, striking out for the cab stand.

Garrus shrugged. “Just envisioning this place the way it’ll look this time next cycle.” He followed the Spectre and Martin, but then stopped and stared at the cab. They couldn’t rely on station transportation. Too easy for someone to slip a bomb into a cab. “Tomorrow, you two need to find someone who can build us some custom vehicles. We need high performance, shields, concealed weapons. They also need to be completely nondescript. I don’t want to attract too much attention.”

“Because the army and the flotilla of ships we’re building will be completely low key,” Martin said, his tone desert parched.
Garrus clipped him in the back of the head. “They will be able to defend themselves. A couple of people running down to the bar for a drink don’t need to be asking to get blown out of the air because the mercs recognize our vehicles. They also don’t need to get carjacked because they’re driving the best looking ride on the station.”

He turned to the rest of his team members. Only one team could use the shuttle, the rest had to rely on public transport. “Stay together, don’t go into merc territory. If you can’t find enough supplies for everyone, we’ll double up or borrow from the ship.” He cut a grin across at Anderson but then levelled a very serious scowl at Dr. Chakwas. “Dr. Solus is meeting you here?” When she nodded, he mirrored it. “Be careful. Go nowhere without Kaidan.”

Kaidan winked at the doctor before turning to Garrus. “Don’t worry, General. I’ve got her back.”

“So do we.”

Garrus spun toward the gruff, accented voice and came face to face with a tall, lanky human. The man grinned at him, displaying some magnificently smashed teeth beneath an equally impressive bent and broken nose. In fact, the man’s whole face looked as though it had seen the losing side of a great many fights, some of them recent.

“And who is we?” Garrus asked, his eyes moving to an extremely tall, broad-shouldered turian who stepped up to cover the human’s flank.

“They’re with me,” Mordin Solus said, stepping into view around the other two. The salarian pointed to the turian and then the human. “Lantar Sidonis. Gabriel Butler.”

“Gabe,” the human corrected. “My wife works with the doc. I help with security when he needs me.” He narrowed his eyes and pushed in on Garrus, bristling a little. “Who are you?”

“Garrus Vakarian.” He turned away, refocusing his attention on Mordin. “You’ll be coming every day rather than staying?”

“Patients need me, but will be there,” the salarian replied, nodding twice in rapid succession. “Challenge to unravel Reaper technology very exciting. Unlimited possibilities for discovery.” He turned to Dr. Chakwas. “Ready?”

She nodded but then met Garrus’s eyes. “Don’t worry, General. We’ll be fine.” Her calm assurance did more to settle Garrus’s concerns about her safety than the presence of Mordin’s little brute squad, neither of whom looked particularly solid or trustworthy. “Kaidan and I will pick up Joker on our way over once you give the all clear.”

Kaidan chuckled, but it sounded forced. Garrus made a mental note to check in with the lieutenant, make sure he was okay. Kaidan did his best to keep everyone else’s spirits up, but he spent most of the time looking lost. “We’ll drag him over there even he kicks and screams the whole way.”

Mordin nodded to Garrus, then ushered Dr. Chakwas down the docks, quickly disappearing into the crowd.

Garrus waited until the other teams caught cabs and headed off to the markets before he called one for Nihlus, Martin, and himself. They were headed over to scout the first building, sweep through, and deal with any complications. Garrus didn’t expect anything more dangerous than outcast vorcha and a few homeless people, but one never knew. The last week had given him a new appreciation and dread of the unexpected.

After entering the building location, Garrus let the cab do the driving while he closed his eyes and
leaned back in the seat. The few hours he managed to fall asleep he spent chasing nightmares around in an endless loop. He’d watched Shep­ard die so many times over the past two days that he felt worn paper thin. Somehow he needed to set aside the guilt, the persistent voice in his head that screamed at him to do something to save her, even though that moment had long since past. He hoped that being on Omega, working toward her goals would let him get some sleep.

After the cab landed, Garrus stared up at the building without moving. The last time he’d approached it, Nihlus was down, Ashley wounded, and Shepard charged in like a praela, all fire and wrath, determined to make sure she didn’t lose any of her people. Garrus sighed and opened the top.

“Holy crap,” Martin squealed the second he climbed out of the cab. He wretched and slapped his hand over his nose and mouth. “What is that smell?”

“Dead krogan,” Nihlus answered, walking past. Garrus watched him for any sign of drunkenness, but he seemed steady enough. If he was drunk, he was holding it well, at least. Nihlus grumbled and looked over the edge of the bridge. “You never quite get used to it, but you do stop needing to throw up.” He stopped at the center of the bridge that spanned the void between the entrance to the district and the block of buildings. Looking up, he asked, “Aria gave this place to Shepard?”

Garrus nodded, his eyes travelling up the face of the abandoned building. “The whole block.” He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat that formed in response to the picture that appeared, unbidden, in his mind, and the sensation of Shepard clung­ling to his arm. “After Shepard rescued Liselle.” He palmed the door control, but it flashed red. He opened his omnitool and went into the file containing the deeds and other documentation for the buildings.

“Mmm,” Nihlus hummed noncommittally. “Aria doesn’t care for being in anyone’s debt.” The Spectre backed up a few steps, leaning back. “But a whole block . . . on Omega? Why would she just give Shepard a block of abandoned buildings?”

“Who’s Aria?” Martin asked. He put his helmet on, let out a sigh of relief that made Garrus grin, and then followed Nihlus toward the doors.

“Someone you want to steer clear of, kid,” Nihlus replied. He slid his hand over a pouch on his armour as if checking to ensure something remained within. “She’s thirty times your age and as likely to use her biotics to snap you in half as look at you.”

“She’s asari?”

Garrus didn’t like the starry-eyed quality to Martin’s voice and turned to glare at him. “Listen to Nihlus. Aria runs Omega as the largest criminal outpost in the galaxy. Stay away from Afterlife unless you’re with Nihlus or me.”

“Fine.” Martin sulked over to the low wall along the side of the bridge and leaned over to look down the hundreds of floors worth of empty space. “But, I’m not a kid.”

“Yeah, you are, but that’s not a bad thing,” Nihlus retorted. “I wish I could get those cycles back. Don’t be too eager to throw them away.” He scraped the caked filth from one of the large front windows. “I think I can see what we’re smelling.”

Garrus found the entry code and unlocked the door, only half-listening to Nihlus. His concentration focused on keeping a lock on the memories of the night he and Shepard had run around Omega first trying to catch up with the team, then to find Mordin Solus. Shepard clung to his arm so tight in those ridiculous shoes. They were completely insane, but he couldn’t stop staring at her legs
when she wore them. He shook his head, a sharp glance tossed back over his shoulder at Nihlus when he registered that the Spectre had been talking to him. “What was that?”

“Looks like we’ll be turning the local body dump into our headquarters.” The Spectre walked up, following Garrus in the door. “Why would Aria just give Shepard a block of abandoned buildings?”

Garrus shrugged, just a faint twitch of his head. “The night we chased Tali and those krogan across Omega, Shepard remarked on how we could turn Omega into a base for the war effort. Turn these buildings into barracks for soldiers being trained, a place to plan and organize where the Council had no influence.” He stopped, the smell of decay, mold and dust blasting straight into his face.

“Spirits.” Nihlus walked past, making it halfway to the stairs before he stopped. “I was almost joking about the body dump.”

Garrus chuckled, a bitter rattle of sound. “Why wouldn’t Aria dump all her bodies here? Give Shepard a gift that comes complete with a nightmare.”

“A fuck you very much?” Martin asked, his expression gloating a little behind his face shield.

Garrus shot him a quick grin then choked down his gag reflex and walked into the lobby. A mostly decayed body lie mouldering at the base of the stairs. Shepard had killed that one on her way in. He opened his omnitool again, calling up a business directory.

“The others are going to be here in a couple of hours. What the hell are we going to do?” Nihlus edged around another body and walked through to the kitchen area. Out of the corner of his eye, Garrus saw the Spectre pull a flask from his armour and take a long belt of whatever was inside.

“Since they’ll all be here by supper time, I guess we need to get this place habitable by then.” Garrus sent messages to several specialized cleaning services. He probably shouldn’t have been surprised by the sheer number of businesses offering services aimed toward cleaning up after dead bodies and other bloody disasters, but he was. “Can you see to getting the utilities all turned on? Martin, head up to the first floor and make sure there isn’t anything alive. I’ll join you as soon as the cleaners are on the way.” He turned away, then glanced back and yelled, “If there is anything alive, run and scream for help. That’s brand new armour, don’t get it covered in pyjak scratches.”

Within fifteen minutes, he’d hired five different contractors, all of whom dispatched multiple teams. As much as they needed the first few floors for the council, the entire building necessitated a purge. Might as well get it done.

Twenty-five minutes after Garrus spoke to the companies, eighteen teams of people in hazmat suits had set up fans, wired up three incinerators, and started shovelling decaying krogan remains into wheelbarrows with proficient good humour and camaraderie.

“I find their efficiency oddly disturbing,” Nihlus muttered, walking past. Sure enough, his breath smelled of alcohol. “And this is where she wants us to set up the war effort?”

“It is.” Garrus looked down as a ping from his omnitool alerted him to an incoming message. Barla Von, announcing his arrival along with ten scows of salvage from Sovereign. Garrus hadn’t expected the little volus to leave his web for the danger and uncertainty of Omega, but Von didn’t even hesitate. Instead, he volunteered to escort the first of the salvage convoys. The fact that the Alliance sent five frigates along to protect the convoy didn’t diminish the ardent nature of Von’s gesture. Rather it spoke volumes about the banker’s eager dedication and commitment to Shepard and the cause.
Garrus closed the message and shook his head. They’d all known her such a short time, and she presented herself as such an aggressive, prickly creature, all barbs and quills. Why then did they all love and honour her so completely? He blinked rapidly, easing the burning in his eyes, knowing the answer. Despite her best efforts, her sweet vulnerability and the huge heart underneath the spines, showed through clear as Trebia in Palaven’s sky.

He swiped at his eyes. “Damn cleaning solution,” he grumbled and strode up the stairs to help Martin check for squatters of any and all varieties.

They found a couple of varren in one of the apartments, a few pyjaks here and there, but nothing that gave them any trouble. As they swept through, he mentally assigned quarters. Liara and Shiala, Tali and Ashley, Nihlus and Martin in the two bedroom units on the first floor, he, Anderson, and Hackett in the singles. His father could stay with him. The apartment he chose for himself was roomy. A bank of windows along one side opened to look over the lobby, allowing him to keep an eye on things. It also had the most massive bed he’d ever seen.

They moved on to the second floor. He rattled off instructions to Martin, putting the young man in charge of getting everyone situated when they arrived. Providing their rooms had been cleaned, of course. The more they delved into the building, the more perfect it suited their purposes. Near as he could guess, it must have been a research facility at one time. Floors of apartments gave way to floors of labs and lecture spaces, even a couple of gyms and a large infirmary.

The further they explored, the more Garrus found himself excited to get things going, to see the space filled with life and bustle, all focused on one goal: defeating the Reapers.

The first of the team was walking into the lobby by the time he and Martin finished exploring. Garrus stopped dead as he disembarked the elevator on the first floor. In the time they’d been gone, the cleaners had worked their way to the second floor, leaving the lobby and first floor spotless and smelling of overpowering citrus and chemicals rather than rotting bodies.

“Wow,” Liara said, walking in the front door, her arms filled with bags. “I thought we’d be beating off rats to get any sleep.” She stopped and turned a circle. “This place looks great.” She waved a delicate hand in front of her face. “Could use some airing out though.”

“You think it’s bad now,” Martin said, popping the seal on his helmet and removing it, “you should have smelled the place a few hours ago.”

Nihlus trotted past Garrus, heading down the stairs. “It’s amazing what every cleaner on the rock can do armed with industrial solvent and incinerators.”

“I’m certainly not going to complain,” the asari said, laying down her burden. “We purchased pretty much every sheet, blanket, and towel on Omega. Any volunteers to help bring it all in?” She walked to the door, doing a graceful long, beckoning glance over her shoulder.

Nihlus and Martin set out after her, but she stopped just inside the door and turned back. “Oh, Garrus, I found something that belongs to you.” Her lips curved into a sly, teasing smile, and then she turned, stepping outside.

She’d found something that belonged to him? Confused, he did a quick mental inventory. Scowling to himself, he tried to figure out what he’d dropped as he followed her out onto the bridge. His talons caught on the flat cement, and he lurched to a stop as a face so very like his own appeared above a moving pile of bags.

When the other turian spotted Garrus, he stopped, stared for a moment then bobbed his head to
indicate his burden. “Give an old torin a hand?” his father asked.

Ashley elbowed Garrus on the way past. “Yeah, Garrus, what sort of son are you anyway?” She chuckled, then cursed as a package fell out of her arms.

“Serves you right,” Garrus replied, but then waved her off when she tried to retrieve it. “I’ll get it.” He picked up her dropped package, watching her for a moment as he tried to catch up with her mood swings. When she walked in the door, he hurried to his father’s side, lifting off more than half the load.

“Thank you, that’s much better,” his father said.

Unsure what to say, suddenly nervous faced with Herros Vakarian in the flesh, Garrus nodded, just managing to grunt, “You’re welcome.” Nodding his head toward the door, he cleared his throat, trying to work the tremor out of his second larynx. “In here.” He led the way back into the base, feeling as though his father’s stare heated the plates on his back. Fleeing from it, he ran up the stairs, taking the pile of packages right up to the first floor.

He walked into the large room that made up his apartment, stopping just inside the door. It looked better clean. Much better. In fact, being a torin of simple needs, the bed, couches and small kitchen area looked absolutely perfect. A few personal touches and he’d be able to call it home. He smiled and nodded once, a decisive gesture of approval.

He felt his father’s energy enter the space, the torin’s well known tread on the tile, his scent—strong, masculine, and comforting—just registering over the cleaner.

“Where should I put these down?” Herros asked, following him inside.

“On the couches or bed is fine. I’m sure the sorting crew will be swooping down to get everything organized in a few minutes.” He placed his burdens on the coffee table, then helped his father unload.

Herros stretched his shoulders until they cracked, then turned to face Garrus. After a moment of silence, he reached out and grasped Garrus by the shoulders. “You look good. How are you?”

Garrus grasped his father’s shoulders, the embrace as intimate as turians got outside of pair bonding. He leaned in to touch his brow to Herros’s, all the tension and awkwardness draining from him as his father returned the gesture. “I’m well.” He straightened. “How are mother and Solana?”

Herros chuckled. “When I spoke to your mother last night she instructed me to answer that question with, ‘If you called home more, you would know’.” He released Garrus’s arms, but didn’t step back.

“Yeah, I have that coming,” Garrus admitted, regret whispering softly. He and Shepard should be on Palaven now. He was supposed to be introducing his girlfriend to his family.

Herros sighed and reached up to grip Garrus’s upper arm. “Both she and Sol also told me to tell you how sorry they are they didn’t get a chance to know her. They were looking forward to your visit.”

Garrus looked down, unsure what to do with his hands . . . or the rest of his body. In the end, he stepped back a pace, flipping a hand toward the apartment, deciding to change the subject to ease the awkwardness. “I’ve laid claim to this space. If you wish, you’re welcome to share it while you’re here.”
Herros smiled, his mandibles flicking hard, and cleared his throat. “I’d like that.” He strode to the open windows and looked out at the growing pile of merchandise and the accompanying growing crowd of people. “This is quite the . . .” He shrugged and let out a dry, rumbling laugh. “What do you even call it? An organization? An operation?”

Garrus stepped up beside his father. After looking out for a moment, he closed his eyes and took long, slow breaths, immersing himself in his father’s unique energy. His throat tightened and his hand lifted of its own accord to rest on the smaller torin’s shoulder. He’d missed it. As much as he’d rebelled against the bulwark solidity of Herros Vakarian, without it . . . a . . . safety vanished from his life, an anchor that kept him moored even when he insisted on flying into the storm.

At one time, he lived for the days his father came home. He ran to the door, racing out to greet the skycar, insisting on carrying Herros’s bags even though they dragged along the ground. During the infuriating minutes his parents spent greeting one another, sharing disgustingly soppy words and embraces, he ran to the caman to ensure he’d reached the correct solution to the mystery his father had left him the previous week. Every week the same, his father carried Solana into the caman and took his seat, a tumbler of ice-cold puala juice on the table in front of him. After an impossibly long silence, Herros always turned to Garrus’s little sister and asked, “Well, did your big brother solve his case this week?”

A strong arm slipped around him. “It’s an army,” Herros said, as if finally deciding on the word. “When Shepard showed me that datapad . . .” Garrus felt him shake his head. “Half of me wanted to throw it back at her and kick her out of my office. Denial was better than accepting the enormity of what we’re facing. How could one woman—regardless of her brilliance or that of the team behind her—hope to prepare against an enemy like the Reapers, especially fighting the council the entire way?” A chuff followed that Garrus decided was self-deprecation, something he didn’t even know his father could feel.

Garrus shrugged, but awe and respect flowed under the movement. “Shepard didn’t know how to quit. She might complain the whole time she did it, but she just kept moving.” He opened his eyes as he heard laughter from below, but looked over at his father. “And smart. Damn that woman was so sharp and so creative. Mind always working, planning.” He stepped forward and looked down on the team as they trickled in, carrying packages and crates. “Kahri held her cards so close to the vest behind that crazy act that everyone underestimated her . . .” Mandibles dropped, he flicked them once in a sad sort of half-smile. “. . . even me.”

The team who’d been buying food fought to carry in their burdens while fending off curious hands trying to get into the packages. Anderson elbowed Martin out of the way as the young man ransacked his way through a crate. Garrus chuckled, his hand lifting toward the people below. “She brought together some remarkable people. We’ll get it done, Pari. The other option is unacceptable.”

Garrus grinned as Joker and Dr. Chakwas entered, the former covering his ears and humming tunelessly but at an ear-shattering volume while the latter tried to talk to him. The Normandy’s pilot had refused to leave his ship even for a couple of days, but Garrus insisted, wanting them all under one roof. Unexpected and brilliant things could come of discussion between people who didn’t usually spend much time talking, and they needed all the unexpected brilliance they could get.

After a moment of comfortable silence, his father spoke softly, “Your Kahri was remarkable, Garrus. Almost got me sent to IA on sexual harassment charges . . . but remarkable.” Herros reached up and stroked a hand down the back of Garrus’s neck then pulled away. “Come, let’s go down and help get this place sorted. We have a few long days ahead of us, and she’s expecting us
to work miracles.”
Chapter Summary

Things are starting to come together, even if no one is quite ready to call it moving on.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Preteril -- A small, spiny, ground burrowing marsupial analogue found in high meadow and forest lands of Palaven.

Aligarim Dau -- Giant, four-winged bird from ancient turian mythology. It was said to have stolen the seed of life from the Creator of All Things. Upon the seed of life was inscribed The Fate of All Things, the story of the universe from birth to death, inlaid in magnificent stones, gems, and metals. The Aligarim Dau coveted the seed for its beauty and hid it away where the Creator would not find it. One day while the giant bird was polishing and caring for its treasure, the seed cracked open and life spilled out. The Aligarim Dau jumped back in dismay, flapping its four giant wings, the wind scattering life throughout the cosmos.

Maraquil -- Sea bird analogues. Large white and blue-green raptors that nest in seaside cliffs on Palaven.

Tussat Flower -- A large, blue-green flower that forms on a cactus type plant with long, oval pads. When the flower goes to seed, the petals are replaced by a very tough but delicate silk fibre used in weaving. Tussat silk is extremely soft but hardy, making it the favourite material for clothing, linens, and upholstery.

Seat - Refers to both the building that houses the turian hierarchy and the chambers where they meet.

6 Days ASD

“Water’s on!” Nihlus called, the echo of his words preceding him into the lobby. “You’ll want to run the taps for a while before using the water, though.” Striding around the stairs, he stopped, green raptor’s eyes searching the room.

Garrus stopped halfway down the stairs, meeting the Spectre’s gaze once it found him.

“The power systems are fine,” Nihlus continued, “but heat’s going to be a day. Something about shorts in the master circuits. They’re down there scratching their heads over it now.” He shrugged and headed over to look in the grocery parcels. As if his talons were thirsty, his hand drifted up to pat the pouch at his waist.

“Wait,” Tali called, looking up from rooting through a bag. “You have amateurs looking at the power systems?” She shoved aside the package to grab Legion and Kal. “Come on, lets go make sure they don’t blow the place up or burn it down or something.”
The quarian Marine dragged behind a little. “What am I supposed to do, ma’am?” Kal asked, following her nonetheless. “Stare at the problem until it fixes itself?”

Ignoring Kal’s protest, Tali stopped halfway across the lobby, turning back to glare at Nihlus. “Well?” Balling one hand into a fist, she pressed her knuckles into her hip, the image of impatient expectation.

Garrus suspected Tali’s mother had taught her that pose. His mari could have been galactic champion if they held competitions.

The Spectre choked, caught in the middle of drinking from his flask. “Well, what?” He wiped his chin on his arm and closed the flask, shoving it back into it’s pouch.

“I don’t have the building blueprints inside my head. You’ll have to show us where to go.” She held out an arm, her head tilting as she waited.

A wry grin spread across Garrus’s face as he watched the exchange. Poor Nihlus. The Spectre didn’t stand a chance; already beaten, just oblivious to it. The team really had learned far too well from Shepard’s example.

Nihlus bristled. “Do I look like the Omega travel bureau?” Setting his shoulders, he turned back to the pile of groceries on the table, casting quick, covert glances her way. Tali just stared at him.

Garrus did his best to hide his amusement at the stand-off and headed over to the pile, picking up as much as he could carry, moving it to the kitchen. He peered inside the cupboards and refrigerators, hoping the cleaners thought to do the interior as well as the exterior. They had. As he unpacked the parcels, he kept an eye on Nihlus, waiting to see how long it took the Spectre to cave in to the pressure. He’d moved on to his second armload before Nihlus let out a thin hiss.

“Fine.” Nihlus grumbled and pulled his sidearm. “You’ll get eaten by vorcha or feral varren if you go down there alone, anyway.” He stalked past them, heading toward a door in the back wall, under the stairs.

Kal’Reegar perked up at the mention of vorcha and feral varren, no doubt glad to see a point to tagging along with the engineering geniuses. Without waiting for Tali, the Marine strode to the door.

“I’ll cook for the levos,” Anderson shouted over the overlapping conversations. “I don’t trust the rest of you to know your stewing beef from your canned tuna.” He picked up a load of bags and carried them into the kitchen.

“I’ll help you,” Martin volunteered, pulling off his gauntlets. “I’m starving.” He followed Anderson into the kitchen. “What are we making?”

“Well, come on in here and let’s see what we can find.” Anderson dove into the pile of supplies, pulling a brown jar out of a crate a few seconds later. He held it up. “Really? Please tell me you didn’t spend the two thousand credits it must have cost to buy Nutella on Omega.”

“It was more than that,” Ashley said, walking in with another load of bags. She set them down and threw up her hands to cut off any questions. “No, you don’t want to know exactly how much, but it was the only way to get that . . .” She pointed at Joker. “. . . turd off the ship without breaking every bone in his body.” She waved to Liara as she bent to pick up a crate. “Grab the other end of this, Doc, and we’ll head up, start putting rooms together.”

“There’s a pile of sheets and towels and things in my room on the left at the top of the stairs, as
Garrus called, then turned back to unpacking.

Joker limped into the kitchen and settled himself in one of the kitchen chairs, as belligerent as Garrus had ever seen him. “You made me leave my ship for three days, General. Three days!” He grumbled and crossed his arms, a marked pout on his face. “Is there a vid screen here at least? I can catch up on my stories.”

Garrus laughed along with the rest despite the twinge of sadness that slid beneath, riding the memory of his night with Shepard before Virmire. Would there ever be anything that didn’t remind him of her? As soon as the question appeared in his mind, he shook his head. No, he’d rather feel the sadness than lose her like that.

“We picked up a couple large vidscreens and a half dozen computers,” Anderson replied as he stirred some amazing smelling ground meat in a frying pan. Garrus’s stomach growled. Turning to rifle through bags, pulling out packages of seasoning, Anderson said, “Maybe when Tali and Legion get back, they can see about getting them up and running.” He set his finds on the counter, then crossed the kitchen to set a plank of wood, a knife, and a bag of carrots in front of the pilot. “For now, chop these. They probably cost more than your chocolate crap.”

“They didn’t,” Ashley said, arriving at the bottom of the stairs. She started gathering up bags. “There’s a group of humans down in the bowels of this place that make money selling the veggies they grow in their hydroponic garden.” She shrugged, then stopped and looked Garrus in the eye. “Might be worth looking into. Maybe with some help, they could grow enough to keep this place set up.”

“Good idea. We could offer them security and keep them out from under the thumb of the gangs.” Garrus added it to the mental list, along with sitting Ashley down for a good, long chat about her apparent and ongoing mental breakdown.

“Okay,” Herros said as he stepped up beside Garrus, “how about you and I take care of cooking for the dextro contingent?” He looked over the pile of merchandise. “Anyone see a sterilizer in that pile?”

The meal preparation turned into a communal affair, half the team helping cook while the other half set up the bedrooms and lavatories. Soon, savoury smells overpowered the scent of cleanser, and the place started to look like people lived there.

Garrus stopped chopping tubers into strips and looked up, allowing himself a moment to feel good about the fact they had taken the first steps down the long road. But, as he looked around at the team, his face plates slowly migrated into a scowl. He was forgetting something. Running through the list of people who should be there, he checked off Mordin. The scientist had sent Dr. Chakwas ahead with the promise that he’d be along as soon as he saw to his patients. Barla Von was still securing the scows filled with Sovereign’s bits and pieces, and the STG wasn’t arriving until the morning. Who was he forgetting?

Mordin and his two bodyguards walked in. “General,” Mordin called by way of greeting. “Has the rachni queen arrived?”

Garrus cursed to himself, but smiled at the salarian. “Not yet, we’ll be sending a shuttle for her immediately.”

“Excellent, am fascinated to meet her. Rachni are a most impressive species.” Mordin hurried over to where Dr. Chakwas sat, working on her omnitool. His flared to life a moment later and the two hunched over what looked like scans, talking quietly, but with apparent excitement.
“I need to take the shuttle to pick to the female shaman,” Wrex called. “I don’t want the vultures on this rock to know she’s here.” He strode over to face Garrus. “I’ll pick up Shiala and the bug on the way back.”

Garrus nodded. “Thanks, Wrex.” Shame heated the underside of his plates as he admitted, “They got lost in the shuffle.”

The krogan grunted, his eyes looking past Garrus to find Martin. “You coming with me, pyjak?”

Martin ran up beside Garrus, practically bouncing with an enviable eagerness. “Garrus?”

Chuckling, wondering why he hadn’t realized he was adopting a mostly-grown son when he promised Shepard he’d look after Martin, he nodded toward Anderson. “It’s up to the captain. You volunteered to help him.”

Anderson looked up and shook his head. “You’re abandoning me?” He let out a long-suffering sigh, and grumbled, the corner of his mouth quirking into a half-smile. “Fine. Go ahead, but be careful. Omega isn’t a place to take lightly.”

“Thanks, Anderson.” Martin snatched up his gauntlets and bolted after the krogan. “Wrex, wait up.”

“He was important to Shepard?” Herros asked, appearing next to Garrus’s arm to relieve him of his chopped tubers.

Garrus nodded. “She met him on Elysium before the Blitz. He ran errands and messages for her during the attack. He tried to help some people and the slavers grabbed him.” He turned his attention back to chopping. “He and a group of other kids all had their eyes, ears, and tongue taken to punish Shepard for leading the resistance.” He smiled. “She made sure they got the best doctors, coerced the Alliance into paying for whatever reconstruction and implants they needed, and donated almost her entire wage over the last six cycles to a rehabilitation center so they could recover in peace.”

“Everything I heard about her before I met her worried me,” Herros said, a subvocal of confession and regret laced through the words. “Brash, abrasive, abusive of authority figures, loathed and mistrusted by many of her superiors, known for massive victories but at the expense of insane risks.” He elbowed Garrus a little. “I wasn’t sure I was okay with my son being involved in suicide missions led by a lunatic.” He walked over to the stove, dumping the starchy roots in with sizzling chunks of drellak meat and fragrutis cactus leaves.

Garrus followed, stirring the pot as his father added the remainder of the ingredients to the bubbling kettle of stew. He leaned over the pot and inhaled deeply, the fragrutis making his nose burn and his eyes tear up. It was going to be spicy. He hoped Tali and Kal’Reegar had a tolerance for heat. Once content with letting the meal cook, they sat down at the table closest to the stove.

“She drove a Mako through a thresher maw, Pari,” Garrus said, taking up the conversation once more. “It took me two hours to wash the guts and acid off the poor tank.” A smile worked its way through the memory, no regret that time, just the comfort he’d felt talking with Shepard. “Then the two of us spent the whole night replacing and repairing parts.” He frowned, but it was thoughtful rather than sad. “I think that was the night I fell in love with her.” Shaking his head, he pulled himself back on topic. “She was a mad woman, but she calculated the risks so that no matter how suicidal a mission seemed, she brought most of her people through.”

“She sent me messages every couple of days.” Herros turned one of the chairs around and straddled
it, leaning on the back. “Just a quick, Garrus is fine, pulled my butt out of a collapsing building, saved my life with emergency surgery in a tiny shelter, or whatever other trouble you’d been in.”

Garrus chuffed. “She didn’t include that the only reason we were stuck under that damned building was because I ignored her orders and took off after Saren like a hot-headed fool? She came after me and was caught out in the open when the geth ships opened fire. She broke a bunch of ribs, but came for me just the same. Rescued me from Saren.” He shrugged, not feeling nearly as much embarrassment admitting to his mistake as he would have thought. “Sovereign opened fire, trying to level the building, and the only way for us to escape was down. I had to carry her most of the way.”

He got up to stir the stew, the memory alive and fresh inside his head. “She built us a shelter out of medical lockers, saved our asses. Promised me that if I ever did anything like that again, she’d kill me herself.”

Herros chuckled. “Good. I’m glad for your sake that she was a strong leader.”

“Heat’s going to be a day,” Tali announced, returning to the lobby. “Shorts in the master circuits.”

“Thanks for letting us know, Tali. What would we do without you?” Garrus laughed, earning a glare that sizzled through the quarians mask and started burning a hole through his armour.

“Now, make yourselves useful and get a vidscreen hooked up,” Joker called. “If I don’t have six hundred channels of mindless entertainment, the next three days will be a nightmare for you all.” Joker got up and limped into the living area to supervise.

A comfortable silence settled between father and son until the others started drifting in, gravitating around them, bringing cheerful, blessedly simple small talk that allowed Garrus to set everything else aside in favour of pleasant company. Wrex and Martin returned just as the chefs declared the meals ready to serve.

All they heard from Mordin when the rachni queen entered was a high-pitched, “Fascinating.” The salarian hurried over to the rachni and started rapid-firing questions at her. Shiala did her best to keep up with the answers, but stopped trying after Amalair agreed to let Mordin scan her, and the pair moved over to a quiet corner of the lobby.

Admiral Hackett arrived a few minutes later. He dismissed a small squad of soldiers at the door, then turned to greet the team.


The quarians shook their heads. “He left us as soon as we reached the building’s maintenance room,” Kal replied. “Said something about clearing out vorcha and varren.”

“Kal offered to go with him, but … .” Tali shrugged and sat at the table.

“I’m here,” the Spectre grumbled, walking around the stairs. Gesturing at the blood and viscera covering his armour, he said, “I should probably wash up first.” He headed up the stairs, taking three at a time.

They spent the evening meal teasing each other and telling highly exaggerated stories about their adventures. Afterward, everyone chipped in either cleaning up after the meal or helping get the rest of the place set up.

Garrus watched them work, glad of the easy camaraderie and friendship. Even Wrex, the shaman,
and Mordin seemed to find a common ground in Amalair. The shaman sat, talking to the queen through Shiala, while Wrex haunted Mordin’s every step as the scientist focused on studying the rachni.

Shaking his head, Garrus grinned as Wrex moved the conversation to the challenge of harnessing thresher acid. Mordin offered several suggestions to which Wrex responded with suspicion and abrasiveness, but comments rude enough to raise Garrus’s hackles either met with the shaman’s quiet, stern disapproval, or flew right over Mordin’s head.

Gradually, everyone finished up the work and gathered in the living area where Joker sat dead center in front of the vidscreen, self-proclaimed lord of the remote control. Despite complaining about missing his stories, he ended up watching the news. Sovereign still topped the reporting from the Citadel.

“What if there are other dead Reapers out there?” Joker asked. Conversation stopped cold, every eye in the place turning to stare at him. The pilot glanced around, self-conscious, his eyes shifty. He looked down at his uniform. “What? Did I spill spaghetti sauce down my front?”

Garrus grinned as he watched the pilot’s attitude click in.

“Oh, I get it,” Joker grumbled. “I was just here for eye candy. I wasn’t supposed to say anything that actually helped or made sense.” He shrugged in the face of their continuing stares. “What? We killed the first one we faced. It’s a fair bet the Protheans killed more than a few.” He flipped a hand at them and turned to the vid screen. “Fine, carry on being dull-witted and slow. I’ll keep my manly brilliance to myself.”

“How would we ever find them?” Liara asked. She sat primly at the other end of Joker’s couch. “There’s a lot of empty space out there. Given fifty thousand cycles to drift … .”

A harsh inhalation of breath heralded Barla Von’s arrival. “I may be of some use in that area.” He took a wheezing breath. “The Shadow Broker maintains a file of such rumours and sightings.” He waddled into the kitchen to greet Garrus, who straightened from wiping down the tables. “General Vakarian, the barges of material are docked in a private, secure warehouse.”

“Thank you. Are you satisfied with the security?” Garrus asked, his skin going cold and his gut twisting as he imagined what the merc gangs or Aria would do with Reaper tech.

“They are well protected.” The little fellow nodded with his whole body. “But we were not the only ones salvaging the Reaper’s remains,” he said. “Numerous vessels of unknown affiliation have conducted several raids on the debris field.” His raspy breath interrupted enough that it took all Garrus’s patience to suffer through it. “The fleets drive them off.” Breath. “But I am certain they managed to escape with material each time.” He flipped his hands in a helpless little shrug.

“In addition, the council is trying to restrict all access to the remaining debris field.” The volus stepped forward, the overall impression being one of leaning in to speak in confidence. “Only the continued geth and quarian presence has dissuaded them from claiming the remaining salvage.” Breath. “But I expect them to issue an order to discontinue our efforts within the next day.”

Garrus nodded, keeping his facade even despite the extra wrench the news twisted into his gut. “I didn’t expect to control Sovereign’s remains as long as we have, but let’s keep trying to gather up as much of that thing as we can for as long as we can.”

He ushered Von further into the kitchen, away from curious ears. “Tomorrow morning, can we meet early? 0600. We need to start organizing an infrastructure. Soon enough, we’re going to need
“to pay people, order a constant stream of supplies, and see to details far too numerous for us to handle personally.”

“Agreed.” Von wheezed and shrugged a little. “0600 tomorrow will be fine.”

Garrus led him into the living area and introduced the volus around before taking a seat in one of the armchairs. “Okay, so Joker’s idea about finding other Reaper corpses. I like it, but as Liara asked, how do we find them?”

“Stories, like Barla Von said?” Kaidan offered. He pulled a kitchen chair over and straddled it. “On Earth, there were tales about the Kraken, Leviathan, and other sea monsters for hundreds of years before we found living evidence of giant squid. They lived in the deepest parts of the ocean, but still, people caught glimpses of them at sea, found dead bodies washed up on beaches, and created legends.”

“I know someone who might be able to help,” Hackett said from the kitchen. He hung his dishtowel from the cabinet door under the sink and walked into the common area. Yawning, he sat at the end of one of the couches and kicked his boots off before putting his feet up on the coffee table.

Garrus just watched and grinned. Shepard would have loved everyone just sitting around talking like people . . . like friends.

“His name is Dr. Garret Bryson.” Hackett unbuttoned the top of his uniform and laid the panel open. “He’s an expert in galactic mythology. Tracks down legends of monsters and tries to discover if they have a basis in reality.” He nodded and slid down into the couch. “I’ll get in touch with him as soon as I get back, tell him to contact us if he discovers anything Reaper-like.”

Garrus leaned forward, forearms braced against the arms of the chair. “The Alliance has someone researching legends? Why? Is it purely academic or on the off chance that the Leviathan of Dis turns out to be some sort of unknown alien?” Turians had academics, of course, but he was pretty sure that if someone went to the Hierarchy and claimed that their work had proven the existence of the Aligarim Dau, they would be laughed out of the Seat.

Hackett nodded. “Bryson started as a pure researcher. He is fascinated by legends and myths, and studies the truth behind them. He wanted to know why people create these monsters and great creatures. When we met other races, he became obsessed with links and similarities between all manner of mythological creatures across species. After a while, he started to find evidence that there may be real beings behind some of those legends.”

“Even though the Protheans existed,” Liara spoke up, her voice soft, “people treated me like I was chasing legends.” She straightened in her seat and looked up at Garrus. “Do you mind if I liaise with Dr. Bryson? I believe we’ll discover that we have a great deal in common. Perhaps we’ll even be able to fit missing pieces into one another’s puzzles.”

Garrus smiled and nodded. He stretched out, groaning like someone seventy cycles his senior as he slid lower in his seat, his body threatening strike action if he didn’t get some decent sleep. “Sounds like a good fit, Liara.” Looking over at Joker, who focused on flipping endlessly through vid channels. “And it was a good idea, Joker. Finding a Reaper corpse, especially a mostly intact one, would be invaluable.”

“Shit!” The pilot jerked up, sitting tall and stiff in his chair. “Sh! Listen!” He turned up the volume on the vid screen, then turned to flap an impatient hand at everyone when they continued talking. “Shut up! It’s about Shepard.”
A guillotine blade of silence fell.

A pretty, young human stood in the alley where Shepard died. Garrus winced away from the sight, still able to see his own silhouette outlined on the wall in blood, even though it had been scrubbed clean. The black-haired kid looked nervous as hell, so Garrus suspected that she didn’t have much experience in front of a camera. Behind her, notes, cards, and artwork covered the alley wall. Candles, flowers, and small mementos formed a shrine along the floor, leaving only a narrow strip open for people to pass through.

“People started leaving gifts and tokens within hours of it happening,” Herros informed them, his voice soft and sad. He sank into an armchair off to the side of the screen.

“... people are questioning C-Sec and the council’s official statements that Captain Shepard’s death was a random act of violence. Humanity’s first Spectre was gunned down in this alley less than thirty six hours after she killed rogue Spectre, Saren Arterius, and coordinated the destruction of the dreadnought, Sovereign.”

The reporter stepped sideways, revealing a beautifully painted graffiti depicting Shepard as a warrior outfitted in silver armour, brandishing a golden sword and shield. Huge wings spread out from her back as if she soared into battle.

“It’s an archangel,” Ashley whispered. When Garrus looked over at her, she met his stare and shrugged. “They’re warrior angels of God. Protectors and vanguards in the war against evil.”

Garrus nodded and looked back at the screen, his eyes drawn to that fierce, beautiful depiction of his Kahri. She would have hated it, but he couldn’t think of a more apt position for her in death. An archangel, looking over and protecting everyone just as she had in life.

“Less than two hours before her death,” the reporter continued, “I asked Captain Shepard for an interview. She gave me her contact information, but when I thanked her for agreeing to meet with me, Shepard told me that she was doing me no favours involving me in her investigation.”

Anderson let out a long, grumbling sigh from his seat in the kitchen. “For the love of ….”

“What was Captain Shepard involved in?” the reporter asked, as the camera panned back to show more of the alley. “Did it result in her brutal murder in this alley mere moments after her induction as the first human to join the Spectres? Rumours abound that Saren and Sovereign were just a small part of a much larger threat. If that’s the case, who would want to kill our best chance of defending against it?” The camera zoomed in on the young reporter. “I intend to find out. Emily Wong reporting from Zakera Ward on the Citadel.”

Nihlus stepped in front of the screen, earning a chorus of protests, but didn’t move. “I warned Shepard about involving that child. Miss Wong is going to get herself killed.” He emphasized the Miss.

Kaidan bristled to Garrus’s right. “Shepard didn’t endanger people, especially civilians, unnecessarily. She had to have thought Emily Wong could help in some way.” He stood and stalked into the kitchen where he rifled through cupboards and opened the refrigerators to stare inside.

“Alenko’s right.” Anderson said, looking up from his omnitool. “We need to get Miss Wong read in before she starts banging on the wrong doors. She’s definitely got the guts. If she’s handled correctly, she could be a solid resource when it comes to educating the public. We’re just going to have to be prepared to watch her back.” He looked up at Garrus.
Garrus almost laughed as the more experienced soldiers all looked to him for the final decision, but he kept his expression even as he nodded. Looking over at the volus, who sat, half-sprawled in a very uncomfortable looking position in an armchair, he asked, “Barla Von, could you get Miss Wong here by tomorrow evening? I don’t think it will take very much to convince her to come, but make sure she has discreet security as soon as possible.”

The volus shifted, wriggling a little more upright and activated his omnitool. “I will get her here, General.”

“Do you think it was the council?” Kaidan asked. He ended his search with the jar of Joker’s chocolate stuff in his hand.

“Hey!” Joker squawked. “Get out of that. It’s mine!”

Kaidan stabbed a spoon into it. “That just makes it taste so much better.” He stuck the spoon in his mouth. “Mm mm mm.”

Garrus let Joker’s gasping cries of dismay go unanswered, focusing on Kaidan. “I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense for them to make her a Spectre and then kill her.” He looked up at Nihlus as the Spectre walked around the outside of the room, headed for the door. “Where are you going?” he called.

Nihlus didn’t stop. “Out.”

“Not alone, you don’t,” Garrus started toward him, but then Wrex hoisted himself off the sofa where he’d been dozing.

“I’ll go with him. I could use a drink.” He lumbered after Nihlus, stopping when Martin popped up like a preteril from it’s burrow. “You coming, pyjak?” he asked, laughing low and deep. He jerked his massive head toward the front door and kept walking. “Get moving if you are.”

Martin looked to Garrus.

Garrus nodded despite the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Wrex wouldn’t get too loaded to look out for the kid … he hoped. Damn, it was probably a really bad idea. If anyone should go with Martin the first couple of times, it should be him. He opened his mouth to refuse, but what came out was, “Call if you need anything, kid.” Garrus shot him a stern, warning glare. “Especially a ride home. And keep your eyes open.”

“I know, I know, Kahri, but he really isn’t a kid, and he’s going to have to learn to live here eventually.

The reasoning sounded forced and hollow even to him.

“I will,” Martin called back as he ran out the door.

Garrus sighed. “Sure you will.” He forced aside his reactions and sank back into his chair.

“I think it was that crazy bastard, Banes,” Joker said, pulling Garrus’s attention back to the conversation. “Remember the test on Luna that nearly killed her?”

“Does Cerberus have a motive to kill her, though?” Kaidan asked around another spoonful of the chocolate. Finally caving in to Joker’s ranting protests, he put the cap on and stuck it back in the cupboard.
“Well,” Ashley said, taking Martin’s spot next to Hackett, “maybe Cerberus killed Shepard to set up the council . . . undermine them?” She shrugged and drew one foot up under her. “Use her to rally support for their causes?” She scowled. “Did they believe in the Reaper threat?”

Garrus thought about that for a second, then shook his head. He couldn’t recall Shepard saying much about the organization, other than that she believed Banes was behind Kahoku’s dead Marines. “I don’t think they said either way, but if it’s their ships poaching Sovereign’s remains, they could well believe it.” His scowl deepened, dark and thoughtful. They could not only believe it, but be looking for ways to prepare for it.

“Council ordering Shepard’s assassination makes sense,” Mordin said, looking up from his omnitool. He sat next to Amalair, still running scans and asking questions. “Council uses Shepard’s memory to further goals, rally people to their causes. No interference from the truth.” He went back to work, muttering to himself about the fascinating aspects of rachni biology.

Nausea churned Garrus’s guts like a cement mixer. If they’d killed her, they could prop her up to support anything, undermine his . . . all of their efforts using the very person who’d started it all. He couldn’t allow that. He didn’t possess the foggiest idea how to stop them, but he had to. What if they used her to support the idea of appeasement? No matter how successful they were building ships and recruiting soldiers, they’d never be able to wage war against the entire might of the Reapers on their own. They needed the Alliance, the Hierarchy, all the races to bring their might to bear.

He stood back up, unable to speculate any longer. The past week had exhausted him, and the work didn’t seem set to ease up any time soon. “I’m heading up for the night,” he said. “See you all down here at 0800 for breakfast.” He returned their good nights and retreated to his room.

After dropping the blinds, he headed into the shower, turning it on and letting it run until the water turned from rust brown to clear. For a building that had remained abandoned for who knew how long, it had remarkable water pressure, and he stood under the steaming torrent, just letting the water beat the tension and aches from his muscles.

After thirty minutes, he toweled off and dressed in his long, black robe. He ran a reverent talon over the stitch work on the hem of his sleeve. It depicted a flock of maraquil soaring and diving over rolling waves. His mari had crafted every stitch of it, even weaving the tussat-silk cloth it was made from, working on it for over a year while he served in the military. She’d given it to him when he moved to the Citadel to join C-Sec. He missed her and Sol. Maybe he’d go home for a few days once he got things in motion.

He’d just pulled back the blankets when someone rapped on the door. “Now I know why you were always grumbling at the door, Shepard,” he muttered, then straightened. “Yes?”

“It’s Ashley, sir. May I speak with you for a minute?”

“Come in.” He walked toward the door as it opened. He nodded to acknowledge the chief’s greeting, and gestured toward the sitting area. “Make yourself comfortable, Ash.” Following her, he watched her body language, trying to get a read on her frame of mind as she perched on the edge of the couch. He sat across from her and leaned back, leaving it to her to start the conversation.

Ashley sighed, and half-shrugged, her head tilting almost bashfully toward one shoulder. “So, you’ve probably been wondering why I’ve been acting like such an ass since Shepard’s memorial.”

Garrus smiled and nodded. “It’s crossed my mind. You seemed to be getting along very well with everyone until then.”
Ashley braced her forearms on her knees and clasped her hands. “Yes, sir, and I’m sorry about the things I said, especially at the memorial. I know if anyone could have and would have saved her, it would be you.” She sighed and shook her head. “When Jenkins died, Shepard came to talk to me.” A gentle smile ghosted across her face. “Yelled at me, actually. I was feeling sorry for myself, thought I should have been the one to die. Shepard challenged me to get over myself and find a way to honour the kid’s sacrifice.”

Garrus nodded, the picture forming clearly in his mind. Shepard didn’t pull punches when she got passionate about something.

“We’d spoken before about how dangerous Cerberus was, and I said we needed to embed someone in the organization.” She chuckled, just a soft exhalation of sound. “She asked me if I was volunteering.”

“So, after Jenkins died, you decided to do just that?” he asked, leaning forward, mirroring her posture.

“I did. The day Shepard died, we were approached by the leader of Terra Firma. I saw an opportunity to get an in with the pro-human movement, so I pointed out how humanity and Shepard had been dragged into the whole Reaper issue because of Saren.” She shrugged and looked up, making real eye contact for the first time. “Shepard warned me to be careful, but it must have worked, because the next day, I got a message from Rear Admiral Mikhailovich. He’s in charge of the 63rd scout flotilla. He offered me a position that would only be disclosed if I agreed to meet with him.”

“You think he’s involved with Cerberus?” Garrus’s shoulders and back tightened, tension drawing all the muscles up toward his cowl.

She nodded. “He wants to meet on his ship out in the middle of uncharted space. If he was going to offer me a position that was above board, the meeting wouldn’t be in the middle of nowhere.” A long sigh followed that thought. “He’s always been very vocal about our need to keep our technology a secret from the other races, because he believes war is inevitable. When we spoke the other day, he ranted about Shepard allowing so many aliens free rein aboard the Normandy, or the over-designed, turian-appeasing financial disaster as he called it.” She let out a warm chuckle. “Good thing he didn’t call her that in front of Shepard. She would have laid him out cold.”

“In a heartbeat,” Garrus agreed, laughing along with her.

Having someone inside Cerberus would prove invaluable, but the risk made Garrus uncomfortable. “So you kept up the alien-hating pretense on the Normandy just in case someone was reporting back to him?” He nodded, the pieces of the puzzle falling into place. “Do you want to meet with Mikhailovich?”

“Yes, sir. I think he might be my way in. I can’t just walk up to Cerberus’s front door and sign up, but maybe I can ease my way in through the Alliance . . . keep it about serving Earth.” She shrugged and sat up straight. “I have no idea what I’m doing, but I know I can do this.”

Weighing the options, Garrus agreed. If they were going to infiltrate Cerberus, Ash was a solid choice. He nodded, holding her stare. “Okay, but we’ll set up an encrypted frequency where you can drop messages, and you’re never out of contact for longer than forty-eight hours, even just for this meet. If you’re going to be, you leave the message saying how long. If you even suspect your cover is blown, you message me, and we’ll extract you immediately. Understood?”

Ash smiled and pushed herself up off the couch, a firm smile set on her face. “I didn’t want to
appear too eager, so put him off for a few days, saying I couldn’t get leave so soon after Shepard’s death.”

Garrus stood. “I’ll talk to Anderson when we won’t be overheard, have him arrange leave for as long as you need. We’ll discuss the rest of the details once we know more.”

Ashley held out her hand. “Thank you, sir. I won’t let you, or Shepard, down.”

Garrus took the chief’s hand. “She was very impressed with you, Ash. I know you’ll continue to do her proud.” He squeezed her fingers, then released her. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” She strode for the door, her whole posture radiating confidence and a sense of purpose that she hadn’t possessed when Garrus first met her. He just hoped that it didn’t get her killed.

When the door closed behind Ashley, Garrus returned to his bed. He climbed in and propped himself up on a couple of pillows before reaching for the book on the nightstand.

Not quite a half hour later, Garrus glanced up as his father entered the room, the elder Vakarian heading straight through for the head. “Too much wild partying?”

Herros laughed. “All except Joker are passed out on the couches or draped over chairs. A few made it to their beds.” He stopped at the door, sobering. “They’ve had a hard week. They’re trying hard not to show it, but they’re worn out.”

Nodding, Garrus looked back down at his book. “Anderson should take them somewhere for shore leave when we’re done here.” He looked up when his father didn’t reply, but the elder Vakarian had already stepped through, the door sliding closed behind him.

Fifteen minutes later, Herros walked out, wearing a long, deep blue robe very like Garrus’s own, right down to the intricate embroidery work along the hems. Garrus smiled. “That’s a new one.” He shook his head. “Must have taken Mari years to do all that stitchwork.”

Herros chuckled and sat on the side of the bed. “I hated to part with the old one. It was her bonding gift to me, but she put so much time into this. You know her and her fibrecraft.” He ran loving talons along the edge, seeming to disappear into thought for a moment before he turned, sitting so he faced Garrus.

Garrus pushed himself up to sit, leaning against the headboard, frowning a little when he saw the serious look on his father’s face. “Pari? What is it?”

Herros’s eyes glassed a little, his mandibles working in a slow sweep for a long moment before he cleared his throat and shifted himself on the bed. “Your mari’s health isn’t the best, Garrus. She’s having trouble with fine motor coordination, and she has days where she’s in quite a lot of pain.”

“A doctor?” Garrus reached out, laying his talons over his father’s. Claws wrapped tight around his throat as he thought of his vital, strong, kind mari hurting and hiding it from her ungrateful, runaway son during their rare vidcalls. “Why hasn’t she said anything? Why hasn’t Sol said anything? I would have … .” He let the sentence die. What would he have done? Dropped whatever very important case he was working on to travel home and help out? As much as the truth hurt, he knew himself better than that—at least the torin he’d been before meeting Shepard.

Herros shrugged. “You know your mari. She’s scared, but doesn’t want to admit anything’s wrong. I went home for a week last month and took her to specialists. It’s called Corpalis Syndrome. There are no treatments, no cure.” A harsh keen broke through the last words, but he cut it off, his jaw
clenching.

Sun breaking through the clouds in the middle of a summer storm, pain and understanding poured through Garrus, shining a gentle, new light on his *pari*. Garrus clambered out from under the blankets to kneel next to his father on the mattress, pulling him into an embrace. A soft cry rumbled from his throat, both larynges layering sorrow and empathy, fear and regret. Over the cycles, he’d doubted a great many things about his father, but never the *torin’s* devotion to his mate. Even living apart most of the time, his parents loved one another with a strength that Garrus always held as his benchmark, unwilling to accept anything less.

“I’ve made so many mistakes, Garrus,” Herros whispered, one arm slipping around his son’s cowl. “I stand by my decision for you and Sol to grow up on Palaven—real rock and vegetation beneath your talons, sky above your heads—but the rest . . . .” He shook his head then rested his brow against his son’s. “The rest was pride. I should have left C-Sec, taken a position with Internal Forces. I should have been there with her, and then with you and Sol for the past thirty cycles. And now it’s nearly too late.”

Garrus pulled away, leaving his hand on his father’s shoulder. Panic and denial tossed him back and forth until it took all his strength not to leap up and run down to find Mordin, demand that something be done. He couldn’t just sit back and watch his *mari* succumb to a slow and painful death. He had so many things to make up to her, so many things he needed to say . . . to apologize for.

“Garrus?” His father’s voice pulled him back, giving him a anchor to hold onto as he fought his reactions back under control.

Still, his voice shook as he said, “We’ll do everything we can for her. Mordin Solus is a genius and very well known in the scientific community. Maybe he knows someone who’s working on it. We have new technologies to study with the geth, the rachni . . . even Sovereign.” He met his father’s eyes with a resolute stare. “We’ll figure something out.”

Herros gripped the back of Garrus’s neck just above his cowl, his thumb talon gently stroking along the ridge of hard plates. After staring back at Garrus for a moment, he nodded. “In the meantime, I’m going to move home. Fedorian has been after me for cycles to retire and take a seat in the Hierarchy.” He let out a long, noisy breath, the barest hint of the keen returning beneath it. “I’m going to accept. I need to be there for your *mari*, and I can do a lot more for you and the war effort there than I can in C-Sec.”

Garrus frowned. “Are you sure you want to go into politics?”

His father’s mandible fluttered with a small, wry smile. “It wouldn’t be my first choice for retirement, but Shepard was right. You’re right. We need to bring together everyone and every resource we can. Fedorian has offered me the Planetary Security portfolio, and wants me to sit on both the assembly of generals and admirals. I couldn’t have chosen a more perfect position to help with the war. I’ll have to work slowly and carefully, but I’ll find a way to bring them around.”

Herros stood. “Let’s get some sleep. Lamenting and giving into our fears won’t solve the problems of tomorrow.”

Garrus nodded and moved back to his side of the bed, laying on his back, pillows piled under his head, Shepard’s on the top. He picked up his book, but stared blankly at the page, not seeing the words. Instead, he planned all the people he needed to speak to about his mother’s illness and tried to figure out the best timing for a trip back to Palaven. Educating himself came first. Tomorrow, he’d take Mordin and Dr. Chakwas aside and ask them to research Corporalis Syndrome and put
something together to help him understand the disease and what his mother needed.

“Are you reading or worrying?” Herros asked, turning over to look at him. The concern and understanding in his father’s eyes eased back the sorrow and fear.

“I’ve been the worst of sons,” Garrus whispered, looking away. “I abandoned _Mari_ and _Sol_. Fought tooth and talon against you instead of just listening.” He shook his head.

“Not the worst of sons,” Herros replied. “We all did the best we could, Garrus. I tried to raise you to be the _torin_ I wanted you to be.” A soft, bitter chuff cut the air as he shook his head. “I didn’t realize that what I needed to do was trust you enough to raise you to be the _torin_ you wanted to be.” He sighed. “Your _mari_ always knew that. She tried to tell me a thousand times, but I was too stubborn to listen.”

Garrus laughed softly. “Must be genetic.”

“Indeed.”

A comforting silence grew between them for a couple of minutes as Garrus thought about what it would mean for his _pari_ to lose the mate he adored. Would it have been better or worse to lose Shepard after thirty-five cycles together? “It must seem ridiculous to you, my mourning so hard and being so lost without someone I knew a few months,” Garrus said, then chuffed and shook his head.

“Not at all.” Herros tilted his head a little and adjusted his pillow. “I knew I’d found my life partner the moment I saw your mother, and after thirty four cycles, have yet to regret a day.”

Garrus turned his head, his brow furrowing. “You’ve never said anything about the fact Shepard was human. It didn’t bother you?”

Herros sighed, his subvocals rumbling a little. “When your children are born, you imagine their futures. You see them growing up, bonding with a mate you adore as much as they do … grandchildren in whose eyes you can see yourself and their grandmother.” A sad sort of smile drifted over his rugged, strong features. “But, as you watch those children grow and suffer through the inevitable disappointment and suffering of life, you realize that you truly wish for them to find only a handful of things: love, companionship, a sense of purpose, peace, and happiness.”

He shrugged, his mandible fluttering. “I watched you say goodbye to Shepard the day she came to see me at C-Sec, and I knew you’d found everything I wished for you. I’m just sorry you lost her so soon.” He reached out to squeeze Garrus’s arm, his mouth working a little as if he were trying to decide on the wisdom of saying the next words.

“What?” Garrus prompted, truly wanting to know what his father had to say. He no longer retained the arrogant privilege of believing he knew better. His father knew all along the dangers he faced, the darkness the anger bred within his heart. Having seen it, he tried to steer Garrus into safer waters.

Herros let out a soft breath. “Now, I’m afraid you’ll spend the rest of your life bonded to a dead woman.” He patted Garrus’s arm and pulled his hand back. “It’s too soon to worry about, but I see so much of me in you, Garrus.” He chuffed. “It’s probably why we fought all the time. But, I know that when I lose your _mari_, whether it is in a cycle or in seventy-five cycles, that will be it for me. You’re so young, so much left ahead.” He smiled and shook his head. “Like I said, too early for these sorts of worries. You should be holding your _Kahri_ close. She deserves this time.”
Garrus nodded, but didn’t reply. Closing his eyes, he rolled over, facing away from his father, and pulled her pillow tight to his face. Shepurd did deserve that time and so much more. When they met again, she deserved to know that he’d remained faithful to her memory for as long as they’d been apart. He could give her that. He could give her that without even the slightest pang of regret.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for only one update this week. Spent Monday and Tuesday with my head packed in ice and wondering if trepanning would actually work. Next week will be back to Monday, Thursday. As always, thanks for reading, Kim
Chapter Summary

At the brink of moving forward, everyone figures out their place. Or tries to.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Parsophin** - Ancient turian version of cavalry. Warriors rode into battle on **Loraus Montum** (large armoured four-legged reptile analogues that have since gone extinct due to a highly selective breeding process.)

**Buratrum** - The realm of the spirits of dishonourable association.

**Karifratrus** - A blood oath made between turians, bonding them as siblings in honour rather than blood. It has its origins in ancient times where clan members swore oaths before going into battle. If one of them died, the family and all dependents of the other would be adopted into the survivor's family. While the oath-swearers are alive, they are bonded as close or closer than blood.

**8 Days ASD**

Shepard grinned and leaned back in the grass, tilting her face up to the sun. "You picked a hell of a place for our second date." Her bright emerald stare focused on Garrus. After a second, she tilted her head to one side, a gentle smile just kissing her lips. "You know, I've been thinking about something. You have a nickname for me, but I don't have one for you. Well, outside of calling you C-Sec, and I can't really call you that now you've quit." The smile turned, one corner of her mouth lifting as her eyes sparkled with teasing. "That hardly seems fair."

His heart began to pound against his spine at the heat in her stare. Garrus stretched out on his side, the grass cool and lush against the bare plates of his torso as he cradled his head in his hand. He reached out to caress one freckled cheek with his thumb, then tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "I've had a few nicknames in my time. None of which I want to hear from these lips." Dragging the pad of his thumb across her bottom lip, he smiled. "I like it when you use my name.

She kissed his thumb then rolled over onto her belly, her elbows and forearms braced in the grass, her feet raised and swinging a little. The simple joy in the child-like movement filled his chest with a beautiful ache as she wheedled, "Come on, you can tell me. I promise not to use any of them. I just want to know my competition."

His grin widened. "You don't have any competition, Kahri. Not on any level." He laughed, the lightness of her mood infectious. All the old fear and hesitancy had fled, leaving her so wonderfully free. He closed his eyes, allowing contentment and love to saturate every particle of his being.

The grass next to him rustled, and he sensed the presence of a stalking predator. Inhaling, he drew in a deep breath of the sun-warmed perfume of her. Hot strands of silk brushed his skin, tickling along his keel, then the moist caress of her lips tugged at his mouth. "Please," she whispered, kissing along his mandible until she reached his aural canal. "I promise by the holy light of the Enkindlers to make it worth your while." She pushed on his shoulder, rolling him over onto his
"Ow, mind the fringe." Grumbling despite his now wide grin, he sighed and adjusted his folded tunic to support his neck. "Fine, as long as you leave the Father of Light out of this." He paused just long enough to make her wriggle impatiently before he said, "Ridgefield called me Rookie."

Shepard nipped him, her flat teeth scraping the back wing of his mandible. He shuddered, a shockwave of pleasure rolling down his entire body as she said, her breath warm on his hide, "That's not fair. I know that one." She half-leaned against his side, her arm resting across him, just beneath his keel. Leaning down, she rested her chin on his chest. "Come on, tell me something real."

His sigh erupted with perfect melodrama and just the right mix of indulgence and sorrow. "Fine. When I was a boy, my father called me Betru." The old name sparked a small burst of warmth. He hadn't thought about those days in a long time. The endless drilling with rifles . . . that he recalled with excruciating clarity, but the affectionate name . . . he'd forgotten.

Shepard perked up at that. "What does it mean?" Those keen, brilliant eyes stared into his, her joy at being allowed into his past palpable.

He stroked his talons through her hair. "It's the common name of a raptor that lives in the highland forests on Palaven. Their eyesight is so keen that they hunt even through the thick forest canopy." He tucked his off-side arm under his fringe to pillow his head a little. "Pari started teaching me to shoot a sniper rifle even before I was big enough to hold it properly."

"And you hated it because you wanted to be perfect, and you probably couldn't hit the broadside of a barn like that." She rolled onto her hands and knees and crawled up until she stared straight down into his face. "My wonderful perfectionist wanting so badly to make his pari proud."

For a moment, Garrus thought his heart would punch a hole straight through his chest. He reached up, tracing the lines of her face with gentle talons. "You're so beautiful," he whispered.

She bent down to kiss him, her elbows leaning on his shoulders as her lips moved over his mouth, their tongues teasing gently, hers darting away like a preteril dashing into its burrow as soon as he tried to capture it. Her hands pressed his mandibles gently into his face, allowing him to get enough suction to trap it. The kiss deepened, Shepard arching into him, her breathing fast and deep. Giving up the coy pretense, her tongue caressed and flicked, making love to his with a new, wanton eagerness.

Heart pounding, a building—but not unpleasant—pressure behind his plates, he pulled her down into him, needing to feel her against every centimetre. Her clothes suddenly drew his ire. Too much cloth between his hands and her skin. He needed to feel it against his, to trace the map of scars as if acknowledging them could somehow heal them. Sliding his hand down her back, he tugged at the hem of her uniform, pulling it loose of her trousers. He meant to slip his hand under it, wanting to run the tips of his talons down the nubs of her spine and trace the sharp angle of her shoulder blade, but instead, she pulled away.

"Mmm." She rubbed the cool tip of her nose against his when they broke the kiss, coming up for air. "Why haven't I spent the last month telling you that I love you every chance I got?" She sat up, curling her legs under her. Smiling down at him, she leaned on one hand while the other traced lazy trails along the edges of his chest plates.

"I've known." He laid his hand on her waist. "And I think you knew long before I told you." He shifted a little, his fringe kinked under his head. He watched the wheels turn behind her eyes.
"Hmm," she muttered, tapping her lip with a fingertip. "I'm slow, but I started to get an inkling eventually. It's a bit easier to nail down when I realized that what I felt for the big, hot-headed dummy at my back wasn't just friendship and respect." She reached down, grabbed the hem of her uniform and swept it up over her head in a single, fluid move. Folding it, she leaned forward, her breasts brushing his chest as she settled her uniform under his head. "Better?" she asked, sitting up.

After sorting it a bit, he nodded. "Much, but now you're left with just that harness thing." He stifled his smile, loving watching her expressions shift, the subtle variance from moment to moment. Shadows of clouds on the grass, they moved over the surface, changing constantly, if just the tiniest bit. She said so much without speaking a single word. He slipped a talon under the edge of the material, running it along the border, the swell of her breast soft and warm under his first knuckle. As he watched her eyes the whole time, he didn't see any fear or hesitation, just trust and love.

She swung a leg over him to straddle his stomach and braced the heels of her hands against his chest, staring down into his eyes. "Well, there's a solution to that, isn't there?" Reaching behind her, she unclipped it and let it slide down her arms. Her smile turned a little self-conscious as she revealed herself to him, but she kept her eyes fixed on his.

He encircled her hips with his hands and just looked up at her, her pale skin almost seeming to glow in the sunlight, her hair a bronze halo of curls around her face. Stroking her stomach with his thumbs, he waited for her to relax into him again. Her thighs gripped his waist with steel rigidity, betraying all the nerves and insecurities she didn't want to let him see. Once she settled back a little, he slid his hands up her sides, still caressing her, exploring slowly and gently.

His eyes never leaving hers, he swept his thumbs over the lower swell of her breasts. Smiling, she closed her eyes, her head tilting as if she were focusing on his touch. Bucking his hips a little to get some momentum, he sat up. Lifting Shepard, he settled her on his lap as he crossed his legs.

"Do you trust me?" he asked, leaning in to nuzzle her cheek. Spirits, she smelled so good, all traces of the soldier gone. Just sun-warmed skin, floral, and spice ... just her. He loved the soldier, how tough and talented she was ... how she turned battle into a dance as she strode through, seeming three metres tall and invincible. But the woman ... so many layers and mysteries, gifts and surprises made up the woman, he knew he could spend a lifetime discovering only a portion of them. "Do you trust me, Shepard?" he asked again.

"With everything," she whispered, not opening her eyes.

He slipped his arms around behind her. "Lay back, just let yourself go." He laid her back. "Let your arms and head hang. I've got you." Watching her, he admired the courage it took to wage the conflict he saw going on beneath her skin. Her heart said trust, her mind said trust but didn't quite believe it could, and her body just refused to believe that it could be safe exposed, open and relaxed. In the end, her heart won, and she leaned back against the cradle of his arms, her lower legs wrapping around him.

Massaging the back of her neck with firm, gentle talons, he sat quietly, content to wait as long as she needed to wrestle down the last of the fear. She relaxed into him slowly, head lolling back, arms dropping to the side. Wrestling back the tightness in his throat, he smiled. A praela indeed.

"You're the bravest person I've ever met," he whispered, easing her back a little. He smiled when she didn't reply, just relaxing a little more, her breathing finally slowing and growing deeper with each inhalation. Over the next five minutes he just laid her back, massaging her gently. "Where are you?" he asked when he cradled all her weight in his arms.
"Right here, with you," she answered, her voice soft and dreamy. "I've always loved the way you hold me. I feel safer in your arms than I've felt anywhere in a long time."

He leaned down to nuzzle the base of her neck, the ribbons of scar tissue that covered almost every centimetre from her chin to the waist of her trousers felt like satin cords against the upper plate of his mouth. He wished he could go back in time to erase them for her, but supposed he'd have to settle for helping heal them. "You'll always be safe with me, Shepard."

Out of the clear sky, thunder rolled across the land, one booming roar after another. Shepard stiffened and sat up.

"Garrus? What's going on?"

His eyes opened, blinking at the near complete darkness as he tried to figure out what happened to the sun. His arms felt strange … barren and empty without Shepard's slight weight laying in them. Where had she gone?

In the end, smells reoriented him, working their way through the dream. The fresh summer breeze, sun-warmed grass, and Shepard vanished before the onslaught of citrus-scented cleaning fluid, stale food odours, and his father.

A low, disappointed sigh struggled out of his throat, warbling a little as sorrow strangled his vocal chords.

"Someone is pounding at the door," his father said, his voice gruff and sleepy. "That's what woke you up." Herros rolled over and pulled the blankets up to his fringe.

"Okay." Garrus threw back the blankets, swatting at them when they tangled around his feet. Whomever it was, they'd better be bleeding to death, or running to get help for someone who was bleeding to death. Even then, he might just make them pay for snatching him out of Shepard's arms.

Finally free of his argumentative bed linens, he grabbed his sidearm off the nightstand and stalked to the door. "What is it?"

"It's Lantar Sidonis. We met a couple of days ago," a turian voice called back.

Garrus's internal alarm began to shriek, but he packed it down and palmed the door. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

The turian gave him an apologetic shrug. "Sorry to wake you." He glanced past Garrus to the bed, his eyes snapping back to Garrus's face when the general stepped in front of him. "Urdnot Wrex sent me. Nihlus is wasted and refuses to leave Afterlife."

Garrus raised his brow plates. "And Wrex can't just toss a drunk turian over his shoulder and haul him home?"

Sidonis shrugged. "Nihlus started waving his shotgun around in the bar. We're lucky no one took the bait, or we'd probably still be getting our asses beaten. Wrex tried to get him out, but Nihlus threatened to shoot him. We tricked him into a side room, kicked everyone out, and Wrex is guarding the door. He said to take the car, and come to get you." Sidonis backed up a step, his subvocals rumbling his worry that he had stepped into the middle of something he shouldn't have. "Wrex tried your radio, but you didn't answer. So here I am."

Garrus cursed, imagining all the shit Nihlus could get himself into. "Does he have Aria's
attention?" Dread stabbed him with shards of ice only to have anger at Nihlus's stupidity melt them into steam.

Sidonis chuffed. "Can't see how he could have avoided it, but she let us handle it."

Garrus shoved aside both the worry and annoyance. "Okay, give me a minute." He stepped back from the door, letting it shut, and headed straight for his armour.

His father shifted on the bed, his voice still grumpy and rough as he asked, "Do you want me to go along?"

Garrus unfastened his robe and pulled it off, trading it for his under armour. "Thanks, Pari, but no. I'm sure the three of us can wrestle Nihlus to a car and drag him back here." He sighed, a grumble tumbling out hot on its heels. "I hope this isn't going to become a nightly occurrence. At least last night, they were able to convince him to come back." He zipped up his underlayer and started sealing his armour into place. "I thought that if he was given something to focus on, he'd do better."

"Give him time," Herros said, less grumpy and more reasonable as he woke. "It's been a week. Let him grieve for a while yet. If you have to drag him home a few times, you do."

Shame at his impatience scalded under Garrus's plates. "Yeah, I guess." He snapped the two halves of the girdle together, then started armouring up his legs before lifting the torso section into place. In under five minutes, he was suited up and ready to go.

"If we're not back in an hour, send in the parsophin" he said as he hung his sidearm from his hip. He didn't dare take anything more powerful on the chance that Nihlus had Aria's guards riled up. He harboured no desire to start a small war.

Herros chuckled. "I will. Be careful."

Garrus smiled and headed to the door. "I will." He palmed the control and strode straight past Sidonis, who was leaning against the wall. "Let's go." He let out a grumbling sigh. "I was having a really good dream."

The pair didn't speak on their way to the car, Garrus content to let the other torin drive. Lifting off, Sidonis manoeuvred the car through the buildings with the deft skill of someone long used to Omega.

Throughout the first ten minutes of the trip, Sidonis kept looking over at Garrus, making him squirm a little in his seat. Finally, Garrus ceased his in depth study of the front viewport and turned to meet one of the glances. "What? If you've got something to say, just say it."

Sidonis's mandibles dropped and pulled tight against his face. "Sorry, it's just … all your people call you general. Don't get me wrong, you've got the stern authority thing in spades, but you seem pretty young to be a general."

Garrus nodded. "If I'd stayed with external forces, I might be a captain by now." He chuffed. "I left the military because I didn't want to spend my life fighting wars, killing people. Joined C-Sec mostly out of a sense of duty, wanting to make my father proud, but it wasn't my choice of profession either." His turn to glance across the car. Why was he telling this complete stranger his life story?

"And now you're a general in a private army?" Sidonis chuckled. "Sounds like you're running in the wrong direction for a torin looking to escape battle."
Garrus nodded. "So it would seem, but there's a very real threat coming, and I made a promise to get the galaxy as prepared to face it as possible."

Sidonis nodded, and a good two minutes passed before he started glancing over again. "So, Nihlus and Shepard were together?" the other turian asked just as Garrus sucked in a breath to tell him off. "He's really torn up about her death. They must have been something."

Garrus let out the breath and shook his head, keeping his voice as flat as he could manage. "They weren't together."

He could see that took Sidonis by surprise, so he could guess what Nihlus had been doing at the bar. Hopefully, Nihlus hadn't spewed any sensitive intel.

Sidonis shrugged. "When my sister died, I was a lot like Nihlus." He chuffed and shrugged again, almost a hiccup of movement that clearly said he hadn't moved past the pain.

"How long has it been?" Garrus asked. His thoughts gravitated to Sol and his ailing mother. Damn, he needed to get back home for a few days.

"A cycle. Well, a cycle on Omega anyway." Again, that slight, spastic shrug. "Gangs got her. Don't know which one, probably Blood Pack. They just grab females off the street." A laugh so filled with rage that it came out sharper than a scalpel, sliced the air between them. "Not just females. Heard of others." A hard, demanding stare pinned Garrus with the rage and fear behind it. "Is your army going to be one more thing the people on this rock have to survive, General?"

After a second of hesitation, Garrus reached out to lay a hand on the torin's shoulder. "No, Sidonis. In fact, within the next year, I intend to have the gangs all but driven off this rock." A firm nod met Sidonis's skeptical frown. "You could help with that if you had the mind to."

They finished the rest of the drive in silence.

They got out of the car half a block from the front door, the thumping, disjointed rhythms of the music hitting him like a giant, padded fist.

"Damn, that's loud," he called over the racket, just barely resisting the urge to clap his hands over his aural canals. "How are the people inside not deaf?" Losing the battle, he covered one side of his head, his tympanic membrane begging for mercy with sharp, stabbing cries.

Sidonis laughed, this one lighter than the last, but still angry. "It's no worse inside. Aria pipes it out here to keep the people trapped in line mollified." He stopped and turned to stare at Garrus for a long few seconds, his gaze searching for something. Seeming to find it, he frowned. "You're trying to hide it, but you're as messed up as Nihlus." A decisive nod seemed to congratulate himself on his deduction. "My father would like you. You're obviously a very good turian. Still, I can see you're in a lot of pain."

Where had that come from? Uncomfortable, Garrus brushed past, avoiding the correct, but inappropriate observation. Turians didn't draw attention to one another's weaknesses as a rule.

"Sorry," Sidonis called, hurrying to catch up. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have just blurted that out. I see things. Most of the time, I don't show the good sense to just shut up about them." He shrugged. "My sister always said it would be considered a gift if I could just keep my mouth shut."

Garrus just set his jaw against a testy reply and strode for the line at the door. "Are we going to have to wait here?"
Sidonis trotted after him. "No. Aria knows I work for Mordin. She likes him, which gets us past the goons at the door." Sidonis strode up the line, nodding to a batarian bouncer as he passed.

Dim and grungy, like the rest of Omega, the long tunnel entrance into the bar flickered orange and red with holographic flame. Whose afterlife was this place? His people's mythology spoke of a realm set aside for those who died dishonourably, but if he recalled his tutor correctly, it was cold and dank. As far as he knew, asari didn't believe in any sort of buratrum. In fact, as far as he knew, only a couple of the human religions believed in a flaming realm of eternal punishment. It said a great deal about Omega that the concept of hell seemed the most fitting theme for Aria's club.

Garrus stepped through the inner doors to Afterlife and stopped, letting Sidonis walk ahead. People packed the place, some dancing, most standing around in small groups tossing back overpriced alcohol. Foggy smoke hung like a cloud layer just above Garrus's head-level. Anyone who expected people to take care of the air somewhere so reliant on a small supply of it would have been disappointed. As would anyone who expected the air recyclers to actually clear the smoke away. He ducked down a little as he pushed into the crowd. He didn't begrudge others their bad habits, spirits knew he had one or two, but he didn't enjoy smoke inhalation.

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Grateful not to see nor hear Nihlus, he weaved his way to the side room. A turian with muddy brown famila notas intercepted him halfway across the floor.

"Aria wants to speak with you," the turian yelled over the cacophony of music, conversations, and noise.

Garrus glanced up at the queen's throne then shook his head. "It's three in the morning. I'm just here to pick up a friend. Another time."

The turian stared him down, neither moving nor speaking until Garrus tried to step around him at which point, he merely sidestepped to place himself back in his path.

"Do you have a name?" Garrus called.

"Name's Grizz." The turian tilted his chin up, trying to look proud and arrogant, but the rest of his posture stayed slumped and defeated, spoiling the effect.

"Really?" Garrus chuckled. "Your parents give you that name?" He shook his head and tried to step around him. "I'll just take my friend and go." When Grizz just stepped in front of him again, he sighed. "Fine, in the spirit of getting to return to my bed at some point tonight, lead on."

Grizz nodded with an expression that said Garrus would have gotten home to bed faster without arguing, turned and made his way through the throng.

Garrus followed, noting the ridiculous number of guards lurking about. Aria could take out a decent squad singlehandedly if the reports were accurate. The guards had to be for show. They climbed two flights of stairs to come face to face with the pirate queen on her throne.

Aria sat easily, smug and aloof, one leg crossed over the other, her hands resting in her lap. Both her smile and head cocked to one side. "General Vakarian, thank you for deigning to speak with me."

Garrus raised a brow plate. "What can I do for you, Aria? I came to take my people home." Odd, but he didn't feel much of anything when faced with Aria in the flesh. At least as a concept, a threat looming out in the ether, she'd made him nervous, but just then … nothing.

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She nodded and shifted a little. "Yes, poor Nihlus. He's taking Shepard's death particularly hard."
Funny, but the last time you were here, I thought the two of you were together." Another sly smile crawled across her lips as she stared into his eyes. "She looked at you with such …." The smile faded. "Ah."

Forcing his entire body into a stoney, stoic mirror, Garrus cocked a hip and crossed his arms. "Can I help you with something, Aria, or can I take my people home?" He watched her, getting almost nothing back from her other than haughty disdain, although she did seem genuinely sorry about Shepard. Maybe his fiery little praela had made herself a better friend than she'd thought.

Aria stood and turned to look out over the club. "You want to build an army here. I think that warrants keeping an eye on you." Her shoulders twitched a little, unconscious shrugs that made him smile. Not nearly as casual as she wanted to appear.

"I harbour no desire to run Omega, Aria. Omega suits our purpose. Leave us alone, and we'll leave you alone." He held himself still despite the urge to twitch and a growing itch behind his right mandible.

"I know what Shepard thought was coming," she said, spinning around to face him. "Was she delusional? Was that dreadnought just a geth tool, or was it alive?"

"Nazara was a Reaper, a living machine, and just the vanguard of an army of them." He hesitated, uncertainty tangling up in his guts. Should he lay it all out? Chances were that Aria knew it all anyway and was just testing to see how cooperative he intended to be. "Thousands of those things are trying to find a way back into the galaxy from dark space."

Her chin tilted back up, but her throat convulsed a little, showing fear. Good, maybe she wasn't quite the horror that he believed. Maybe a spark of decency still hadn't been completely suffocated in the vacuum of her spirit. "They wiped out the Protheans?" she asked, shoring up her wall of inscrutability.

He wondered if she was playing him, then realized he was too tired to give a crap. Let her. "They did, and every galactic civilization back millions of cycles." Straightening, he said, "We're here to prepare for them, not to depose you. I will, however, give you fair warning. I intend to wipe out the merc bands. Blood Pack, Eclipse, Blue Suns … they're all going down."

A twisted little smile told him what her words confirmed a moment later. "Do try to be entertaining, we get so little good theatre on Omega." Sitting back on her bench, she neatly crossed her legs and tucked her hands into her lap. "I'll look forward to the increase in weapon sales."

He chuckled, a charged, electric rumble. "Make sure to sell them the good stuff. I can't be bothered to loot the corpses for crap."

A genuine smile greeted that. "I think we understand one another, General."

Ice and steel reflected it back. "I don't think we'll ever understand one another, Aria, but a civil detente will do." He tilted his head. "Good night." He turned away from her crooked smile, knowing that she believed she'd gotten to him.

"The council has eyes watching you, even now," she called after him, her tone one of mixed sadistic curiosity and satisfaction. "How long do you think they'll leave you alone?"

He just kept going. She could believe that she'd gotten to him. He had no time or patience for games, and Aria T'Loak was the least of his problems. Movement from the bottom of the first flight of stairs grabbed his attention as a familiar face got up from a table. The merc from Donovan
Hock's mansion fell in behind Garrus, following him down to the club floor.

"Heard you talkin' up there," the scarred man said from behind Garrus's shoulder. "You think you're going to take down the Suns, do you?"

Garrus didn't look back as he weaved through the crowd. "I am, along with any other gang that preys on Omega's residents." Stopping just before he reached the access to the side room, he turned to face the other man and said, "Massani, right?"

"Yeah, what's it to you?" The merc leered at him, his one milky, blue eye accentuating the expression into something that he seemed to believe should be intimidating. Massani puffed out his chest, bristling as if he expected Garrus to challenge him.

"If you're interested in helping that process along, maybe earning a respectable living, head over to Kima district one of these days." With that he continued down to the door. As much as he didn't want to bring personal grudges into the fold, he respected that Massani hadn't had to help Hock's victims, but did. Nor had he asked for payment, even though he gladly accepted what Shepard offered. Either way, he might just make a solid addition to the core group.

"Garrus," Wrex greeted, his voice low but carrying. He stood on the left hand side of the door, his shotgun in his hand, but hanging next to his leg. "Be careful in there. Nihlus … ." The krogan shrugged his massive shoulders, the simple gesture filling Garrus with dread. Wrex seldom seemed at a loss, tackling things with nothing more than bravado and violence if he needed to.

"He's lost it, Garrus," Martin chimed in. "He's just sitting there, staring at … ." Shaking his head he jerked a thumb behind him toward the door. "Maybe it's best if you see for yourself."

A quick nod and he pushed past them, palming the door. He stepped through, needing a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. Nihlus sat in the corner under a table, his back pressed against the wall. The orange glow of his omnitool made the white sweeps of his familia notas reflect like flames against the deep red of his hide. The Spectre's shotgun sat on the floor next to his leg, within easy reach.

"Nihlus?" Garrus took a step toward the other torin, leaning down a little. His mandibles pulled in tight and brow plates dropped in a worried scowl when Nihlus showed no sign of knowing Garrus was even there. "What's going on?"

Voices came from the omnitool, drawing Garrus's attention to the small vidscreen open above Nihlus's arm. It took a second, the volume was so loud that it distorted Nihlus and Anderson's voices, but then the conversation registered.

"I need to contact the Alliance parliament and ask them to send extra security personnel to cover Udina," Anderson said.

Icy talons scratched their way down Garrus's carapace, claws ripping furrows through the cartilage as he placed the conversation. "Nihlus, what are you doing?" he asked, his voice barely making it out through the constriction closing his throat.

"The council is usually guarded by a multiracial force assigned from C-Sec with Spectres stepping in for high profile events or where security is particularly risky," Nihlus replied. "They probably won't be happy about Alliance personnel."

Garrus heard his voice in the background, but talked over the reply, trying to drown it out. "Nihlus, shut it off. Is this what you've been spending your time doing? Torturing yourself with your
hardsuit recording."

"This is it, right here," the Spectre said, pointing a trembling talon at the vid. "When the civilians get off the elevator, I should have stepped up to block her." He keened long and offkey. "There it is, the moment I could have saved her." Slumping against the wall, he let his hand drop. "I've killed her more than a hundred times since that alley. Every time that fucking moment mocks me." He groped for his weapon, pulling the compact shotgun into his lap. "Every time she just dies again, because I wasn't paying attention to the only thing … the only being in the whole fucking galaxy I loved."

Garrus approached slowly, keeping his eyes on Nihlus's weapon. The energy coming off the Spectre grated against his nerves like a metal file … it screamed of desperation, warning him of how close the Spectre was to doing something to make everything so much worse. "Nihlus, we can never save her. That moment has come and gone." A soft keen broke free, and he reached up, raking his talons over his fringe, trying to blink the tears from his eyes. "But, if you do what I think you want to do … you will break us. All of us."

Two more impossibly slow, careful steps carried him a half-metre closer. Crouching down, Garrus reached out a hand. "Nihlus, give me the gun, and let's go home. This is no place for a Spectre."

Nihlus looked up at him, his gaze unfocused and wandering. "You think I want to kill myself, Vakarian?" He laughed, a sharp belch of rage and bitter humour. "She'd kicked my ass if I showed up because I ate a bullet." He held up his gun, staring at it with a longing that belied his words. "I want to, but I can't. I'd give anything to see her again, but not that way."

Garrus relaxed a little, grateful for that small piece of awareness. "Erase that recording, Nihlus, and let's go home."

"Home?" The Spectre frowned at the word, repeating it over softly as if tasting it. "Is that what we're doing, Vakarian?"

Garrus held out his hand. "Come on. Shepard doesn't want this for you. She expects better … the proud Spectre fighting to save the galaxy." He shrugged. "That was the torin she loved."

Nihlus's frown deepened, but he took hold of Garrus's hand and allowed him to help him up onto his feet.

They didn't speak as they left the room, Wrex and Butler taking the lead to clear a path, Martin and Sidonis falling in behind. Outside the bar, the music sliced into Garrus's head again. Was it actually louder outside or just seem so because of the absence of bar racket?

Nihlus stopped near the end of the line and turned his unsteady stare on Garrus. "At her memorial, you said I was your fratrin." He stumbled a little as if the pavement shifted under his feet. "Could you have shared her heart, Vakarian?" he asked, his words strangled enough to make Garrus believe he had a very real chance of being puked on.

Garrus met his stare for a moment, then shook his head. "This is neither the time nor the place for this discussion, Nihlus. Let's just get back to the base." He started back toward the cab stand, half dragging Nihlus along.

"I could have," the Spectre whispered, just audible over the music. "I couldn't have denied her anything, even you."

Garrus scowled at Nihlus and tugged him along. "Let's just get home before someone decides to
"Shoot your drunken ass." He hoisted the *torin* up his shoulder a little further trying to redistribute his weight.

"Thanks for your help," Garrus said to Sidonis and Butler when they arrived at the cab stand. He poured Nihlus into the passenger seat and turned to shake their hands.

Sidonis spoke for them both. "Glad to help."

Garrus got into the cab and quickly set their destination before he glanced over at Nihlus. "If you're going to throw up, yell so I can land."

The Spectre grumbled and gave Garrus a belligerent scowl, but made the trip without befouling the car.

When they landed just outside the front door, it took both Garrus and Wrex to get Nihlus out of the cab and half-carry, half-drag him inside and up the stairs.

"Here," Garrus said, nodding toward his door. "This is as far as I'm willing to drag him. He can sleep it off on the couch." He palmed the door, taking more of Nihlus's weight so Wrex could let go. "Thanks for watching out for Nihlus. I'll see you two in the morning." He watched them head into the back hallway, then turned into the peaceful darkness.

"Why aren't you lying on a floor somewhere, Vakarian?" Nihlus asked as they crossed over the threshold. He pulled away, supporting his own weight on wobbling legs, his tone suddenly so even that it sent a shiver up Garrus's spur. "Why aren't you going over and over her last words until you have to drink them out of your skull? Did you even love her?"

Garrus swallowed the small asteroid that Nihlus's words lodged in his throat. A sigh, long and trembling with a keen he refused to let escape, forced its way up as the blockage cleared. He stared back at the Spectre. "You think that alley doesn't play over and over in the back of my mind until I think that it'll drive me mad, Nihlus? Every single thought, every single word I say over the course of a day has to fight its way through those moments." He pulled back, suddenly needing to focus all his will into not burying his fist in the Spectre's gut. "I had my arm around her when he killed her." A throaty keen made it out before he beat it back. "Do you know what that feels like, Nihlus? I had my arm wrapped around the woman I intended to spend the rest of my life with when she was murdered. And I did nothing to stop it."

He fought back the urge to dump Nihlus in his own room and guided the Spectre toward the coffee table, sitting him down. Who knew what the *torin* would do if left on his own. Aspirate on his own vomit more than likely. Garrus sat next to him. "Look, you loved her, and you knew she loved you, but you never got a chance to hold her the way I did. I'm not trying to take away how much that sucks, Nihlus. I know it hurts like hell. I knew her three months, and already I couldn't breathe if I didn't see her for a couple of hours."

Nihlus tipped off the seat, landing on his side. After a second or two of looking around as if trying to figure out how he ended up on the floor, he leaned up on his elbow, swaying unevenly. "How can you be … so … that?" He tossed a dismissive gesture at Garrus. "Soulless stone." He belched, and for a moment, Garrus thought the Spectre would introduce him to the last litre of brandy he'd tossed back, but Nihlus swallowed it. "I'm empty," he spat the words, along with a healthy cloud of noxious stomach contents and alcohol fumes.

The stench sent Garrus's stomach rolling, but years of practice forced the reaction aside. One didn't spend long in C-Sec without becoming very familiar with vomit and the associated stink.
Garrus stared at Nihlus for a moment, then shook his head. "How have you managed to do and see as much as you have and still be such a complete dumbass, Nihlus?" The Spectre let out a belligerent belch and started trying to shove himself up off the floor, but Garrus waved him off. "Don't pull anything." Sighing, he dragged the back cushions off the couch. It took him a bit to find a couple of extra blankets and a pillow in the bathroom cupboard, but then he made up a bed on the leather. "Come on, get up here before you pass out and have to spend the night on the floor."

Offering a hand, he levered Nihlus up off the floor and over onto the couch. Once he managed to throw the Spectre's feet up onto the cushions, he grabbed another blanket and spread it over him. "Are you going to throw up?" He leaned down, trying to see through the hazy fog of booze to Nihlus's actual state of being. Not possible. "You're not even going to be able to find the head, are you?"

Sighing, he headed downstairs, and rooted through cupboards until he found a container big enough, then returned upstairs and set it at Nihlus's head. "If you need to throw up, do it in the basin, please."

"How do you do it, Vakarian?" Nihlus asked, his voice a slurred whisper.

Starting to feel like every other breath was a sigh, Garrus sat on the edge of the coffee table. "How do I do what, Nihlus?"

One tearing, unfocused eye stared up at him from the pillow. "Keep breathing."

Garrus let out a huff of breath, deflating a little. His armour cut into him, reminding him that he wore it. "I do what she wanted me to do, Nihlus," he replied as he removed his gauntlets. He shook his head and shrugged a little. "Sometimes when I'm planning or working, I'll swear that she's right beside me, pointing something out that I've missed or whispering suggestions to me. And when that happens, I feel peace. It's not much, but it's better than nothing." He removed the torso section and set it behind him on the other couch. Leaning forward, he rested his forearms on his thighs. "She's only gone if we forget her."

Head cocked off to the side a little, he met Nihlus's stare. "Do you want to forget her, Nihlus? Do you want to forget the way she couldn't laugh without that mischievous glint in her eye, or the way her lips felt against your hide?" It took a bit to swallow, but then he shook his head and leaned closer. "You asked me if I could have shared her love, but it was a stupid question, Nihlus. You know I already did."

Nihlus stared back, brow plates drawing together, his mandible fluttering in and out a little. After a moment, he nodded. "Yeah, you did, and with a lot more class than me."

Garrus resisted the urge to agree with that and peeled off his gloves, staring at the palm of his hand for several heartbeats. "She's dead, Nihlus, but she's not gone. Between us, we can keep her alive."

An ironic chuckle escaped as he pressed a talon into the pad of softer flesh at the base of his thumb talon. Watching the bead of indigo grow against the steel of his hide, he shook his head. "Never thought of myself as the sort to do this, but … adapt and grow, right?"

Holding out his hand, he pinned Nihlus with a frank stare. "We'll swear this, become brothers for her. We'll work to keep her alive and with us, and find a way for you to discover joy in carrying on in her name."

Nihlus wrestled himself up onto his elbow, his face frozen in an expression of surprise, but something grateful and lonely dwelled beneath it. "Brothers?" His mandibles dropped. "Both bonded to a dead woman." A bitter laugh rattled out of him. "Fitting, I suppose." He grumbled,
heavy on the subvocals, then started a small war with his glove that Garrus thought for a good minute that he'd lose.

Finally wrestling it off his talons, Nihlus pressed a talon point into the same spot and gripped Garrus's hand, talons laced. "Until and beyond death," he said, his voice low, solemn, and almost sober sounding.

"Until and beyond death," Garrus repeated. "Get some sleep, and don't forget to use the basin if you're sick." He released Nihlus's hand and stood, not letting himself examine what he'd just done too closely. Retiring to the head to finish getting out of his armour and back into his robe, his mind wandered to what Aria had told him about the council having eyes placed everywhere to watch them.

"Let them watch," he grumbled to his reflection in the mirror. Bracing his hands on the edge of the counter, he stared over the sink into his own eyes, searching to see what Shepard had seen … what they all seemed to see. Was there a general in there, or just a pretender? "We'll just have to be ready if they move against us," he said, testing it out. Despite the bravado of his words, his heart thumped sluggish and cold in his chest. Could they be ready to take on the forces the council could muster? "Guess we'll have to be." He shoved himself away from the sink, still not sure he saw anyone of note looking back, then palmed the light.

He almost returned to his bed, but then found himself walking out the door and down the stairs. Before he knew it, he stood on the bridge, looking up through the narrow gap between buildings to the dark bulk of the asteroid. "You left me with a hell of lot to do," he whispered to the silent district. Not even the sound of skycars permeated the heavy, fetid silence. He drew a breath, his sinuses burning with industrial cleaning fluid and the lingering smell of burning corpses.

"I don't know if I can do this, Shepard." He winced a little, his mandibles spreading to flick once at the lie. He knew he could do it. Well, the war part anyway. Trying to keep Nihlus from self-destructing was something else entirely.

"I don't want to do this without you." The truth came out softer, drifting and fluttering in the still, stale air. "Nihlus is in bad shape, Shepard. I swore karifratrus with him tonight. He feels alone in the galaxy. I thought it might help with that. You'd probably kick my ass for doing it. Not sure how you'd feel about the oath." He let out a long breath. "It means something to turians though."

A lonely skycar flew overhead between the buildings. He watched it in silence until the lights vanished from sight. "Martin's here. He insisted on coming. That kid is almost as stubborn as you." He chuckled and turned, boosting himself up to sit on a crate. "He's impressed me, Shepard. He's got guts, good instincts ... he'll find a place here, so don't worry about him. I'll keep him safe like I promised I would."

"Martin reminds me a little of someone else," the deep, familiar voice of his father said. Garrus moved to jump down, but his father waved for him to stay where he was. "You always had good instincts, Garrus. You were always pointed in the right direction."

Garrus chuckled at the irony of having travelled so far to get hit with one of his father's oldest lectures. "Just taking the wrong path to get there," he grumbled under his breath.

Herros laughed and hopped up to sit next to him. "As much as I hate to let the old rhetoric die: no, not for a while now. Shepard ... she cleared things up for you, allowed you to see through all the nonsense that our little dramas seeded in your head." He let out a long, slow breath that laced a purring sound through his subvocals. "Your mother ... she's always known you'd figure things out. She's always trusted the universe, while I was afraid it would smash you to pieces. I should have
seen how strong you are." He chuckled again, his subvocals soft, devoted and loving. "She's going
to love my admitting that she's always been right."

Garrus glanced to his right, his gaze brushing the side of his father's head before returning to the
long void of Omega filth. "She'll be glad to have you home if you go through with this retirement
plan."

Herros shook his head. "Either that or kill me within the first week." Bracing his hands against the
edge of the crate, he leaned forward, head tilted up to the narrow streaks of moving lights high
above. "I can't say I'm excited about going into politics, but it's where I'm needed. We're a people
mired in tradition, Garrus. It's not going to be easy to convince the Hierarchy or the military that
there's an enemy coming that we can't fight using our tried and true methods."

Garrus nodded, not pointing out the understatement in his father's words. "Are there any who give
you cause to hope?" He watched Herros out of the corner of his eye, noting the way his father's
mandibles worked slowly in and out almost like bellows.

After a pause so long that Garrus gave up on getting an answer, Herros cleared his throat. "There
are a few of the younger generation who will be my first attempts. Your sister will be the first."

Garrus felt a twinge of guilt. He'd intended to take Shepard home, to spend some time with his
mother and Solana. After Shepard died, he hadn't even called. He'd have to remedy that as soon as
he saw everyone off the next day. "I wouldn't underestimate Mother's abilities in the persuasion
skill set either. She's talked me into a great many things over the cycles." Garrus chuckled.

"She has her ways, but … ." Herros let the sentence die out, then slid down to walk over to the
railing. "You've done a very impressive job over the last couple of days, Garrus." He turned to look
Garrus in the eyes. "I'm grateful you joined Shepard's team for a lot of reasons, but mostly because
... she gave me back my son." He stepped forward to pat Garrus's knee. "I'm headed back to bed.
Try not to bounce around too much when you come in."

A soft, dry laugh answered that. "No, sir. I'll be careful not to wake you. Rest well."

"And you, once you're finished saying your other goodnight." He turned back. "Oh, and Garrus …
I'm proud of what you did tonight with Nihlus."

Garrus smiled and nodded, then watched his father set off across the bridge toward the front door.
After a few seconds he looked back out at the void. His father's praise warmed him like a steaming
cup of *amarceru* in cold hands. He knew it wasn't empty praise, highlighting his earlier lie. The
pieces of Shepard's plan lined up inside his mind, each root and branch of the organism fitting
easily into the whole. The two days of discussion and planning had proven fruitful beyond his
expectations. The next day, they'd go their ways and put their parts of the plan into action. Just as
Shepard knew he would, he formed the trunk of the tree, the sturdy center that unified the different
parts, overseeing it all.

He didn't need to give his brain time to settle … didn't need time to worry and process. It was
sorted. He was ready. Smiling, he hopped down off the crate. "Pari, wait up, I'll walk back with
you." He looked out over Omega and reached up to press the backs of his talons to his forehead.
"Goodnight, Shepard. I love you." He smiled. "See you in a few minutes. We have a nickname
debate to settle."

Chapter End Notes
A-N: Sorry about the wait. I've gotten guest reviews (on FFN) asking how much longer I intend to detail the events after Shepard's death. LOL Ummm... until the end of the story. I will say only that this week brings change, and I have something planned for N7 day. (My birthday. Yep, I have the best Mass Effect birthday ever.) As always, my big love to my betas and all the love to my readers. Also thanks to those who check in whether it is every chapter or every ten ... whatever. You keep me writing even when I get discouraged. Sassy and the crew owe you everything. :D
Chapter Summary

500 days have passed since Shepard died, and things have really changed for Garrus and the war movement.

**Tarin** -- Female turian over the age of majority.

**Ungentira** -- A large warm-blooded, cat-like predator native to the high mountains of Palaven. It is neither mammal or reptile, but has aspects of both. (See bottom for full description.)

**Parsophin** -- Ancient turian version of cavalry. Warriors rode into battle on **Loraus Montum** (large armoured four-legged reptile analogues that have since gone extinct due to a highly selective breeding process that effectively devastated the gene pool.)

**500 Days ASD**

“Tell me a story.”

Garrus tilted his chin up just far enough to meet Shepard’s eyes above the curve of her ribcage. Skating a mandible over a nipple, he half-closed his eyes, savouring the silky texture of her skin against his. “Seriously?” He lowered his face to nuzzle her sun-warmed flesh, making his way between her breasts until his tongue teased the hollow between her ribs. “Am I boring you?”

She laughed, the sound bright and sharp as it bounced off the thick wall of grass that towered above them, and stroked his fringe, moving languidly beneath his arm and against his side. “Not in the least. I didn’t say you should stop what you’re doing.”

He teased a breast with the upper plate of his mouth. “And how would you have me do both?”

Eyes closing, she arched into him a little, rolling over to lie on her side, facing him. “You’re a talented torin; you’ll figure it out.” She caressed his face with loving fingers, the warmth in her smile forcing his breathing into shallow, quick pants.

Leaning up a little, he kissed her, tongue fluttering against her bottom lip. “I can find so many better things to do with my mouth,” he whispered, his hand sliding down over her ribs to the soft hollow just above her hip bone. Every touch, every scent, every sensation … no matter how they faded in the real world, in his dreams, she remained exactly as she’d been.

His Shepard.

True, her humour didn’t bite as hard or as quick, and she didn’t rise to the highs and lows that she once had. Death had mellowed her, but her love provided the rest and shelter he sorely needed, holding him above the yawning abyss that haunted his days. Out there, a bone-deep weariness gnawed at him until some days he needed to check his reflection to be sure that it hadn’t consumed
Turning his back on those thoughts, he stroked her skin, the sun washing out the freckles that dotted its surface. Strange how before Shepard, he’d never fantasized about humans or asari. He’d been attracted to his share of tarins, even found his way past the stumbling awkwardness with a few, but Shepard, as alien as she was … he could completely lose himself in exploring every centimetre of her over and over. He slipped his thumb talon beneath the waist of her trousers, leaning up to watch her eyes as he unfastened her belt and popped the button on her trousers.

She smiled, but it didn’t blossom past her lips, her eyes blank—almost sterile—the corners of her mouth and the delicate planes of her face flat. “Going to try to take your expedition afield, are you? Chart the unknown?” Despite the teasing words, he felt her freeze under him as he eased down the zipper. “Beyond this point, there be dragons.”

A sigh, arid and famished, wafted over her skin, and he winced, hoping she hadn’t heard it. Laying the material open, he nuzzled his way up her side, his thumb caressing just below her navel. She never moved. Damn. “You’re not still afraid?” he asked quietly, not wanting to upset her.

“No, my love, I’m not afraid,” she replied, her voice as expressionless as her face. “You are, because you know there’s nothing past this point. I’m exactly as I was when I died, Garrus. I’ll never change, never grow, never expose new ground for you to explore. All I can ever offer you along that road stops—”

“All right, a story,” he said, his voice slicing over hers. Even as her words detonated inside his chest, shards of ice and slivers of glass tearing through him, he nodded toward a large, hardcover book lying a couple of feet away. “Do you want me to keep going with that one? We were being chased toward Bree by Ringwraiths yesterday.”

She shook her head. “I want to hear one that your mari or pari told you when you were young.” Her expression remained flat, almost sad. “I feel …” She shrugged, just a quick, helpless pop of the shoulders as she fought to find the words. “… thin, I guess. Help me feel real, Garrus.”

Leaning up, he blinked rapidly, a splinter of panic burrowing through the tough hide to lodge in his neck. He kissed her. “Okay,” he whispered, his mouth still brushing hers. He stretched out along her side, curling his arm under her neck. Smiling—one that crinkled the skin at the corners of her eyes and lips, warming him with its delight—she burrowed deeper into his side. He shook his head and nuzzled his way down her jaw. “You and your stories,” he whispered against her neck.

Closing his eyes, he tucked his face in under her ear. “A very long time ago, when turians started to move into great, fortified city-states, one rose above the others, a jewel of architecture, engineering, and art.” A rumble rolled along under his words, matching the slow, lazy sensuality of Shepard’s fingertips as they whispered along the ridge where his hide transitioned into cowl. Spirits, he loved the way she touched him.

“Cipritine?” she asked, her voice muffled as she nuzzled his temple.

“No. In fact, it stood as Cipritine’s, or Gemmarin as it was called back then, greatest rival. The other city was called Aerearis. The primarchs of the two cities had been good friends in their youth, but grew apart as they assumed greater responsibility and power. Things only became more complicated when both fell in love with the same tarin.” Smiling, he flicked just the tip of his tongue against the beat of her pulse where it thumped, restive and strong beneath the skin. “As these things usually do, the whole affair quickly dissolved into war. The way my mari told the tale, it featured heavily on the war and social cost, while my pari’s version emphasized the romance.” He shrugged and grinned. “I think Mari was trying to encourage me to treat relationships and their
consequences with a degree of gravity.”

“As she should,” Shepard agreed. “Can’t tell you how many of mine led to war, famine, social upheaval … .”

“With you, I’d believe that.” A chuckle smoothed his words as he continued, “Anyway, both primarchs were great warriors and generals, but their priorities couldn’t have been more different. The primarch of Aerarais, Tunarus, desired to be remembered and exalted as a great visionary, to survive the ages in legend. He sent explorers out to discover new lands and rich new resources, leading massive armies out to conquer what land he couldn’t just claim. His city rose up the Cliffs of Laertus, the citadel high enough to be seen from Gemmarin.”

“Lots of statues, temples … that sort of thing?” Shepard asked, a brittle rind of humour crackling along the underside.

He kissed her ear. “Definitely. His state towered above all others, rich, prosperous, and beautiful.”

He paused to run his tongue around the inside of his mouth and swallow a few times to ease the sandy roughness rasping through his voice.

The breeze ruffled her bronze and copper curls, caressing them against his mandible and throat, the delicate touch drawing a festered splinter of longing from his throat.

Shepard pulled away to meet his eyes, all humour bleeding away in favour of concern. “Garrus?”

She stiffened, supple flesh turning cold, ephemeral, and spun-sugar fragile against his.

Panic drew her back in, none too gently. He just shook his head and tucked her into his warmth, returning to the story. She wanted to hear a story, surely she wouldn’t leave him until he finished. “The primarch of Gemmarin, Callor, was a very different sort of torin from Tunarus.” He stroked his talons along her arm, massaging until her porcelain tenuity softened.

As she melted into him once more, his heart slowed, and thawing neurons allowed the tale to flow back through. He nuzzled her temple. “Although one of the most skilled and talented warriors of his generation, Callor chose only to defend the lands and lives passed into his care. Instead of exploring and conquering the world, he dedicated himself to culture and art, to writing and education. In fact, he left behind one of the most prolific collections of treatises on war and ancient turian history. They’re housed in the Palaven national archive.”

“Mmm, I like Callor already,” Shepard said and grinned, her eyes slipping closed as she sighed with contentment. “I think this story may be rigged.” She stretched next to him, languid almost to the point of purring like an ungentira as she slid the pad of her foot up his lower leg and along his spur. Her toes teased the sensitive nerves, launching white-hot bolts of ecstasy up his leg to lodge in his groin. She’d done it a couple of times by accident during the nights they’d shared her bed, each time sending him darting for the far side of the mattress before she caused an … awkward issue.

One truth about turian physiology … the pointy, vulnerable bits were chocked full of nerve endings for their own preservation, making them natural erogenous zones.

A soft, throaty moan rolled up from his gut, gratitude and relief and pleasure all tangling into a knot that loosened his plates. “Do you want to hear this story or not?” he whispered, pulling back to look into her eyes. An impish expression that struggled to police itself into innocence stared back at him. Shaking his head, he continued, warning her, “If you keep that up, no more story, because my mouth will be too busy to talk.”
Shepard shrugged, her eyebrows climbing toward her hairline as her lips pressed hard together. They wriggled like a worm caught in a maraquil’s beak for a moment before she got them under control and said, “What? I’m not doing anything.”

A crooked brow plate called out her lie, but she ignored it, just settling back against his chest, her arm draping over his side. “So, who did the fair tarin choose?” she prompted.

“You’re getting ahead of the story,” he chastised, settling his face as firmly as he could. “Katrana was not the sort of tarin who wanted to be chosen or even courted.” He winced as he used the word, but then a reluctant nod forced its way out, jarring and wooden. “Yes, once turians were all about the traditional courting rituals.”

Shepard kissed his mandible, dragging the tip of her tongue along the edge. From the corner of his eye he saw her grin as her efforts produced a throaty purr. She tickled the tip of her nose against his cheek in what she called a bunny kiss. “I sort of love that. I’ve always known there are hopeless romantics hiding behind all the really big guns. You and Nihlus can’t be the only two.”

A long, grumbling breath spirited out to ride along the back of the wind. “Anyway, she fought at her family’s side to defend their territory—a small state several days north of the coast—was known for her talent with musical instruments, and almost all the Loraus Montum used in the Parsophin of every major leader was trained by her hands.” Smiling, he rubbed her arm. “Strong and independent, Katrana was sort of like someone else I know, so when Tunaris sent envoys laden with rich gifts to declare his intent to court her, she sent everything back unopened.”

“As she should,” Shepard sighed. “Didn’t even go himself. I hope Callor showed a little more sense.” Stretching again, she slid her palm up the long, flat plane of his lowest chest plate, draping herself against his chest.

Garrus rolled over onto his side, settling his keel against the ground so he could pull her in tight, their noses touching. “Stop jumping ahead. Spirits, you’re impatient.” He reached up, talons brushing through her hair. “Tunaris responded to Katrana’s refusal by declaring war on her family’s state.”

“Not the best way to try to bring the girl around,” Shepard sighed and shook her head, a grin hiding beneath her disapproval.

“True. Katrana’s father marched south to meet Tunaris’s army, but secretly he sent Katrana to meet with Callor, asking for aid in the war.” He nuzzled her lips. “Katrana’s family controlled a large territory, but didn’t stand a large enough army to hold Tunaris at bay for long. Even with Callor’s forces, the odds weren’t in their favour.” He grinned. “You know, telling you this, I realize that all those cycles, my parents were disguising a lecture as a story. The whole thing is an object lesson.”

Shepard chuckled but just caressed his arm with soft, lazy fingers, and waited for him to continue.

“When Katrana arrived in Callor’s city, he fell for the intelligent, talented tarin almost instantly, and agreed to help her father protect his state from Tunaris. They both knew that they needed to take an unorthodox approach toward the coming battle, or Tunaris would end up conquering all their lands.” He sighed and closed his eyes, just savouring the sun beating down on them, the whisper of the grass that made up their little hideout, and the woman in his arms.

“Katrana fell for Callor as well, but didn’t want to admit it, so she told him that if he could find a way to end the conflict without a the loss of a single life, she would be his bond-mate and they would join their lands. Callor didn’t care about the extra land, but he did care about his people, and he wished Katrana to be his bond-mate, so he agreed.”
“Quite the challenge, indeed,” Shepard said, brushing her lips against his mouth. “So, how did Callor manage his miracle?”

“The reason you can’t walk around on Palaven without an environment suit is the weak magnetic field. Because it’s so weak, Palven’s animals are very sensitive to any disruption. We have to carefully manage our technology to prevent it from causing interference with the established patterns. Callor used that weakness to his advantage. He set up high magnetic sources to redirect all the routes, sending every animal that migrates to Tunaris’s city. His beautiful city became completely uninhabitable. He and his army returned home to try to deal with the problem, but Callor had created a magnetic fence around the city, and the people ended up having to flee, leaving almost everything behind.”

“And they had to live as refugees in Callor and Katrana’s lands?” Shepard laughed. “Smart cookie. I imagine that Katrana found him completely irresistible after that.” She pulled back, reaching up to trace the lines of his face with tender fingers. “I would have. Love a torin who uses what’s between his ears.” She leaned up and looked at both sides of his head. “Or in the case of turians, I suppose … ummm … aural canals? Tympanic membranes?”

He dragged her back down and rolled over to pin her down as he kissed her. Passion and joy roared through him, everything about her building the flood until it swept him away. The taste of her mouth, the softness of her body under his, the way her fingers couldn’t seem to stop seeking out places that made him moan against her lips.

“Did they end up joining their states and finding their happily ever after?” Shepard whispered, nibbling along his mandible between words.

“Near enough. They had a long and prosperous rule, several children … a statue dedicated to them stands in the courtyard of the Hierarchy’s Seat in Cipritine.” He kissed her again. “At this point my mari would say, ‘All because he used his wits instead of less keen weapons’.”

Shepard smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck. “What does the name Callor mean?”

He pulled back just far enough to stare down into her eyes and frowned, brow plates lowering as he thought. “Light, but more of a glow, like candlelight on a wall. It also means bright in the sense of intelligence … for obvious reasons.” Leaning down, he nuzzled the tip of her nose. “Why?”

Her chest caved a little in an awkward shrug, trapped beneath him as she was. “Callor … “ A smile accompanied a sharp nod. “I love it. I think we’ve finally found your nickname.”

“Gah! Massani, why is that creepy-ass painting back in the sitting room?” The sharp cry of disgust sliced through Garrus’s dream, snatching him by the fringe to drag him from Shepard’s arms.

Opening his eyes, he sighed and rolled over, pulling his pillow over his head in a vain attempt to muffle the angry asari as she continued.

“You do know the story behind it, don’t you?”

“Yeah, so?” The grizzled old merc replied. After a moment, Zaeed’s voice rose to rival the asari matron’s, and that said something. Melanis possessed a true gift for volume. “God. That’s bloody horrible coffee. Who made this shit?”

“I did,” Martin replied. “You think that you can do better? Do it.”

Garrus threw back his blankets and sat up on the side of the bed. Why had he chosen the room right above the common area? And why did Zaeed have to keep hanging that bloody painting—quite
literally—directly beneath his windows?

Callor. I love it. I think we’ve finally found your nickname.

He smiled as Shepard’s voice whispered through his still-foggy thoughts, a siren call to start his day. The sooner started, the sooner ended. Still, he leaned forward, hands braced against the edge of the mattress, arms tight against his side, and waited for the Mako of exhaustion to either roll off his shoulders or crush him. Of course, he knew better. It would do neither, he’d just shoulder it and get on with the million things he needed to do in the course of a day.

“Speaking of … ,” he said, subvocals rumbling. He hoped Nihlus had reported back to the Normandy, and Martin had their inspection tour itinerary—

Footsteps ran up the stairs then his door reverberated with a heavy, familiar cadence. Spirits, he hated Martin’s energy some days. “I’ll be down in ten minutes, and you’d better have confirmations from every stop on the tour,” he hollered.

“Wow,” the kid called back, “someone got up on the wrong side of the bed. Everything’s ready, but some stuff has come up. I’ll fill you in once you get a strong cup or two of amarceru into you and shake off the growling bear routine.”

Before Garrus could reply, the young man’s footsteps trotted down the stairs, returning to the common room.

Closing his eyes, Garrus tried to pull forward a picture of Shepard, but after so many days … . He swallowed past the iceberg lodged in his throat, his head dropping to hang from braced shoulders.

“Don’t leave me,” he whispered to the pale ghost painted on the insides of his eyelids. “I’m so tired, Kahri. I couldn’t find the strength to keep Archangel running without you. It’s so damned huge, Shepard. So damned huge and so damned heavy.” After another couple of long, deep breaths, he squared his shoulders and cracked his neck. Time to get another day started.

“General, did you know that Massani hung that damned painting back up here?” Melanis demanded the moment Garrus appeared on the stairs. The asari raced up the stairs to meet him, fury flushing her skin a dark, mottled violet across her cheeks and down her neck.

“I did,” Garrus said, thumping down a couple of stairs his earlier weariness returning. “It’s just a painting, Melanis. Those people have been dead for a couple thousand cycles.” He took her by the shoulders and turned her toward the kitchen. “Do the two of you have to argue every second? Go to your corners and take a time out. Eat some breakfast or something.”

“But the artist mixed the blood of each victim into the skin pigments, boss,” Melanis whined, spinning back to lean into him, her big, leaf-green eyes staring up into his. Spirits, they were so like Shep—

Garrus cut his gaze away to look at Zaeed, stepping back from the asari. She tended to stand too close and behave in too familiar a fashion for his comfort. “Like I said, they’ve been dead longer than the sum total of all our lives.” He held out an arm to usher her down ahead of him. “Still, It’s probably not safe here, Zaeed. The thing is worth a half billion credits. Do you really want to just leave it sitting out in the open in the slums of Omega?”

The grizzled old merc spun and looked at the large canvas, pride of ownership radiating through the tilt of his head. “Who’s going to believe that its real?” he asked, letting out a throaty snort.
“Whether they believe it or not, Omega’s combination of desperation and lawlessness can push people to take chances they might not ordinarily.” Garrus shrugged. “You want it stolen, leave it up.”

Garrus followed Melanis down the stairs, stuttering to a stop at the bottom as a tiny, white-haired human woman passed him, a gigantic cup of coffee held between her hands.

She looked up, wrinkled but still pretty features meeting his curious stare with a pleasant smile. “Good morning, sir.”

Nodding, he fought back his confused scowl enough to return her greeting. “Good morning.” The moment the words escaped, the scowl slammed back into place. Trying not to stare, he watched her hobble up the stairs. She shifted her cup to one hand, clench the railing with the other to haul herself up. The whole procedure looked so entirely painful that Garrus barely resisted the urge to scoop her up and carry her to the elevator.

“Does anyone know who that was?” he asked once the elevator doors closed behind her. He continued on to the kitchen, bypassing the serving line for the cupboards.

“I think her name is Susan,” Melanis replied. “She works on the fifteenth floor in the accounting department.” The asari shrugged and grabbed a plate. She passed it to the floor matron, who began heaping it with breakfast. As strong a biotic and as great a teacher as Melanis was, Garrus was pretty sure she ate enough to pay the wages for three biotics instructors.

“She’s been coming down for coffee every morning since she started here,” the floor matron, a human named Marcie, said. “Lovely woman. Very friendly and polite.”

“There’s a kitchen on the fifteenth floor,” Garrus said, brow plates lowering, his eyes looking back to the elevator. “Why come all the way down here for Martin’s crappy coffee?” Something cold and wary raked its talons down his spine. He shook it off and grabbed a covered mug of amarceru off the counter and a couple of ration bars from the cupboard, and turned to head up to his office.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Marcie snapped, stepping into his path. She snatched the ration bars from his hand. “You’re going to be living on these for the next couple of months. This morning you eat properly.” She dished up a heaping plate of krellar eggs, puala fruit, and strips of fried drellak roast. “Go sit down and eat. The affairs of the galaxy can take care of themselves for a few minutes.” One eyebrow lifted up her forehead, higher and higher every moment he stared back.

Having slogged his way uphill through the bramble-laden swamp of that argument more than once, Garrus sighed and took the plate. Giving in meant reaching his office on the twentieth floor fifteen minutes faster than trying to get past Marcie. “Thank you,” he grumbled, not even attempting sincerity, and threw himself into the nearest chair. Knowing he looked like a petulant ten-cycle-old tweak his mandibles into a faint smile.

Zaeed poured himself another cup of coffee, took a sip, cursed, and then sat across the table from Garrus. “So . . . you want me to take a platoon to deploy those sensor nets in the Sol system?”

Garrus glanced up from shovelling in his food, grateful for the distraction of work. “No, Hackett has people installing them in all the Alliance systems.” He grinned, sussing out the merc’s intentions. “No sunny caribbean beach for you, at least not until after you’ve taken two of the stealth frigates into the Kite’s Nest.” Resting his forearms on the table, he gestured with his fork, punctuating his words. “Deploy the new nets along the edge of the batarian systems. Hopefully, if we slip them in there without being detected, the nets themselves will escape batarian notice.”
The general managed another couple of mouthfuls then sighed as Melanis walked up to glare down at him.

“What about the painting, Garrus?” she asked, her tone demanding, bordering on insubordinate. “It’s an abomination, and the asari who live here shouldn’t have to look at it.”

He looked up at her, glad to see her quail in the face of the annoyance he allowed to bleed into his stare and expression. “If it bothers you, don’t look at it. The two of you need to figure out how to get along, because if I wake up to you screaming at one another even one more morning, you’ll both be moving down into the sub-levels.” Holding her stare, he cocked a brow plate. “I have a thousand more important things to worry about than whether or not you don’t want to look at a painting. Am I making myself clear?”

The asari flushed a deep indigo and nodded, looking both contrite and embarrassed. “Of course you do, sir. My apologies.”

He softened his expression and nodded. “Accepted. Go ahead and eat your breakfast.”

The sound of motorized joints and servos alerted Garrus to Martin’s approach even before the young man strode around the stairs. “You packed and ready to go?” Martin asked, grabbing one of the reinforced chairs necessary to support the extra weight of the battle frame he wore. He thumped down into it and rested his forearms on the table.

“No.” Garrus finished the last bite of his breakfast, washing it down with a long swig of the bitter amarceru. “How did the squads do last night? Are they ready to ship out with the *Banquan* and the *Aesarus*?”

Martin nodded, a huge grin spreading across his face. “The flight crews’ scores ranked in the ninety-six percentile, but the ground squads … .” He practically cackled with delight. “They blew the top off the score chart. The new battle frames are forty-eight percent faster and more agile. Theta squad ended up chasing the enemy to the base of this cliff. The Blood Pack all jumped into the lift the miners use. Theta squad didn’t even hesitate. They practically ran up the cliff to reach the top before the lift did.” He aped wiping a tear and gave a melodramatic sniff. “I wish you’d seen it. It was beautiful.”

Garrus nodded. “So the Blood Pack are out of those mines, and the instructors have all signed off, passing the crews on to active duty? I want those two frigates on their way to the Kite’s Nest by 1500.” He opened his omnitool, but waited for Martin to answer before entering the information.

“They’re cleared to go, and the only Blood Pack left are corpses.” Martin jumped up and grabbed a plate. “I’m starving.”

“We need to focus on turning more mercs rather than killing them.” Garrus scrolled down the list of tasks he needed to clear up before leaving Omega in the hands of his senior staff for nearly three months while he toured Archangel’s many and varied operations. “The geth are delivering five frigates, four cruisers, and two dreadnaughts this month, and we’re going to have to mothball them for lack of crew.” He muttered and shook his head. “I’m going to have to get Wrex to start sending us potentials.”

Looking up, he skipped ahead to the next concern. “Has Nihlus checked in?”

“Yeah.” The kid stuffed an entire biscuit in his mouth while he waited for Marcie to fill his plate, spitting crumbs everywhere as he tried to talk around it. He swallowed and thumped his chest a couple of times. “And Tali called. She seemed pretty upset. Asked me to make sure you got back
to her ASAP.” Sitting back down, he frowned. “Actually, Nihlus seemed off as well.” He shovelled in a couple of forkfuls. “And General Oraka wants to know about the battle frame modifications for turian forces. Do you want me to handle getting those prototypes sent up to him?”

Garrus stood. “Yes. Take care of that and then check in with Mordin about the samples from Trident. Seven million souls do not just vanish without a trace. I want answers to send on to Nihlus.” After dumping his dishes in the sink, Garrus headed for the elevator. “I’ll see you at the briefing.”

He closed the door and hit the controls to take him up, then froze and spun, suddenly sure he felt someone behind him. A faint, electrical tingle shivered along his forearm. No one there. He turned around to face the front, a scowl settling in, promising to stay with him for the day.

Garrus stepped out on the twentieth floor, a faint headache moving in behind his lowered brow plates. Technically, the twentieth floor and the five above it were dedicated to Research and Development rather than administration, but the elevated energy level and suppressed bullshit level of the department suited Garrus. And if he headed out to tinker on the latest electronics from time to time, who was to object? He was in charge of the whole damned thing; the big cheese as Martin would say.

He lifted a hand to the geth working in the first lab. The ten platforms rarely quit working, just taking a couple hours a day to hook up to their hub, recharging and networking back to their servers on Rannoch. Each of them were part of the new generation of platforms based off Legion’s prototype, as independent as geth could get. Their current project both teased his imagination and scared the living crap out of him.

He glanced at the wall of schematics for the new combined missiles. The geth had come up with the idea of backloading Wrex’s thresher acid missiles with nanites. The acid got the missile through the shields and weakened the Reaper’s armour, allowing the nanites to penetrate and sabotage the machine from within. After a few generations, they stopped replicating and terminated, clogging up all the systems they’d invaded, thus weakening the Reaper’s defences to more conventional attacks.

Pushing the door to his office open, he suppressed a shudder. The idea amounted to inspired genius … until the Reapers found a way to turn the nanites against them.

“Good morning, General,” his assistant grumbled, the batarian sounding as though his morning had been anything but good. Of course, he always sounded like that. Vartash’s distaste for affected niceties and small talk made up a large part of why Garrus had chosen him to be his right hand.

“Good morning, Vartash.” He stopped next to the captain’s desk, taking the small stack of datapads the batarian handed him. Skimming down the list of calls and messages he needed to return, he said, “I’ll be in the QEC room for the next hour or so, then do you want to meet to go over the marksman classes for while I’m gone? The only one that will make you want to kill someone is the new Iota squad. If you actually locked them inside a building, they still wouldn’t be able to hit the walls.”

“I’ll handle them all right. Besides, you’ll be glued to the ship’s QEC the whole time you’re gone anyway. If I start shooting, you’ll know within the day.” He nodded toward the window that looked out into the hall. “Mordin’s on the move, you’d better run if you want to get any work done before noon.”

Garrus glanced out into the corridor, then spun on his talons and bolted for his office door. Luckily, the salarian scientist’s attention remained focused on Martin, sparing Garrus a couple of hours
worth of fascinating, but time-consuming rapid-fire conversation. With the gang population dropping like a stone, and Garrus authorizing a public comm channel so that anyone who needed safe transport to medical aid got a ride thanks to Archangel, the salarian had been able to move his clinic to the tenth floor.

Archangel outfitted the doctor with a fully equipped hospital and three labs, then provided him with a budget that allowed him to hire another two doctors, three researchers, nurses, and techs. All the organization asked in return was that the salarian work on indoctrination, curing the genophage, and other priorities as they arose. At the moment, those priorities involved helping Nihlus and Anderson figure out what happened to the almost seven million people living on Trident.

Garrus locked his office door behind him, pausing to look at the miniature of the Normandy’s galaxy map as it spun lazily in the corner of the room. White markers showed the positions of Archangel forces galaxy wide. Gold markers indicated Hierarchy forces while blue flashed the locations of Alliance vessels. A single red marker indicated Trident’s position.

A colony that functioned pretty much outside the law, made up of mercs, pirates, and shady business people, one expected people to go missing on Trident, just not all seven million humans. And definitely not overnight.

Garrus walked over to the map, staring down at that single glaring red dot. Two weeks ago, it appeared. Two weeks since a group of turian gun runners arrived in the main port city to sell their wares only to discover a ghost town. Anderson and the Normandy responded immediately, taking Nihlus along, but they found no signs of battle, no toxins, nothing at all to explain the disappearance. The only evidence of foul play showed up in the dead comm and electronic systems. All vid from surveillance and other cameras had been wiped.

He looked up at the vid monitor on his wall, the image frozen on the second last frame before the spaceport went dark. No matter how many hours he spent going through the footage, everything remained completely business as usual. Someone had committed the perfect crime, on a scale that terrified Garrus. He knew the hands behind it belonged to the Reapers, but so far Nihlus had turned up nothing to tell them who or what or how.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw another red marker appeared on the map. His heartbeat stuttered.

Spirits. Another one.

Garrus tossed the datapads onto his desk, hurrying through his office to his private comm room. A year before, the R&D department had earned them a massive grant to develop and install quantum entanglement communicators based on a quarian/geth design that proved far more elegant and cost-effective than the one in Alliance development. The only condition imposed on the cash infusion involved handing over the designs to the Alliance and Hierarchy so they could install the same systems fleet-wide.

He opened a channel to the Normandy, not surprised to see Nihlus ready and waiting. “What’s happened?”

The Spectre shook his head. “We received a message from Eldfell-Ashland headquarters saying that they’d lost contact with their people on Caleston.” He nodded in response as Garrus stiffened. “Their on-site management is required to check in every twelve hours. When they didn’t get a call in from Caleston, they went on alert.” He shifted from leaning on one hip to the other and crossed his arms over his keel, the tell setting off all Garrus’s alarms.
“Spirits. Caleston. They’re the largest supplier of drive core material in the Traverse.” Garrus shoved that aside for later consideration, focusing on the immediate issue. “How long before you heard about it?” he asked, leaning forward, his hands braced against the console.

“They contacted Arcturus as soon as they couldn’t raise their people, and Hackett called us as soon as he got word.” He shrugged, his mandibles flicking once. “Maybe five hours. It’s a straight shot from the Hades Nexus to the Rift, but when we arrived, we found the exact same thing as on Trident. Nothing. Not a soul left, alive or dead.” Losing a bit of composure, his mandibles dropped, and he cracked his neck. “At least on Trident, when we got there, everything had shut down other than lights. On Caleston, the machinery was still all running as if the people had just walked away. Damned creepy.”

A deep, unsettled rumble rolled from the Spectre’s throat, making Garrus wonder how fast Nihlus would head from the QEC to his quarters and the bottle hidden in his pack. Despite having pulled himself out of the pit he’d started digging after Shepard’s death, Garrus knew Nihlus still drank almost constantly.

“Okay,” he said after another moment spent trying to figure out what to do, “I’ll have Mordin contact you directly. Gather whatever samples he needs, and get them back here. It looks like only human colonies have been attacked, but that still leaves too many targets to keep our eyes on. I need you to organize a defensive deployment of all available vessels. Scatter them where they have the best chance to get to a colony as soon as it goes dark.” He shoved himself away from the QEC. “We need to figure out what’s going on out there.”

“You’re pulling out today? Heading for Tuchanka?” Nihlus asked, visibly trying to shake off the aftereffects of the colony.

Garrus took a step back as he nodded. He understood his fratrin’s reaction, but hated to see it. Nihlus had been doing so damned well. “I was leaving tonight, but I think I’m going to delay until 0900 tomorrow. Something is off here.” He glanced around, feeling as though eyes watched him. “Something has me on edge, and I want to figure it out before I go.”

A cracked cement cough of laughter erupted from the Spectre. “You’re always on edge, Garrus. The entire galaxy worries you.” He gestured toward the galaxy map spinning over the secondary QEC. “Although with this missing colony situation, I think you’re dead right to be.” He turned to look behind him as if checking to make sure no one would overhear. As he looked back, Garrus could see the walls and shields going up.

“What is it?” Garrus prompted, stepping back up to the console and leaning in. “Talk to me, Nihlus. I see connections coming together inside that head.” One mandible twitched in a faint smile as the Spectre chuffed.

“What did Shepard tell you about the visions the rachni queen helped us unravel?” he asked without humour. He cut the air with a hand, then glanced over his shoulder. “Did she tell you how Sovereign was created?”

Realization crashed down on Garrus, nearly flattening him. “Someone could be harvesting the humans to build another Vanguard?” His elbows shook as they reluctantly took his weight, fists braced against the metal and polymer of the QEC interface. How had he missed it? He should have seen it. His whole career consisted of putting pieces of puzzles together. “Who?” he asked, hating the desperation in his own voice. “And where?”

Nihlus just shrugged, although the fear trembling over the comm channel from his second larynx said everything his rigid posture tried to hide. “I don’t know, but I think that’s our mystery. It’s not
what is being done with the humans, but how and by whom.”

“Okay.” Garrus braced himself. “We both have mysteries to solve. You contact Mordin, and I’ll hopefully solve mine before I head to Tuchanka.” He gave Nihlus a solemn frown, and changed the subject. “Are you okay?”

The Spectre nodded, firm and quick even though his expression relaxed. “Yeah, I’m fine.” His mandibles flicked. “But you look like crap.”

All Garrus could do to respond to that was nod. “Yeah, well, maybe I’ll get some rest during my inspections.” His talons hovered over the disconnect control. “Be careful, Nihlus. I’ll be in touch.”

“Stay safe,” Nihlus answered, then his image vanished.

Garrus turned away from the QEC, his mind already puzzling through both mysteries … surely his uneasiness in the base and the missing humans couldn’t be connected.

“Spectre Kryik is closer to the truth than any of us know, I expect.”

Garrus spun around, coming face to hologram with a human in a dark suit. A cigarette burned in one hand as the man sat, legs crossed casually at the knee. Even though the image on Luna had been so badly damaged that Garrus hadn’t been able to make out more than a human male in a suit, he felt sure of the encroacher’s identity. He stared into the eerie blue lights glowing from the man’s irises. “Armistan Banes.”

The man shook his head. “Armistan Banes is dead, General. He died some time ago.” He lifted a glass from a holder on the arm of his chair and drank down a respectable belt of amber liquor. “I’m called The Illusive Man.”

**Ungentira** -- A large warm blooded, cat-like predator native to the high mountains of Palaven. It is neither mammal or reptile, but has aspects of both, featuring a heavy, plated hide along its back, and a rich, luxurious pelt along their underside. They are ferocious predators, frequently taking on prey three or four times their size, which is approximately the same as a labrador retriever. Three, five-centimeter- long claws on all four feet and large fangs are their primary weapons, but they also have a poison spike at the end of their tail used for defence. They are known for climbing partway up trees and stretching to leave territorial claw marks in the bark of trees to intimidate foes with their perceived size.
Mass Effect - Future Complex Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

Security? What security?

**Uncaemanus Bellicartibus** -- A turian martial art as old as recorded history. The combatants are called **Uncaelatum** or Clawed Hands. It is an open-handed, bare-taloned fighting form requiring a high degree of skill, agility, and athleticism.

**EM Micro-trips** -- Molecule sized EM emitters encased in a fragile shell. When stepped on, they stop transmitting, allowing even cloaked people to be tracked. Since it is a passive emission, the trips don’t show unless specifically scanned for on their frequency.

The Illusive Man chuckled, a warm sound that coated Garrus’s bones in ice. After taking another drink, the human set the glass down. “You’ve built a remarkable force, General Vakarian. Shepard would be proud.” Sucking in a deep breath through his nose, he nodded. “A fleet of ninety-seven vessels, including eight of the most impressive dreadnoughts I’ve ever seen, and fifty-four stealth frigates larger than the **Normandy**. The geth have really been upgrading your weapons systems, as well. Most impressive.” A smile twisted one corner of his mouth. “Must be hard finding crews for all of them, particularly with the gangs having enacted a policy of not being taken alive.” He shrugged as if he’d seen and bypassed such shortages many times. “It doesn’t matter, of course. As soon as the Reapers show up, the recruits will flock to your door seeking shelter for their families in turn for service.”

Garrus stayed silent, glad to see at least the Illusive Man’s numbers were out of date. It meant a more convoluted path from his office to Cerberus than he feared. He ignored what the man said, mining beneath for information about what he wasn’t saying. According to Ash, the Illusive Man was building himself an armada, as well. She was mid-level command in charge of the construction of a ship that she wasn’t even allowed to see. She’d told him last communication that she’d found well over six billion credits being funnelled into three projects. The ship amounted to the second-most expensive. Dropping his impatience into the ice water running off his bones, he forced himself to stay completely cool. Given time, the operations chief would find out what the other projects were.

The Illusive Man stood and walked over to a massive bank of monitors. “I’m glad to see someone else is looking into these missing colonies. The Alliance and Council don’t seem to believe there’s a problem. The galaxy needs people who aren’t afraid to look the truth in the eye and do something about it.” A calculated turn spun him back to meet Garrus’s stare. “It’s good that you’re a visionary. Your race does not have a reputation for such.”

Instead of feeling like praise, the compliments landed like handfuls of sludge, gelid and viscous as they slithered beneath Garrus’s armour. He drew himself up, rumbling a warning through his subvocals that he wouldn’t be patted on the head and spoken to like a child running in the door with a positive academic report.
The man in the suit nodded as if he understood Garrus’s intent if not the actual message and took a couple of steps forward. “You’re investigating Trident and Caleston, but we know of two much smaller colonies that have vanished over the last two months. Practice runs, no doubt. I suspect the Reapers are behind it, as do you and Spectre Kryik.” His eyes narrowed. “This idea that they use other life forms to construct new Reapers … it would explain the people having been taken while everything else remained.” He cocked his head a little, his body language giving Garrus no clues about the man at all. “I’d be very interested in the information Spectre Kryik possesses.”

Garrus laughed, a harsh, derisive cough. “I’m sure you would be, but we don’t work for Cerberus or with Cerberus.” He bristled, his posture all corners and spines. “Which leads me to wonder how you’re aware of the conversation between Spectre Kryik and myself.” Cocking a hip, he crossed his arms over his keel, throwing up a hasty defensive barrier. “Not to mention contacting me on my own QEC.”

The Illusive Man’s lips quirked a little. “I have loyal agents everywhere, General. If a few of the techs installing your QECs work for me, well …” He returned to his chair and sat, crossing his legs. “… efficient communication is going to be vital in the months to come.”

Not to mention the intimidation factor. Garrus let that go, but held onto the word ‘few’. Too many. Cerberus would never risk such heavy coverage … so that meant one tech inside Archangel. Garrus choked back the first three or four responses that leaped into his mind and clenched his jaw. “In the interest of efficient communication, did you order the hit on Shepard, because she wouldn’t dance to your tune?”

Shaking his head, the Illusive Man actually looked as though he felt genuine regret about Shepard’s death. “No, General, I did not. An argument could be made that Shepard was insane, but she was also our best chance to be prepared for the Reapers when they find a way back from dark space.” He paused to light a cigarette and took a long drag, the end painting the planes and hollows of the man’s face with a macabre dance of shadows as it glowed orange.

A slight tilt of the head accompanied his next words. “I’ve been unable to collect any intel on who contracted that killer.” Index and middle fingers still gripping the cigarette between them, he lifted the glass and drained it of liquor. “As much as I’m loathe to believe it, the evidence points toward a random act carried out by a single, maniacal individual, perhaps an indoctrinated agent of the Reapers.” He made a show of setting down the glass and butting out his cigarette, his eyes focused on his tasks. “As hard as he appeared to be trying to conceal any emotion, Garrus saw the Illusive Man’s jaw clench. “My assets are vast on that front. I’m not accustomed to coming up empty.”

A sarcastic, half-formed thought about how the Illusive Man’s assets might stack up to the Shadow Broker’s whispered through the back of Garrus’s head. Some twitch of pleasure must have tweaked a muscle somewhere, because the Illusive Man’s lip twisted a little.

“Don’t trust your good friend, the Shadow Broker, General. Yes, he’s afraid of the Reapers, but believe me when I say that while what Shepard started is one of his contingencies, it is only one. And it’s lost Shepard. Don’t be surprised if those teeth turn and you find them at your neck.” He lifted a hand to hover over the controls on the arm of his chair. “I’ll send you what we have on the other missing colonies in the interest of efficient communication, General. We’ll be in touch.”

Garrus cocked a brow plate at his dismissal and stared at the empty space where the hologram had been the second before. How the hell did Cerberus get an entangled particle into his damned QEC? He spun around, pulling his shoulders in defensively, aware of the ridiculousness of the gesture even as he did it. Turning away from the offending spyware wouldn’t actually stop anyone from hearing him. Still, it made him feel better to have his back to the wall, so to speak.
“Vortash, I need my office and the senior staff briefing room swept for bugs.” He paced to the locked door and back. “Grab Erash. Just the two of you. Go over every millimetre then the comm rooms. Once my office is clear, have Montague and Krul meet me in there. We have some serious security breaches to patch.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll have them swept before the briefing,” the batarian replied, his rumbling voice reassuringly professional. Anyone else would have peppered him with questions. Reason number two he’d chosen Vortash.

The QEC signalled an incoming message. After a moment’s hesitation, Garrus turned to answer it. In the months since they’d completed his comm room, The Illusive Man must have overheard twenty-five hundred conversations. What was one more? He hit the control, Tali appearing in front of him.

“General Vakarian!” She cocked a hip and crossed her arms with enough attitude to do Shepard proud. “Is this what your people call getting right back to me?”

Garrus smiled, the expression dropping away when he saw how badly she wrung her hands. “Tali.” He shook his head. “Sorry about that, it’s been a really busy, strange morning so far.”

“Better late than never, I suppose,” she replied, trying to sound cheerful, but his ear had been trained to hear what slipped beneath the teasing. Something had Tali rattled. Very rattled.

He leaned in, fists braced against the console again. “What’s going on, Tali?” His brow plates raised toward his fringe as she paced back and forth across the QEC pad, wringing her hands so hard that he worried she’d break her own fingers.

“I know you’re scheduled to head for Tuchanka first, but something’s come up here.” She glanced behind her as if afraid of being spied on. “We’re … I need your help, Garrus.” Stopping and spinning around to face him, she let out a long breath, her shoulders rising and falling in a helpless sort of shrug.

Garrus cut the air with a hand. “No details. Communications here aren’t secure at the moment. Cerberus has me bugged. Just ….” One mandible twitched. “… on the Shepard scale of insane pain range, how bad does it hurt?”

Tali’s shoulders bowed, telling him even before she spoke. “‘Eleven. The axe wound has gone septic.’” She craned her head, looking behind him. “Is Nihlus able to come as well?”

Septic indeed, if she wanted Nihlus along. Whatever had her worried, Tali’s entire demeanor set off a bomb in his guts. “Okay. I’ll contact Wrex, clear everything through him, and then get back to you.” He pushed away from the console. “It’ll just be me and Martin, though. Entire human colonies have started disappearing. Nihlus is out in the Traverse with the Normandy trying to figure out what’s happening.”

She nodded and stepped up to the controls. “I’ll be waiting to hear from you.” Sighing, she slumped a little. “Thanks, General.”

“Talk to you in a few minutes.” Garrus disconnected and opened a channel to Wrex’s camp.

The krogan who answered the call stared at Garrus with an expression of malign indifference. “What do you want?” he asked, looking away at some other work, prickly and belligerent as always.

Garrus hid a grin. He loved the game with the krogan, and affected his own belligerence, but

The krogan looked up and narrowed his violet eyes. Hunkering down, he bulked up his shoulder width, massive and unmovable. “The clan leader is busy.”

Garrus laughed, sharpening the edge of it. “Now.” He stared down the messenger until the krogan rolled his eyes and growled something that might have been asking Garrus to wait or telling the general to kiss his sizable, krogan backside. Garrus didn’t really care as long as Wrex came to the damned communicator.

“Vakarian!” the chief bellowed a moment later. “Aren’t you supposed to be blessing us with your presence in two days?” Wrex crossed his arms and cracked his neck. A crooked grin ticked at one corner of the clan chief’s mouth. “Admit it, you couldn’t wait to see my handsome mug.” A harsh, slow chuckle rolled out. “Or something’s gone wrong.”

Garrus chuckled, hiding a grin. “The longer I go without seeing that thresher maw’s backside, the better.” He shoved aside regret. He’d been looking forward to seeing Wrex again, and spending some time on Tuchanka shooting things, living rough … doing guy stuff. Now, who knew how long he’d spend playing diplomat to solve whatever perceived insult had the quarians and geth at one another again. “I just hung up with Tali. She’s got a crisis of some sort going on, and asked me to come there first.”

Wrex let out a roar of sound that sounded like half-cough, half-curse. “I’ve got problems of my own here, Vakarian. If you’re not coming, you need to tell someone to call off their attack dogs. We’ve had flyovers here almost every day. Those bastards in the orbital stations are looking too closely at the thresher maze and the processing plant. I wouldn’t put it past them to start dropping bombs on them.” The chief bristled. “I didn’t fight my own people as hard as I did to get this stuff built just to have turians blow it to Aralakh.”

Garrus slammed his arms down across his keel and cursed. “Damn it, Wrex, what did I tell you? Camouflage the maze with rubble and get the processing facility underground. I’ll run interference on Palaven, but if the turians attack, you’re on your own.” He shook his head, letting his fury bleed through. He’d warned Wrex that building too fast would attract the wrong sort of notice. But oh no, Wrex just had to go big and flip off everyone keeping an eye on the Krogan DMZ … twenty-four hundred of them from orbital battle stations around the damned planet.

Wrex let out an indignant roar. “Watch the way you talk to me, Garrus. I’m not some whelp you can take a strap to.” He leaned in, his holo looming huge and furious. “We’re putting krogan necks on the line for your war.”

Garrus met fury with fury. “Bullshit. You’re putting krogan necks on the line for a chance to become part of the galactic community. And if I have to take a strap to that land mover of a backside to preserve the peace, I will. We’re supposed to be building our strength for war with the Reapers, Wrex, not war with the Council. Swallow that damned krogan pride, and do what I told you to start with.” He paced for a second. His father could probably arrange some breathing room for Wrex. A couple of the younger generals and admirals had started to come around. Focusing back on the krogan, Garrus straightened, standing down what Martin called his ‘general shoulders’.

“I’ll get there as soon as I can, but in the meantime if you see or hear anything else, contact me right away.”

“Remind me why I haven’t killed you yet.” Wrex glared at him for long seconds, then let out a deep, appreciative chuckle. “Vakarian, you’ve got a quad.” Wrex boosted his armour up his shoulders again. “Tell the pyjak that he’d better be ready to get some blood on that fancy new armour of his.” Grinning, the chief took a step forward. “When you going to make that armour for
Relaxing, the need for posturing over, Garrus laughed and put his fingers over the control. “You don’t need it. You come with your own.” All humour melting from his face, the general levelled a serious, commanding stare at the krogan. “I mean it, Wrex. Anyone makes a move, contact me. Don’t try to deal with it yourself. We don’t need anyone thinking we have a krogan rebellion in the works.”

Wrex grunted. “What can they do to us that they haven’t done already, Vakarian?” Still his posture relaxed, answering Garrus’s demand even when his words didn’t.

“Let’s not find out.” Garrus stepped back. “Okay, I have a massive security breach to deal with, so I’ll contact you from the Passchendaele once I know how long I’m going to be on Rannoch. Talk to you in a few days, Wrex.”

The behemoth nodded, a quick jerk of his head. “Vakarian.”

Garrus hung up and called Tali right back. The relief coming off the young quarian when he told her that he’d be there the day after next just tied his guts in more knots. He was just as glad not to let the Illusive Man know about the chinks in Archangel’s armour, but damn, he hated walking blind into whatever was going on.

Unlocking the door, Garrus strode into his office, throwing himself into the chair behind his desk. “Martin, I need to see you in my office.” Swinging his chair around, he brought the miniature galaxy map and its two red dots into view. After lunch, there’d be four. Maybe then he’d be able to start seeing a pattern to it all. Of course, maybe the only pattern was humanity itself.

“General,” Vortash called through on the speaker, an indecent grin snarling beneath his words, “Mierin and Mordin just called in a Medical 1145e.”

1145e. Unintentional discharge of heavy munitions resulting in significant injury or death. Again. Damn. The news filled him with frustrated annoyance until the part Vortash hadn’t spoken whispered through his ire, setting his heart pounding. “Likelihood of fatality?” He held his breath. Not another one. He’d kill Mierin.

“No. Mordin has started dermal regeneration.” The batarian almost sounded sad about the lack of bloody, burning death.

“Did I tell Mierin that maiming another student would lead to his ass being tied to twenty pounds of explosives and blown to hell? Or was it killing another one?” As broad a talent for destruction as the salarian explosives expert possessed, Garrus would send him packing if he couldn’t manage his classes so that people didn’t keep getting hurt. Only lucky stroke came in that every single heavy munitions student in the buildings had been painted by the same brush. Utterly mad, every, single one.

“Had to be a death. Sorry, General. Weaver’s here.”

“Send me the incident reports when they come in.” Garrus wrenched the chair a little further around, facing the door as it opened. In his second childish tantrum of the day, he stayed slumped and sort of crumpled in his chair. “Has this room been swept yet?” he yelled over Martin’s shoulder through the open portal.

“Do I look like I’m sweeping for bugs?” Vortash hollered back.

“No, which could turn into a career-ending oversight on your part.” Garrus shoved himself up in
his chair hard enough he almost flipped it backwards. Nodding to Martin, he grumbled, “Come in, let the door shut, and set up a jammer.”

Martin’s frown made some eloquent points about Garrus’s general state of grouchiness, but the kid just opened his omnitool. “Wow, you really got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning. You could jam the room faster than I can.”

“Which is why you’re doing it.” Garrus glowered at him until he finished. “Is it secure?” He watched Martin run the test subroutines from the back side of the omniscreen. “Okay,” he said the moment Martin finished. “We’ve got some serious holes to plug in this facility before we leave. I want you to head out to the dead zone in one of the cars. See if Sidonis will go with you, so I’m not breaking my own two-person-team rule. I need you to send a list of encoded questions out to Tali. Tell her to use the Theta Zhu Shepard Scale return code and to send it right to my omnitool. Then send this packet of information to Nihlus.” He transferred the file the Illusive Man sent him. “Tell him to maintain radio silence except for emergencies until he can contact us on the _Passchendaele._”

Garrus opened his own omnitool and started keying in the list of questions for Tali. “When you get back here, hit the computer, and find me the technician who put Cerberus’s particle in our communicator. Whomever it is has probably already been replaced, but I want him or her out nonetheless. Anything else will give the Illusive Man too much wiggle room.” A lightning-quick glance cut up to make sure Martin kept up before he turned back to his questions. “Then have three of the geth go through the _Passchendaele_’s QEC and make sure it’s clean. Understood?”

Throwing two nods sharp enough to slice someone in half, Martin replied, “Yes, sir. We’re not delaying our departure?”

Vortash’s voice broke through. “Senior staff briefing room is swept, General. Nice variety of hardware in there.”

Garrus held up a finger to Martin then braced both hands against the arm of the chair. “Destroy them and get me a tight active laser scan grid in there. This is ridiculous. Same in here, then get your asses to my meeting. After lunch, you and Erash can go over my ship from stem to stern and then lock it down.” Catapulting himself out of his chair, he vaulted his desk, nearly crowing at the glorious release of even a second’s worth of unrestrained aggression. He strode out the door without pausing.

“No, this does not put back our schedule, Martin. We leave tomorrow, so be packed.” He cursed, not having packed his own kit. “We’ve got a hell of a lot to get done before bedtime, kid.”

“No kidding.” Martin finished typing and closed his omnitool. “So, senior staff briefing?”

Garrus nodded and led the way, feeling very much like an _unciaelatum_ facing a new opponent every second. Fighting and clawing through endless adversaries, he kept his eyes up, searching for an end to the line of new combatants, but one never arrived.

After the senior staff briefing, Garrus hurried from the elevator to his quarters. He needed to pack, eat, and then get back to shoring up the base’s security.

“Bloody, arrogant bastard,” Butler grumbled from the dining room. “If I catch the tech who bugged this place, I’ll introduce him to his own damned kidneys.” He threw himself down in a chair, the legs screeching across the floor. Butler could never just sit, he needed to rearrange the furniture.
“I’m pretty sure he already knows his kidneys,” Martin shot back.

Garrus shook his head, able to see the kid’s cheeky grin even with the blinds down. Hurrying to his closet, he pulled out both of his footlockers and threw them on the bed.

“Not like that … I bloody mean … .” Butler stopped, and grumbled. “Shut up, Weaver, or I’ll introduce you to your kidneys.”

“And I already know my kidneys. See? Hello kidneys, it’s me, Martin, the awesome guy who lets you live inside his body and strain impurities from his blood. Thanks for that, by the way.”

As Garrus strode into his bathroom, the rest of the conversation blessedly becoming too muffled to hear as it continued to devolve. A brilliant, talented, loyal group of people had rallied to see Archangel become a reality, but sometimes it took every ounce of his control to restrain himself from knocking heads. Anderson claimed the constant teasing and bickering meant they had formed a strong, cohesive unit. Garrus suspected most of them just needed to grow up a few years.

A few minutes later, Garrus’s stomach growled, coaxing him away from packing clothing for every possible contingency from the heat of Tuchanka’s salt flats to the heart-freezing chill of Alchera and its eezo mine.

Garrus thumped down the stairs, hard and fast. Just like in the elevator, an electric tingle brushed his left hip. He stopped and looked toward Zaeed’s painting rather than the direction of the electricity. The faint EM field might not have been picked up by any of the races used to heavier fields, but to a turian, it felt like a signal flare. Once, he could pass off as his imagination or a freak static charge from the elevator. But twice? No, twice meant trouble.

He continued on, pretending to ignore the close encounter, and strode into the kitchen. Acting casual and secure when he felt eyes watching him from everywhere felt like dancing along the edge of a blade. He sidled in next to Marcie. “Hi.”

She looked him up and down, one eyebrow arched. “You hitting on me, General?” She planted a plump fist on a cocked hip and turned the raised eyebrow up to a glare.

Nodding, he leaned down. “Maybe.” Getting even closer, he whispered, “That older lady from the fifteenth floor … has she ever shown any interest in Zaeed’s painting?”

Marcie shook her head. “Not that I know of.”

His turn to raise his brow. “Not even when Zaeed and Melanis are fighting over it like a couple of rabid varren?”

“I don’t think so. She might have said it was pretty once. Mostly, she’s too busy hauling herself up the stairs.” She pulled back. “What’s this about, General?”

He shrugged, a cold surety taking root in his gut. “How many times a day does she come down?” he asked instead of answering.

“Five or so. Just grabs a cup of coffee, says hi, and off she goes. Is there a problem?” The matron scrubbed her hands on her apron, starting to look nervous.

Garrus chuckled and shook his head. “No problem. I’m just getting old and paranoid. Thanks, Marcie.” He stepped over to the line and picked up a tray. “Fill it up. I’ll eat upstairs.” He thanked her when she passed it back full.
Pivoting on his talons, he headed for the stairs, calling back, “Martin!” He didn’t wait for a reply, just started up. “Butler, Vortash, Sidonis, Melanis, and Massani. My quarters. Now!” He heard their chairs sliding across the floor before he finished speaking, and their footsteps thundering up behind him before he reached the door.

Standing in the center of the doorway, he forced them to squeeze past him into the room before he followed them in. Once the door shut, he nodded toward the washroom door and whispered, “Keep going.” He dropped his tray on the table and pushed in on them again as they entered, earning a couple of strange looks.

He followed them in, as sure as he could be that the invisible set of eyes hadn’t stalked them. “Okay, we don’t just have one fairly serious security breach going on,” he continued to whisper. “The first—Cerberus—is being dealt with, but I want the second nullified before I leave as well.” He met Zaeed’s confused stare. “I’m fairly certain someone believes your painting is real, and plans to relieve you of it.”

Zaeed cursed and pushed forward, causing a tidal waves through the closely packed space. “What do you mean? Who is it? I’ll rip their bloody head off.”

“No head ripping will be necessary, and I think we might end up with some excellent resources if we play our tiles right.” Garrus leaned against the shower stall. “From what I’ve seen, it appears to be a two person team. Susan, the little old lady who visits the main floor for coffee five times a day when it supposedly hurts her to climb the stairs … she’s the visible face. Insinuates herself, sweet, innocuous … no one gives an old lady from accounting a second glance while she watches our every move, figures out when the painting is most vulnerable.”

Zaeed shoved again. “How do you know they’re after my painting?”

“Is there anything else on the main floor worth stealing? Take out a nice oven or holo-screen?” Brow plates peaked, he stared at the merc until he backed down. “The partner is cloaked, and it’s a damned good one. Even when I knew where he or she was, I couldn’t see it. I’ve just felt the brush of its EM field. I think when I started asking questions about Susan, I warranted closer watching, so he or she’s been following me. Otherwise, I might never have known anyone was there.”

“So what do we do?” Zaeed demanded. “They’re not getting my painting.”

“Good riddance,” Melanis grumbled.

Garrus didn’t even look at her. “Zaeed, you’re going to go on a tear. Let it be known, without overacting it, that with Cerberus breaking through our security, you’re not convinced the painting is safe. Say that you’re arranging to have it moved to the Archangel main vault at the Shadow Broker’s base. I’ll make the arrangements with Barla Von to have a massive security detail to move it.”

He held Zaeed’s stare until the merc nodded before he continued, “Tonight, we’ll go about the evening routine as usual. Get the cadets into bed, settle the base down, and then take positions along the second floor. I want EM micro-trips all over the main room and stairs as soon as everyone is in bed. I want to know the second anyone steps into that room.” He crossed his arms, dropping them into place like gates.

“EM micro-trips?” Vortash grumbled. “You want to blanket the main floor so we can track our cloaked friend’s movements?” The batarian winced. “Pricey way to do it, General. Laser grid would be faster and cheaper.”
Garrus nodded. “And very efficiently tip off a couple of pros that we’re onto them. Pricey or not, I want subtle. I’m not sure we can catch them, but if we can, maybe they can be convinced to use their skills for the good guys. They’ve infiltrated our base for weeks without detection.” One of his brow plates leapt toward his fringe. “How many days have you watched a supposedly infirm old woman hobble up those stairs without giving her a second glance? Archangel could use that sort of infiltration talent.”

Melanis pushed past Martin. “So we tuck our departments into bed and sneak back down here to pounce when they try to take the painting? That’s the whole plan? Against professionals?”

He straightened, towering over her belligerence. “Sometimes simple is best. Now, you all know what to do, get the hell out of my head.” He herded them out and then flopped down on the couch, sprawled along the length. Melanis had the right of it. The weakness of the plan formed a certainty, not a question. The only question that remained was how had he missed these people infiltrating his base? All of them. Okay, Cerberus he expected, at least to some extent. He didn’t anticipate the Illusive Man being as interested in the organization as he was, but still, he’d expected some level of spying from them.

Reaching over without looking, he grabbed his tray of food from the table and balanced it on his stomach. He needed to arm himself with as much intel as he could find before trying to spring his trap. Sitting up, he shovelled in a couple of mouthfuls, then set the tray down and returned to packing.

“Your office is clear and the detection grid is up, General.” Vortash’s voice rumbled in Garrus’s ear. “The geth are going through your QEC, the one in administration, and the one on your ship.”

“Good work. How subtly do you think we can get tonight’s countermeasure deployed?” He paused to eat as he waited for the answer.

“Very. I’ll disperse the micro-trips in solution, give them to maintenance to spray when they do the floors. No one should be the wiser,” the batarian answered.

“You’re in my office as you’re saying this?” Garrus flipped the lids of his footlockers closed and headed out, his half-eaten tray of food in his hand.

“I’m not even going to dignify that with an answer. Vortash out.”

Garrus grinned. Poking the grouchy old varren never lost its appeal. Hauling his lunch with him, he headed back up to his office to gather as much intel as he could on thieving duos. Some idea of what they faced might help.

Sitting down behind his desk, he took the time to lock his computer out of the network, then started his search with current law enforcement bulletins. He struck gold right off the mark with a recent BOLO from a salarian Spectre named Jondum Bau. After leaving a message asking for more information on Kasumi Goto and Keiji Okuda, Garrus set about moving the rest of his pieces into place.

“Emily Wong.” The young woman’s face appeared on Garrus’s omnitool after a brief delay, but broke into a wide, open smile when she saw him. “General Vakarian. How is my favourite rebel army leader today?”

“Been better.” Still, he smiled. Emily Wong impressed him. For someone who came across as earnest and guileless as she did, she possessed a solid core of courage and attitude. “I need you to get together with Barla Von and do a report for me. We’re going to be going into the big vault and
taking out ten pieces for auction. We need to make room to move Winter Garden into secure storage. It doesn’t need to be a huge report, just something about how due to concerns for the security of some of our publicly displayed work, including Winter Garden, we’re going to be bringing in an appraiser to choose … blah blah blah. Von can give you the rest.”

“Will there actually be a sale of these artifacts, General?” Emily asked, a teasing grin playing along her lips. “This smells of a set up.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, one mandible ticking when she just glared back. “The items will be sold. Once advertised, we can’t back out.” He smiled, his head cocking a little. “And I think I’m about to create a new project.” Leaning forward, he said, “It’s one you might like to help with when you have time.”

She laughed. “Fine, you can send me the details when you have them, but back off the General Vakarian charm thing. It’s worrying. Makes me think you’re going to start kissing babies and try to join the council.” She alerted, cocking her head in the intergalactic sign for got a call on another line. “Here’s Von now. I’ll have the news out in a few hours, sir. Have a good trip. Pick me up something nice.”

His mandibles flicked hard. “I’m going to Rannoch, Ilos, and Tuchanka.”

She shrugged. “Then bring me back something that’s not radioactive. Goodbye, General.”

He no sooner hung up with the reporter when he received an incoming message from Jondum Bau. Opening the channel, he drew himself up, settling into his most official pose. “Jondum Bau?”

“I’m Bau,” the salarian replied. His expression carried all the usual salarian attitude, as if their lives were too short to be bothered with most people, but it held a wariness and curiosity as well. “Why would the leader of a mercenary army be contacting me about the most infamous thief in the galaxy?”
The dark and quiet settled around Garrus, a massive, ephemeral leviathan that swallowed him whole. Laying back in an armchair in the darkest corner of the common room, he stretched out his legs, crossing them at the ankle, and cushioned his head in his hands. His eyes slipped closed, the steady mechanical whirr and thump-thump of the building’s heartbeat coaxing him toward sleep.

He pushed himself away from the precipice and the siren call of the peace and rest awaiting him in Shepard’s arms. He needed to stay awake, as much as he ached to hear her voice, to feel the cool softness of her kisses, her body pressed against his. After a long, frustrating day filled with putting out endless fires, falling asleep felt like going home.

His people teased him from time to time about having a wife closeted away somewhere, their guesses ranging from Aria; to Garm, Omega’s Blood Pack Leader; to a particularly heart-wrenchingly ridiculous tale Monteague wove one night about the forbidden union of Garrus and Councillor Tevos. When they pushed, he just laughed and shook his head, refusing to give up that most private and cherished center of his life.

Shepard belonged to him—his bright, solid anchor of sanity—and he never intended to share that. The universe seemed set to devour him whole, needing so much from him, demanding so much of him. Surely, it wouldn’t deny him a single place to just set everything aside.

Dragging his thoughts back to his current circumstance, he sifted through the layers of sound and presence surrounding him, searching for the slightest clue that their thieves planned to make a move. After a moment, he relaxed. No change. His cloaked friend still lingered on a couch a few meters away, his position given away by the slightest nasal rasp when he breathed. Garrus winced as he recalled Shepard making the same noise. Well, she made the same noise for a few seconds before the deafening snoring began.

The other half of the thieving duo had yet to make an appearance. No doubt waiting for those watching over the painting to grow weary and fall asleep. Garrus stretched and melted a little further into his chair. Might as well take advantage of the lull. As he let his mind drift, the building’s music eased him toward the shoreline until finally, the leviathan dove into the depths, carrying him away.

“Bloody fucking hell!” Zaeed’s shout shattered sleep’s hold, loud enough to make Garrus’s head ring.

The general jumped straight up, a hand flying up to block the searingly bright light beaming straight into his face as all the lights switched on. It took him half a second to orient himself as bodies raced around above his head.

“It’s bloody gone,” the merc shouted, his raspy roar bouncing off the walls until it seemed to come from everywhere. “How the … ?”
“Everyone stop!” Garrus shouted, breaking through the cacophony. His people froze. “Melanis, get a stasis field over the main door. Krul lock down the elevator then block the stairs with Zaeed. Martin, Vortash, Sidonis, Montague cover the windows up there.” He strode over to the section of blank wall.

Eyes narrowed, he turned to scan the floor, the only trail through the EM trips tracked from his chair to where he stood. The stairs remained undisturbed as well. Looking up, he stepped right up to the wall and reached out, his palm brushing against paint and canvas.

“How the bloody hell did they get it out of here?” Zaeed hollered, fuming as he paced back and forth across the top of the stairs. “What about your grand plan, General?”

“They didn’t get it out.” Garrus nodded and cocked an eyebrow at the merc. “It’s still right here. They just cloaked it so that we’d run around like crazy people searching while they lifted it off the wall and walked out.” He grinned and looked up. “It’s been five hours. Are you getting tired of hanging up there?” he asked. When he didn’t get an answer, he pulled his sidearm. After making sure he had the training mod installed, he aimed it toward the ceiling. “I’ll give you to the count of three to show yourself.”

“One.” As he counted, Garrus traced the thief’s plan. She obviously didn’t intend to touch the floor, so that meant monofilament line from the painting to the door and a pulley rig. “Two.” Since the painting remained on the wall, she was no doubt at ceiling height right above it.

“Three.” He fired a metre to the right, then a metre wide the other way. Nothing. “Those were a fair warning. I know where you are, and I won’t be missing the next time. Show yourself.”

Nothing.

He aimed dead center and fired. The shot impacted a half metre short of the ceiling, but to the thief’s credit, she didn’t make a sound.

“Stop!” The air above the suspect couch shimmered, a man appearing, standing on the leather seat. “I give up. Just stop. You shot her!”

Garrus nodded. “Yes, I did. She was given far more warning than most would offer in my position.” He gestured with the pistol. “Step down, son.” He waited until the young man did as he was told. “Keiji Okuda?” Holding the human with a narrow-eyed stare, Garrus pointed toward the ceiling with his pistol. “That would mean it’s the infamous Miss Goto hanging up there, nursing a painful bruise?”

A soft grunt of affirmation answered him as Keiji looked down at the floor.

As he looked up, a rumbling sigh rolled from Garrus’s throat, heavy with rapidly failing patience. Some people did not know when to admit defeat. “Come down. Jondum Bau will be here in three hours to take you both into custody unless we arrive at some sort of alternative arrangement. You’re wasting your short and valuable freedom.”

Still nothing. Movements stiff, he aimed his pistol at the same spot. “The gun might not be lethal, Miss Goto, but I’m not above shooting you until you’re good and damned sore.” Grudging admiration for her stubbornness and toughness made his mandibles twitch, but still, he squeezed the trigger. Precious time trickled away as she played her little game of denial.

“All right. All right,” a husky, lilting voice snapped, annoyed and hard … anything but defeated, or even subdued. A lithe, female human figure appeared just below the ceiling. One hand held her
Garrus hid a smile at the thief’s indignant tone and crooked a beckoning talon, then pointed to the floor. “It’s supposed to hurt.” He hung his sidearm back on his hip. “Come down from there, so we can talk.” When she made no move to do as he said, he snapped the pistol from his hip and shot her in the same spot. “I’ve reached the end of my patience. Come down, Miss Goto, or I’ll simply have you both held in stasis awaiting Spectre Bau’s arrival.”

The thief squawked as the third round hit, but then activated the pulley and lowered herself to the floor. Grumbling to herself, she pulled the monofilament line through her harness. “It’s your own fault,” she said, throwing the bundle of cord on the floor. “Five hundred million credit painting hanging out in the middle of Omega. Of course someone’s going to steal it.”

Garrus nodded and pointed to the couch where her partner stood. “Take a seat.” As he moved to sit across from them, he couldn’t help but shoot a smirk over his shoulder at the indignant, cussing merc at the top of the stairs. Waiting for her to sit down, he watched them both intently. Goto, as Bau’s information indicated, clearly ran the duo. Keiji quailed as she glided past him, shoulders and spine bristled, all angles and points despite the fluidity of her movement.

“Seriously, General?” the thief asked, her lips twitching in a crooked smile under the hood. “Micro-trips? In a building like this, who needs to touch the floor?” She shook her head as if she expected better. Broadcasting ease and a cocky confidence, she seated herself and crossed her legs at the knee, hands neatly folded in her lap.

“Nice counter-move,” Garrus replied, choking down the urge to point out that she remained quite caught. He sat, shifting to the back of the seat, posture rigid.

She smiled. “You never expected the trips or your little ambush to work.” Nodding once, she continued, “Nice counter-move, yourself.” Looking around, she seemed to either be buying for time or looking for a way out. “So, why are we talking, General?”

Garrus shook his head and leaned back. “I’m sure you’ve been here long enough to know what Archangel is about, Miss Goto.” He stared into her eyes, watching the calculations and formulas whipping around behind the scenes like a massive, complicated network of gears. Nothing that gave him any clue as to whether she could be persuaded showed itself. “We could use people with your infiltration skills.”

Shifting a little, she pushed herself up in the seat and refolded her hands, ordering herself very precisely. “I’m a thief, General, not a spy. You’d be asking us to risk our lives for your worthy cause, but what could possibly be in it for us? Stealing secrets is only profitable if you can sell them.” A quick shake of her head discarded the idea. “I’ll take my chances with Bau and the courts.”

Garrus chuckled, admiring her poker face. “Professionals are all about the game, Miss Goto. The prize isn’t the object; it’s cracking the uncrackable safe, getting into the impenetrable room. I’ve met a few of your kind over the cycles.” His hands lifted to forestall her argument. “Although none to compare with your record or skill.” Leaning forward, Garrus braced against the arms of the chair. “And this would be the most intense, most challenging game of your life. Even your prodigious skills will be pushed to their limits and beyond.” He saw the gears behind those eyes speed up, looking for his angle. “Yes, the missions will be very high risk, but I’d arrange for the rewards to more than compensate you.”

A single flick of one mandible met the tick of appreciation that tugged at the corner of her mouth. He pushed a little harder. “You’d be infiltrating locations controlled by our enemies, so I see no
problem with you relieving them of any valuables you might find.” Stiffening, he added a low roll of thunder to his voice. “Providing such procurements don’t risk the larger mission.”

“You’d give us free rein to steal?” Doubt cast shadows over what little of her face he could see. “No kickbacks? No constant threat of being turned over to Bau?” A powdery laugh drifted out. “No offense, General, but I can’t see a single reason to trust you.”

Garrus shrugged. “I’ve given you no reason to distrust me. If you join Archangel and use your talents for the betterment of the galaxy, the organization will shelter and protect you. We’ll make sure you both have solid cover ID’s, and you can base yourself out of these headquarters. You won’t be freelance, no jobs outside the assignments I give you, and you’ll be required to go on missions as I see fit.” He let out a long breath, talons clasping in front of him. “This isn’t a job offer, Miss Goto, it’s a sentence that allows you to continue working at what you do best.”

A mischievous smile flitted across the woman’s face, her eyes cutting across at her partner. “So you’d have us turn Robin Hood?” She laughed, that one coming off genuine as she looked around her at the suspicious faces of his senior staff. “Your men don’t look all that merry, General.”

“Probably because someone has been lurking inside our home, taking advantage of our trust while they plotted to steal from us.” Reminding himself to ask about Robin Hood later, Garrus tilted his head, studying her and her silent partner for tells. As cool as she tried to come across, he could see that being caught had thrown her off, as he’d hoped. The young man still looked rattled by Garrus shooting his partner. Rattled and angry. Garrus nodded. He could use both reactions.

Pushing himself up out of his seat, he said, “For tonight, you can both sleep up in ‘Susan from accounting’s’ quarters under guard. When Bau arrives, we’ll put him up for the rest of the night as well.”

He stepped forward, towering over the seated thieves. “Tomorrow I leave for Rannoch. I’m expecting trouble, so if you decide you’d prefer working with me over going to prison, I’ll expect Miss Goto to be ready to ship out at 0630.” He looked at Keiji. “You’ll stay behind to help my people seal up our electronic security breaches. If you choose not to join us, Bau will take custody of you at that time.”

Crooking a finger to his people, he beckoned them down. “Please see our guests to their quarters and keep them under heavy guard.” Pivoting on his talons, he strode to the wall and lifted the still-cloaked Winter Garden from its hanger. “This will be leaving for our main vault as planned. Goodnight, Miss Goto … Mr. Okuda.”

Without so much as glancing back, Garrus jogged up the stairs and entered his room, locking and encoding the door behind him.

“Did I give them enough incentive?” he whispered to the dim shadows. “Staying any longer seemed too much like begging, but … .” Stepping up next to the couch, he started snapping the seals on his armour. He never knew how Shepard did it. The woman had a gift for knowing just how far to push someone, and just the right buttons to tweak. They might want to punch her in the face by the time she finished, but she always learned what she needed to know, and always found a way to swing the relationship back around to something productive.

Once free of his armour, he considered a shower for about twenty seconds before climbing into bed. A glance at his chrono confirmed that he was already three hours late getting home. Closing his eyes, he let out a long breath, sinking down into the mattress. Sleep reached up eagerly, dragging him down into its grip.
A forest surrounded him on all sides. Garrus stumbled a couple of steps, completely disoriented. Turning in loose, lurching circles, he nearly fell to one knee, finally reaching out to catch himself against one of the dry, chalky trunks. Fear and confusion shoved back and forth, fighting for dominance.

“Where am I?” he called out, but only the echo of his own words replied. “Shepard?” He set out toward what appeared to be a break in the trees. Low bushes wrapped around his legs, leafy adversaries trying to hold him back, but from what? Where the hell was he? He’d never even seen a forest like the one around him with its white-trunked, broad-leafed trees. Reaching out, he tore a leaf from the branch, its texture impossibly thin and delicate between his talons.

Above him, the sky darkened as if responding to his mood, pressing down on him with the impending threat of a storm. In the distance, thunder slammed through the sky, rippling through the clouds. Impossible. All of it amounted to something both unnatural and impossible, at least from his perspective.

“Not my dream?” he muttered aloud. “But ….” The fear from earlier exploded in his gut, an incendiary grenade blasting shards of searing dread through his entire being. Shepard. Somehow, the strange place, the impossible storm, it was all about her. He sped up, jogging a few steps until another clap of thunder tore through the air, sending the clouds scuttling ahead of a solid, steel-coloured, wall of water.

Garrus bolted. As surely as he’d ever known anything, he knew that he needed to reach Shepard before the rain did. “Shepard!” he yelled, barely able to hear himself over the coming storm. “Shepard! Where are you?”

A slight lightening a hundred or so metres ahead gave him a target. Leaping over fallen trees and thick brambles, he raced toward what he hoped was open ground, his gaze drawn back to the approaching wall of water. If it reached her before he did, he just knew he’d never see her again. The fear ripened to an unreasonable panic, splitting open to spill out its rotten fruit. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t keep going without her arms to return to every night.

One moment, the trees pressed thick and implacable, surrounding him on all sides, the next, he ran out into open meadowland. Tall, wispy grass laid down before the wind, sweeping low above a thicker carpet of green. Maybe ten metres away, Shepard sat on the ground, her back to him, legs drawn up to her chest, arms wrapped around them. It took him a moment to realize that he could see through her, the grass blowing in front of her showing through her translucent form.

“Shepard?” He stopped, hesitating when she didn’t acknowledge his call. “Shepard?” Looking up to see the storm crashing down, almost directly overhead, he extended his hand. “Come on, we’ve got to get out of here.”

Her entire body undulated with a long, heavy sigh. “It’s time, Garrus,” she said, her voice flat and slick, plastic words from a puppet’s mouth.

Stumbling forward two steps, he flexed his talons, as if he could will her hand into his. “What do you mean, Shepard? Time for what?”

Arms and legs unfolding like the petals of a flower opening to catch the rain, Shepard stood and turned to face him. Her lips lifted into a smile, but it didn’t touch the rest of her face. “Time for you to stop living in here, Garrus. There’s no future with me in this shadow of life. Time for you to let me go and start looking toward the future.”

“No, Shepard. You know I don’t want that.” He leaped forward, snatching at her. “Stay with me,
The rain slammed down on them like a giant hand from the sky, nearly driving Garrus into the ground. He staggered and managed to regain his balance. Shepard merely looked up, a mild expression of surprise on her face.

Water streamed over her skin, first blurring her features, then slowly erasing them. “I love you, Garrus Vakarian. We’ll meet again.” She held out her hand, delicate digits trembling. “Good-bye.”

“Shepard?” Garrus grabbed her hand, but his talons just passed straight through as she continued to fade, her sad smile and outstretched fingers disappearing last.

* * * * *

One left behind certain moments when they left behind life—all the silly grudges and embarrassments. One also left behind disappointments because they stopped mattering about a second after they occurred.

One left behind hope. Losing the pull of that tingly hook of sunshine rooted in good and deep behind your heart, hurt and it hurt bad. But what use is a hook that pulls you forward by promising better days ahead when the days have run out?

One carried along certain things as well, naturally. Sadness softly faded from loss, and joy saturated the cherished.

Only one thing called out from the darkness, and it wasn’t fear, need, or any great cause, which was surprising, frankly. Damned surprising.

No, only one regret persisted, a single hopeless ember burning in the vacuum that consisted of three simple words. Words that could have brought him joy. Words that remained jealousy and fearfully guarded instead of being shared.

Yeah, that one rated a twelve.
Garrus watched his flagship shrink on the vid screen, pride glowing warm and deep. It hung in the black, poised above the arc of the planet like a great raptor locked onto its prey. The first of her kind, the Passchendaele never failed to amaze him. Sleek, deadly, and beautiful, she embodied the best of human, turian, and geth design, each influence obvious, but seamlessly blended into the whole.

“She’s a beauty,” Kasumi said, dropping her cloak to appear just behind Garrus’s elbow.

He nodded, but then looked down at her. “There are three of us in this shuttle. We all know you’re here, so you don’t need to stay cloaked.”

“Don’t I?” She shrugged, a sly smile darting across her lips before she vanished again.

“That’s going to get old really fast,” Martin said, a rough sigh carrying along a couple of curses for the ride.

Garrus thumped into a seat, silently agreeing with Martin. The thief had a playfulness about her that lightened the anchors wrapped around his neck, but her growing infatuation with torturing Martin had already started to prove tiresome.

“I’m a force of nature, robot armour boy. Get used to it,” the thief’s voice said from the seat next to him.

“And so is that,” Martin said, the words squeezing out between clenched teeth. “And you’re not a force of nature, you’re a pustulating abscess on the ass—”

“That’ll be enough, thanks, Martin,” Garrus interrupted. “Let’s try to keep things civil.” He flopped back into the seat, a hand over his eyes. A bright, white spark of pain settled in behind his brow plates as he considered a couple of weeks worth of their bickering.

“Get used to the abscess thing, too,” Kasumi said, this time from the seat across from Martin.

“Are we there, yet?” Martin cried, moving to the seat next to the bulkhead.

Garrus grinned and shook his head. “Fifteen minutes.” He stretched out, arms behind his head, and closed his eyes. “Just relax and enjoy the quiet.” An implacable anchor, exhaustion pulled Garrus down into the seat. Even fifteen minutes worth of sleep would help ease the ache in his joints, but the anchor hit the bottom before it pulled him into sleep. Letting out a shallow sigh, he let himself float. If he slept, he’d just spend the entire time searching for Shepard anyway, and like the past two nights, she’d still be gone.

“Why are we using the shuttle? Base One has docks now.” Martin sighed. “Let’s face it, sailing in with the stabilizers at full extension, the Passch makes quite the impression.”
Garrus opened one eye a slit as Martin changed the vid screen to show the planet, zooming in on their destination, the new capital. The small settlement remained officially unnamed, its residents referring to it as Base One.

“We don’t need to make an impression, you in particular,” Garrus said, closing his eye again. “Or are you forgetting about screaming and running through the camp in your underwear because you found a small lizard-thing in your tent on our last visit?”

“Now, see, had I been here, I could have recorded the whole thing for posterity,” Kasumi said from the pilot’s compartment, “and no one would have been the wiser. If it leaked to the extranet … well, those things happen.”

Martin growled. “Why did we bring the criminal?” he demanded, and not for the first time. “We would have done just fine without her tagging along.”

Garrus grumbled and shifted in his seat, stretching a little. “She’s not tagging along. She’s here to help us figure out what’s going on. All I got from Tali’s answers to my questions is that someone is agitating for war.”

He understood how resentment and anger could fester after more than three centuries of exile, but surely, a peaceful means of returning to their home had to be worth trying to leave the anger behind. Apparently, some of the quarians didn’t think so.

Kasumi materialized right in front of him. “Having an invisible set of eyes never hurts,” she said. “They can have a much wider range of vision.”

Garrus looked up at her, the spark of a headache rapidly growing into something that would take major fire suppression gear to put out. “Stop that, but yes. You’re both going to have plenty to keep you occupied. Now just sit down and shut up. If one of you starts repeating everything the other one says, you’re both going out the hatch.”

Slumping back into the seat, Garrus went back over his list of questions, wishing he’d asked Tali for more specific information. Her answers just led to more questions and a sick sort of dread stemming from the fact it felt as though she was hiding things from him. He really hoped that part could be chalked up to the vagueness of their code.

“Hey, General?”

Garrus looked up, the worried tone of Martin’s voice grabbing his attention instantly. “What is it?” He sat up.

“Look.” Martin pointed to the vid screen, and several quarian ships hanging low and tight over Rannoch’s northern pole. “That can’t be good, can it?”

Garrus just shook his head. None of the ships were civilian vessels, but ones from the heavy fleet. A dry, heated wind of dread blew through him, and he wished he’d asked Nihlus to divert from chasing ghosts. At the base of his neck, where plate solidified into cowl, a prickle jabbed into his spine, twisting a little. He pushed the warning aside. He didn’t need to have any sort of brilliant skills or talents to realize things on Rannoch had escalated far past what Tali led him to believe, but he couldn’t very well do anything until they landed.

Thankfully, Martin and Kasumi listened to him and spent the last few minutes of the trip in silence. Still, Garrus thrust himself up out of his seat before the shuttle touched down, eager to find closure for all his nagging doubts. He flung the hatch open, the shuttle’s thrusters sending billowing
clouds of dust flying up in his face. Throwing his hand up to shield himself from the worst of it, he jumped down, eyes already scanning for any sign of trouble.

Tali hurried up the gravel road toward the docks, the chipped, red rock crunching and grinding under her feet. He’d worried that he and the other two should be fully suited up, but Tali and the two quarians bringing in a lift for their footlockers all wore complete suits and masks. Garrus frowned even as he strode out to meet Tali. He’d thought the geth had been accelerating the process to free them from their cloth prisons.

“Garrus!” Tali lifted a hand as she closed the last few metres. “Welcome to Rannoch, General Vakarian.” Her hand dropped, extending toward him as she stopped a half-metre away. “Thank you for pushing us up to the top of the list,” she said, glancing around her as if worried that someone was listening in. “Sorry my call for help came so last minute, but Legion and I have been trying our best to fix the situation on our own.” When Garrus grasped her hand, she pulled him into a hug. “It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too.” Garrus gave the quarian a squeeze and a couple of pats between her shoulder blades. “And it wasn’t a problem … at least once Wrex stopped shouting at me.” He backed out of the embrace and stepped past her, walking to the edge of the landing area.

“Hey, Tali,” Martin greeted her, giving her a quick hug as well. “Beware the invisible criminal.”

“In invisible criminal?” Tali asked, walking up beside Garrus.

“He means me,” Kasumi said, appearing on Garrus’s other side. “Nice planet you have here.”

Tali glanced back and forth between Garrus and the thief, then nodded. “Thanks.”

Garrus stared down the nearly thirty metres to the main quarian settlement spread along the cliff walls, admiring the buildings that rose from the red stone like sculptures. They’d been formed out of the natural materials in much the same manner as turian dwellings, but the shape of them definitely harkened back to previous quarian architecture.

Garrus let out a low whistle. “Wow,” he said, stunned by the beauty spread out before him. Everything about the settlement flowed in a seamless whole, buildings, roads, and garden spaces growing out of and moving through the landscape as if they’d been formed by the wind and sea rather than hands and tools. The dim sun gleaming red-gold off every surface and the wild shots of green cacti and brilliant flowers transformed the little village into a masterpiece.

She looked up at him, but sadness rolled off her in waves rather than pride. “I told you to trust me … that it would be worth living in the camp a while longer rather than throwing up those ugly prefabs.”

Garrus nodded. “You were right. I take it those architects I sent were of some use?” He could see the influence of the turian team through the tiered construction and the sweeping, organic lines of the buildings. Turians loved their fortifications, but more than that, they liked their fortifications to be works of art. If you threw up a wall, it told the enemy you intended to keep them out, but if you transformed that wall into a work of art, it said that you fully expected that wall to perform its task forever. It was a subtle form of intimidation, but an effective one.

After looking down at Base One for another moment, the prickle at the base of his neck started heating up again. Something was off. It took him about five seconds to recognize the issue.

“When I came here six months ago,” he said, turning to face Tali, “there were five geth platforms
on the street for every quarian.” His hand swept out as if erasing the previous scene in favour of the current. “Where are all the geth, Tali?” He looked back, dread moving in as his eyes confirmed it. Not a single geth moved between the buildings.

“That’s why I asked you to come.” She gestured down the road and hurried ahead. “We’ll walk back. It’ll give me time to fill you in as we go.”

Garrus strode at her side, giving her a moment to start before he gave in to the many questions trying to turn the conversation into an interrogation. The combination of Tali’s demeanour and the missing geth screamed along his every nerve. Something had been going on that would bring shame to Shepard’s efforts for peace, and he couldn’t abide that. Especially with her disappearance scraping those same nerves raw.

“So, why aren’t there geth in your suits? I thought you were getting to the point where you didn’t have to be masked all the time?” he asked when Tali just wrung her hands. The slump in her posture at the questions told him more than he wanted to know.

The sigh that dragged out of Tali sounded like stone grinding against metal; harsh, jagged, and uncharacteristic. “Admiral Xen announced a couple of months ago that she believed there was a danger that those of us on the planet were being controlled by the geth,” Tali said, starting down the slope toward the settlement.

“Because you’re allowing them into your suits?” Garrus looked up as a group of quarian passed by, all of them looking as spooked and jittery as Tali. What the hell was going on?

“Exactly. She insisted that we all return to the flotilla for tests, so we agreed to come back in pairs, but that wasn’t good enough. She and her growing army of doctors and experts wants us all to come back together.” Tali flipped her hands, a small, frustrated gesture. “We’ve refused, because we know that we’re not being controlled, and we won’t be pulled off and held prisoner to their paranoia.”

“Admiral Xen.” He let out a long breath almost as jagged as the quarian’s. “She’s still agitating?”

He swore Tali rolled her eyes behind her mask. “Of course. Worse than ever. She’s even started saying that the Admiralty Board had no right to decide unilaterally for resettlement and that they should all have to resign in favour of a new board.” Another sigh, this one more musical as it cut the air between them. “At least that isn’t going anywhere because technically all they did was approve the expeditionary team. The Conclave voted for continuing the survey process and unanimously in favour of resettlement should things progress.”

“So, why do you need us?” Martin asked, jogging up on Tali’s other side. “And where is Legion? I thought he’d be here to meet us.”

“Tali’Zorah!” A female quarian raced up the road toward them. As she slid to a stop in front of them, her feet lost purchase on the loose stone. Arms flailing, she nearly went down on her backside.

Garrus jumped forward and grabbed her arm, just managing to hold her on her feet. Once she caught herself, he released her and stepped back, her frantic haste tying the knot in his gut tighter.

“Thank you, sir,” she gasped, her chest heaving as if she’d run a couple of kilometers. In the next breath, her attention snapped over to Tali. “Tali’Zorah, Arax and a squad of primes just walked up to the south wall. Arax asked for you.”
Tali nodded, and let out a shaky breath. “Run ahead and tell the geth that I’m on my way.”

Garrus looked back and forth between them, cursing the masks that hid their expressions. Beneath their words, he sensed a current racing thick and fast, a landslide racing down a mountainside to wash them all away. Again, he wished he’d dragged Nihlus along.

The young female nodded, took a couple of gasping breaths, then turned and bolted back down the road toward town.

Garrus focused on Tali, a growing, sick feeling of disgust writhing through him as he watched the quarian squirm, trying to avoid his stare. “Tali, if you don’t just tell me the truth about what’s going on here … .” He left the threat open, not completely sure what he’d do. As much as he cared about the quarian and admired her courage, the shame he felt coming off of her left him cold. “Why are there no geth in the settlement?”

She set off, leaving him behind. “You know that the geth started making more advanced units based on Legion’s prototype?” She glanced over at him as he caught up, continuing when he nodded. “They wanted more autonomy, the increased intelligence of more runtimes in each platform.” She cleared her throat. “And they thought it would make interacting with us easier.”

Her hands started wringing once again. “The flotilla was concerned about the new platforms’ combat applications and asked us to run scans, send back any information we could gather on them.”

Garrus shook his head, seeing the landslide veering off course, headed straight for the tiny village of peaceful coexistence. “Did you ask the geth before you started treating them like enemy lab subjects?”

Tali’s shoulders dropped even further as she shook her head. “No. The Admiralty Board and Conclave formed the Rannoch Resettlement Committee to oversee our efforts and monitor the geth. They ordered us to remain silent. I argued with them, refused to do it myself, but a lot of the group were still nervous about the geth and agreed.” For a moment, she seemed to teeter on the edge of making some sort of excuse. He really hoped she didn’t. “I kept an eye on the others, stopped them when I caught them, but I didn’t do enough. I let the committee intimidate me.”

The mudslide took out the town, little villagers screaming as the mud washed them away, pulling them down into the muck of insanity.

“After a couple of months, we’d all gotten to know a lot of the geth, worked side by side with them, and considered them friends,” Tali said, her shoulders rising, her spine straightening as some steel fortified her words. “At the same time, the committee’s demands became more invasive. Samples of their materials, hack and copy any code we could.” She shuddered. As they reached the bottom of the slope, she held an arm out to usher them along a street to their right. “We all refused to continue without asking the geth for permission.”

Garrus nodded, unwilling to say anything to dismiss the quarians’ abuse of the geths’ sapient rights. That this committee had taken advantage of nervous children boiled in his blood. Had they done the same to any other race, they would have been dragged before the council for crimes against sapience. And so, he seethed, a seven foot explosive building to detonation, and waited through Tali’s pause.

“The first of the advanced platforms disappeared about a month after we refused to continue the testing.” She hesitated, swallowing loud enough for him to hear it even over the noise of their feet on the rock before she continued, “The next disappeared ten days later.” Lifting her eyes from the
road, she turned to look up at him, then at the houses around them.

“How many, Tali? And how long has this been going on?” He kept his voice soft despite the razor-keen edge, the knot in his gut tightened until it became all he could do to keep from retching.

“Thirty-five,” she answered, her voice barely loud enough for him to hear it. “Over the last year.”

Garrus stopped so suddenly that his boots continued to roll over the flaky, red shale. Backpedaling, he just managed to stay on his feet. “Thirty-five in a year?” He reached up, raking his talons over his fringe as the knot unspooled, releasing itself in fury. “How could you and Legion keep this from me for a year, Tali? What have you been doing to locate them?” At the end of the street, movement caught his attention. A platform that looked very much like Legion stood at the head of a cluster of primes. “Does the flotilla know that geth have been going missing? Did you report it to anyone?”

Tali shook her head. “No. Legion and I decided to keep it to ourselves just in case the committee was responsible.” She shrugged. “At first, we thought it was just platforms leaving for the space stations or the shipyards on Haestrom. Then we started to worry that maybe the disappearances were either heretics that hadn’t really rejoined the geth … or their victims.”

Ice spread through Garrus’s veins as he kept his eyes on the geth. Heretics, still functioning, possibly subverting the rest of the geth. If that was the case, the quarians were right to keep ships on hand. “When did the geth find out about your scans and tests?” Spirits, how had everything ended up so turned inside out? “Could heretics have thought you discovered them?”

Tali shifted further away. “The geth knew all along. When the committee ordered us back because they thought we were being controlled, we knew the chance was nil, because the geth had left months before. It’s impossible to be controlled by geth who aren’t even there.” She shrugged. “The scans I saw didn’t show anything out of the ordinary, but it’s possible that heretic runtimes might have thought we’d discovered their presence.”

“Was it just the ones in your suits that withdrew?” he asked, starting back toward the waiting geth. What a spirit-cursed mess.

“At first, but as more platforms disappeared along with thousands of runtimes, they all withdrew to their base and the space stations.” Tali’s voice thickened, taking on a nasal tone as if she fought back tears. “They even turned inside out? Could heretics have thought you discovered them?”

Garrus stopped again, not as abruptly that time. “Is that why Legion isn’t here? Is Arax its … their replacement?” He stumbled over the proper pronoun. If Legion had stepped back from the colonization process, Garrus needed to pull the geth back into it. Of all the geth, he trusted Legion to be straight with him if the geth had a heretic problem. After a couple of seconds, when Tali still hadn’t answered, he scowled. No. Dear spirits, not Legion.

“Arax is Legion’s replacement,” Tali said at last, “but because four days ago, I convinced Legion to come down to speak with me. I wanted to apologize. I got an idea that I thought could help us find the missing geth and get everything back on track.” She stared down the road to where the geth waited. “He disappeared before he even reached Base One.” The silver reflections of her eyes stared up at him. “I called you to come help, because Legion’s vanished just like the others, Garrus.” Her hands flopped at her sides. “I don’t know what to do.”

Garrus let out a long breath. If there were heretics running amok, Legion would definitely be at the top of their hit list before they started making any moves. Still, if Tali and Legion had kept the disappearances a secret from the flotilla, why were the quarians poised for war? What had them on
“First things first,” he said. “Let’s go see what our friends want.” He led the way down the street, not caring how it looked to anyone if he took charge. Events had accelerated beyond that.

“Creator Zorah, Vakarian-General,” Arax greeted them as they approached. The platform extended a hand, shaking Garrus’s when the general took it. “Geth orbital stations have scanned fifteen quarian vessels over Rannoch’s magnetic north pole.”

Garrus nodded. “Yes, we saw them as we landed.” Stopping, he waited for the other foot to drop. The geth hadn’t come out of their seclusion just to say that they’d seen some ships.

“Probability of creator aggression, high. Geth must prepare to defend themselves. We recommend that creator units currently housed in area designated Base One evacuate to avoid injury or death.”

Garrus shook his head and cut the air with a hand. “There isn’t going to be an attack. Tali’Zorah asked me for my help figuring out what is going on, and that is what I intend to do.” He stepped up to meet Arax eye to eye. “Do you have any information on the geth that have disappeared? Where they last reported in, last transmissions received … anything of that nature?”

The geth cocked its head, the flaps around its light rising and falling in a slow wave. “We will provide Vakarian-General with the information geth have gathered into the disappearance of allied runtimes, but all efforts to locate missing geth have met with failure. Conflict with the creator fleet is inevitable.”

“What’s changed?” Garrus demanded, frustration bleeding into his voice, hard-edged and raw. “A year ago, the geth believed in peace. They believed that geth and quarians could live cooperatively. What happened between then and now?”

Arax stepped back, the primes encircling the platform protectively. “Creators ran tests without geth permission. The geth believe the creators responsible for the missing platforms and all runtimes housed within. They conduct covert scans of all geth operations, including those supporting the Archangel initiative. The conclusion is that they are testing for weaknesses and preparing for war.”

Garrus pushed in, not willing to let them close the conversation down. “I just arrived, and I won’t be allowing anyone to attack anything.” He’d have to call Nihlus and get him there with a dozen Archangel vessels to keep the two sides away from one another. “Send me everything you have that might help me track down the missing platforms. Give me a chance to figure this out before everyone panics and we start evacuating people in preparation for a war I don’t think anyone wants.” Garrus leaned in to meet Arax eye to flashlight. “Peace is still worth taking a chance, isn’t it?”

Dust exploded up from the ground, billowing up in a blinding, choking cloud. Garrus covered his eyes, and turned to face the new threat. Looking up, he saw a large shape through the dust. A frigate? He grabbed Tali’s arm and dragged her back away from the ship as it settled to the ground right where they’d been standing. The thrusters still whipping dust and debris into the air, the ramp dropped, a small contingent of Marines marching down to surround them.

“Tali’Zorah vas Rannoch,” the last quarian off the ship called out. He stopped a couple of metres back. “The Admiralty Board sent us to return you and your expeditionary force to the flotilla for medical testing.”

Garrus stepped forward, but before he could say anything, Kal’Reegar raced in, sliding between Tali and the newcomer, his rifle ready in his hands. “The hell they did,” the Marine shouted over
the roar of thrusters. “No one on this rock is going anywhere.”
“Nihilus, things here are worse than I anticipated.” Garrus glanced behind him. Tali paced back and forth across the office while Kal’Reegar stood guard inside the door.

“Worse than several million missing colonists?” Nihlus cocked a hip and crossed his arms, one plate climbing his brow.

Garrus focused his attention back on the Spectre. “Unbelievably, yes. We’re balanced on the edge of war here, Nihlus.” Shaking his head, he raked his talons over his fringe. “Over the last cycle, thirty five geth platforms have disappeared, so forty thousand or more geth. Legion was the last to vanish.” He paced to the edge of the QEC pad and back. “Tali says she and Legion suspected that heretics might have infiltrated the geth and be behind it, but the quarians are acting suspicious as well.” Stopping back at center, Garrus leaned into the console. “I need your help, Nihlus. And I need the Normandy and a half dozen heavy frigates to park between the quarians and geth.”

The Spectre nodded, the steel in his spine snapping straight. “I’ll be on my way within the hour.” He scowled his ‘all business, decision made, fill me in’ scowl, mandibles giving a hard flick. “What’s the situation on the ground?”

“The Admiralty Board sent a frigate to pick up the survey team, ostensibly for health and safety testing, but I believe it was to get them out of the crossfire.” His frustration escaped in a low rumble that slipped beneath his words. “Between my keen diplomatic skills and Kal’Reegar’s rifle, we negotiated a compromise.” He keyed in information. “Tali and I have to meet with the Admiralty Board at the flotilla tomorrow. Can you join us there?”

The Spectre nodded. “Send me everything you have. I’ll go over it on the way.” He let out a long sigh, his hawk’s glare softening a little. “You look like crap, Garrus. Have you slept at all?”

The general shrugged. “You can nag me about looking like shit when you get here. I’ve got to head out and see if I can find any evidence of what happened to Legion before it gets too dark.” Garrus let out a long breath. “See you tomorrow, and thanks.” He hung up the call, then packaged up everything he had on the geth situation and sent it to Nihlus.

“All right.” He turned to the other two occupants of the room. “Kal, I need you to stay at Base One, and make sure no one tries to forcibly remove anyone.” Striding over to lay a hand on the Marine’s shoulder, he looked past Reegar, out the door. “I don’t want to make it too easy for anyone to start shooting.”

“And what about me?” Tali asked, stepping up on Garrus’s other side, a little of her usual bounce returning.

Garrus thumped Reegar on the shoulder, then hit the door control, ushering Tali through as it opened. “You’re going to help me track and find Legion.” He led the way down onto the street, pulling in a deep breath and stretching his shoulders as he stopped and looked down at the quarian.
“I’m a little out of practice, but I did once investigate cases for a living.”

Opening the file the geth had sent him, he sifted through the insane amount of data to find Legion’s. “Legion left the upper entrance to their base.” Glancing back to Tali, he asked, “You know where that is?”

“Yes.” She nodded toward the part of town where they’d met Arax, beckoning with a wave. “Come on, General. We’re going to have to move fast. It’ll be getting dark in a couple of hours.” Hesitating, she glanced over her shoulder, looking around. “Where are Martin and the invisible criminal?”

“Keeping an eye out.” As much as he trusted Tali, Garrus left it at that. He’d sent Kasumi to see what she could learn from lurking around the rest of the expeditionary team, and sent Martin into the wilderness around Base One to do some recon.

The general looked up into the twilight sky. Despite not being able to see the space stations around the planet, he knew they could most assuredly see him. If heretic geth were to blame for the disappearances, who knew how deep the infection ran and how much of the Reaper agenda still played out around them. Suddenly, everything he’d spent the past cycle building felt like a trap poised with its jaws set to snap closed on him.

Taking a deep breath, he pushed aside concerns for the integrity of Archangel’s entire fleet of geth manufactured ships, and all the geth weaponry and other research. Before he panicked and started tearing Archangel apart, he needed to find Legion. Nobody disappeared without a trace, not even geth.

They walked in silence until the massive geth structure rose out of the rocky hills and cliffs. Garrus stopped and looked up, but through an analytical eye that searched for weaknesses rather than admiring the sweeping gold and bronze lines … the industrial beauty of the place. Storming a compound that well fortified would prove impossible if push came to shove. The geth certainly knew how to defend their holdings.

“So, where’s the upper entrance?” Garrus asked, scanning the cliffs surrounding them, the layered rock pressing in and down on them. He squinted, having trouble seeing detail as the semi-polar day darkened toward mid-afternoon.

“Up there,” Tali said, pointing to a part of the building lined up with the top of the cliffs. “We can get up there two ways, the easiest means climbing up the pipes.”

Garrus walked over to the cluster of huge pipes, leaning against them as he looked up. “Is this how Legion would have come down?” Shoving himself back, he shook his head. “There’s a door right there.” He cut a hand toward a large double door twenty meters to their left. “Why didn’t he just come out there?” No, his gut told him that Legion left via the upper entrance for a reason, and it wasn’t a nice climb down thirty or so metres of pipes.

“I don’t know.” Tali turned back the way they’d come. “The only other way down is to come down the hill. There’s a barely passable slope back down the road a ways. It’s not an easy climb or descent.”

Garrus looked at the maze of pipes for another minutes, then shook his head. “If Legion came down this way and anything happened, the geth would have seen. They’ve got surveillance everywhere.” He turned. “Lead on to the difficult slope.”

Ten minutes later, the pair of them scrambled up a steep slope of loose shale and scrub plants. The
sky painted the entire landscape a pale blue-purple as Tikkun’s weak rays headed for the horizon.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Garrus said, gasping a little as they paused for a breather. He turned up the cooling in his armour to counteract the combination of exertion and daytime temperatures. Even that close to the polar region, Rannoch’s average temperature of 48 C only dipped down to about 35 C. “I feel like I’m going blind.” Shadows clung deep and thick around every surface and object, seeming to shift, skittering across the ground. He blinked rapidly for a moment. That part had to be exhaustion.

“Quarian eyes are made for it,” Tali said. “That’s the reason our masks are shaded out amongst the rest of you. Everything is too bright.” She started up the slope, skirting a thick tangle of bramble-like cacti.

“So, the silver we see is reflection?” he asked, jumping up a ledge as he followed her. “You have mirrored surfaces inside your eyes to bounce the light around.” He chuffed as he stumbled into a wash. “You’d better take point.”

Tali chuckled as she passed him. “Probably best and not just because my eyesight is better. I know where we’re going, and you don’t. Who knows where we’ll end up with you taking the lead.” She picked her way up a winding path, pausing now and again to point out hazards.

Garrus scanned the area with both his omnitool and visor as they climbed. For the first fifty metres or so, the ground appeared virgin, disturbed only by animal tracks. He crouched down to check them out, wanting to judge how long the ground preserved traces of movement. Although it had been a long time and all his lessons had been on Palaven’s soil, he guessed the tracks to be four or five days old. On that leeward side of the cliff, the uneven ground and low scrub kept the wind from blowing away the soil.

Garrus turned to look out past the geth base. It loomed even larger from above. Beyond, a wide river flowed through a canyon, the water sparkling with a million shades of colour. Even with the base—the monstrous hive of machinery that it was—hanging over his right shoulder, the entire scene before him felt like a symbiotic whole. The energy and life of the place flowed with a light, hushed peace.

“You coming?” Tali called. “It’s going to start getting dark for real soon, and we don’t want to be climbing up here when the sun goes down.”

Garrus opened his mouth to answer, but stopped, a chill shudder running down his spine. Something tweaked his inner alarm. Turning a slow circle, he searched for anything that could explain the sudden dark tear he felt in the fabric of the place. Nothing showed itself, but the feeling continued to build.

On a father/son hunting trip when Garrus was a boy, he and his father had been stalked by an ungentira, the aggressive predator following their every move for kilometers. His father told him that they’d be fine as long as they didn’t behave like prey, but it had been six of the most terrifying hours of Garrus’s life. That same shiver, the anticipation of death flying at him out of the shadows, arced down his spine like lightning.

Don’t act like prey.

“Garrus?” Tali edged closer, her posture suddenly rigid, the silver reflections of her eyes darting about as she reacted to his alarm. “Are you okay?”

As she turned to cover her back against his side, her hand reaching for her shotgun, he nodded and
forced himself to give her a reassuring smile. “Yeah, I was just thinking about how peaceful Rannoch feels, even with AI-built constructions erupting from the ground. I hope it can maintain that once cities start going up.” He swept a hand toward their path. “We better keep moving.”

“Okay.” Her eyes stayed locked on him long enough that he knew she saw through his lie, but she just turned and continued up the slope.

After switching on his flashlight, Garrus followed, keeping the beam wandering back and forth over the ground as if merely watching where he put his feet. Eyes watched them, he could feel them like cold fingers sliding over his hide. He just needed to figure out the watcher’s hiding place.

The first clue wandered onto their path five metres later. Two sets of quarian footprints appeared at the base of a high ledge, travelling along beside it, no doubt waiting for an easy way up. Garrus faked a stumble and went down on one knee, using the moment to get a better look at the tracks. They seemed fairly fresh, a day old at most.

“Keelah, you’re clumsy,” Tali exclaimed, turning back. “Are you okay, or do you need me to carry you?” Her fists returned to her hips in a gesture so reminiscent of his mother that a pang of homesickness squeezed his chest tight for a moment.

Tali seemed to have decided to follow the Shepard method of running a crew, turning everyone into a big family. The band around his ribs squeezed harder for a couple of breaths then loosened.

Garrus drew her attention to the footprints then stood, shaking the rest off. “I’m fine, just wasn’t looking where I was going. I’ve lived on a space station for over a cycle, the floors are all flat there.” He looked up at the ledge. “We’re going to find somewhere a little saner to climb that, right?”

Tali gave him a quick nod and headed down the path. “It gets climbable up here a bit further.” She turned back. “Will you be okay, or do you want to hop on my back?” She crouched down a little.

“You’re cruel, Tali’Zorah vas Rannoch. Shepard taught you well.” He winked and hopped up ahead of her, using the moment of balancing himself with a hand on the ground to brush aside the prickly plant stalks. A thrill of mixed excitement and fear sizzled along his nerves. The tracks led up the hill away from the geth base, joining a much more travelled path. Along the path, geth footprints mixed with quarian, trampling the ground to where he didn’t need his flashlight to pick them out.

Picking his way along the ledge as he followed the trail, he felt Tali hurry up behind him, one small hand latching onto his armour. Garrus reached up and patted her fingers, suspecting she’d begun to feel the same dark pressure of unseen eyes. He turned his flashlight to the path, but aimed it high, past caring if his quarry knew he was tracking them. The growing darkness danced along every nerve, prying at them like crowbars dragging a stubborn nail screaming from the wood.

“Garrus—”

He threw up a hand to silence Tali as the dry trickle of falling sand and pebbles whispered up the trail from several metres ahead. Foot catching, Garrus hobble-stepped to a halt, shining the light ahead, but seeing nothing. He glanced toward the setting sun, the already weak rays washing the entire landscape in indigo with obsidian shadows. After a moment, he closed his eyes, straining to hear past the echo of his heartbeat bouncing off the inside of his skull.

Rannoch crouched beneath its pale sun like a sleeper long resigned to never waking, even the wind moved silently over the rock, no insects droning, no animals scurrying. For a moment, Garrus wondered if it shouldn’t have been left alone, a tomb not to be disturbed by running feet or
laughing children.

Tali pressed in against his hip. “Garrus?”

He glanced back, whispering, “Do you see anything? Hear anything?” Those pale gleams stared back, unblinking.

“I can feel something up there.” She pointed above them rather than ahead.

“Are there any predators we need to worry about?” he asked, mentally adding, ‘Other than the two legged, sapient kind’.

“No. The largest predator in this region eats small lizards and rodents.” She stepped even closer, her back pushing him ahead a half step. “Someone is watching us.”

“Yeah.” He nodded toward the path. “Let’s see where this trail goes.” He reached up for his assault rifle, but let his hand drop. With visibility worsening, he didn’t want to accidentally shoot someone because they appeared out of nowhere. Walking forward, he cursed the crunch of their boots on the stone, it echoed back from every direction, sounding like an army on the march. It would be hard to hear anyone approaching.

“Is it bad to miss the days of fifty geth coming at us with rifles roaring?” he whispered.

Tali grumbled. “No, this is giving me the creeps.”

Ten metres up the path, they stepped around a corner, the air shifting, wind picking up as it whistled down through the river valley and onto a wide, open area. With it, the breeze carried a new scent. Garrus inhaled, only needing a moment to identify the thin current of blood, urine, and feces—the stink of fear and death—that slipped beneath the spice and dust of the desert wind.

“Hold up, Tali.” Sharp talons pinched his gut, twisting it slowly as he raised the light, shining it around the area. Every single instinct he developed over his cycles at C-Sec started screaming at once. A half-dozen metres to his left, the beam gleamed slickly off long strings of black streaked across the rock as if thrown from a heavily laden paint brush. Gesturing for Tali to stay where she was and keep an eye on their six, Garrus moved in, taut with dread, reaching out into the murky half-light.

A talon touched the end of one of the sly cords, then raised to his nostrils. Definitely dried blood. A metre away, another reflection caught his eye. White bubbles lined the cracks in the rock delineating a wet patch where some sort of fluid had seeped into the soil. He crouched to gather some on a talon. Geth, and spilled only a couple of hours before.

“Over here,” Tali called softly, pointing to a dark patch of rock. “More blood.” Bending down, she picked up a short, heavy branch. One end bore the same stain, a dark crimson in the light.

Garrus opened his mouth to say something … maybe to ask why quarians and geth would be clubbing one another in the middle of nowhere … maybe to ask something a little more intelligent, but then a sound rolled down on them from above. Short, guttural screams and roars tumbled down the slope like boulders, crashing into Garrus. Choked and unnatural … almost mechanical, they rocked him with the unspeakable agony and horror that propelled each one. He backed away as they grew in volume, tearing into his mind and heart with savage claws. For more than a minute, the being howled, unformed words tangled into the wails of a thousand nightmares.

Then silence fell, a clean cut from a keen-edged axe dragging a groaning sigh of relief from Garrus’s throat. Relief turned to shame as he realized he’d been wishing for whomever it was to
die, just so long as the horrific, blood-curdling shrieking ended.

“Garrus?” Tali called, her voice tiny and frightened. “That couldn’t have been a person, could it? It had to be some sort of animal. No quarian … .”

He reached back, his eyes never leaving the top of the cliff. When she wrapped both hands around his talons, squeezing hard, he said, “Come on. It came from up there.” He released her, hearing the unmistakable sound of her shotgun as she pulled it from the small of her back. Well, at least one of them was ready with the bullets. He still didn’t feel certain enough of the situation to start discharging death.

Shining the flashlight ahead, he picked his way around the edge of the clearing and back onto the upward slope. Here and there, blood drips and spatters—both organic and synthetic—gleamed up at him from the rock and the prickly leaves of the cacti.

Just before they reached the top, they emerged onto a small ledge overlooking the clearing where they’d found the first blood and heard the terrible screams.

“It’s a cave,” Tali whispered, nudging Garrus with the butt of her shotgun. She nodded toward a dark tear in the fabric of the cliff. Edging that direction, she glanced back. “Want to take bets on something really horrible waiting for us in there?”

Not a bet he’d touch. He shook his head and turned to look her in the eye. “Don’t open fire unless we’re attacked, and then aim to disable rather than kill. Corpses can’t answer questions.” He took a couple of steps. “And turn on your flashlight.” When her light blinked on, shining just behind his, he walked to the cave entrance.

Damn, he hated walking into anything blind. He called up his smuggler’s room scanning program and pressed himself into cover against the rock, extending his arm into the space. It read as a short entrance tunnel that opened into a chamber that seemed fairly wide, maybe seven or eight metres. He signalled for Tali to stay along the right hand wall, and cover that side. A sharp nod answered him, and he headed in.

The tunnel darkened to pitch before it turned a sharp corner and light blinded him, shining in his eyes from large stand-mounted fixtures. Throwing up a hand, he found himself staring at absolute insanity. Two geth stood a couple of metres away, stumbling around to face the intruders. One reached behind it for a gun, bringing the weapon around slowly, fumbling with it a moment. A harsh cough from Tali’s shotgun and it crumpled. The second one stared at them for a moment, then its light went out and it fell over as well.

“What in the name of the ancestors?” Tali asked, edging further into the space. She stopped three steps in and let out a garbled moan. “How?” She retched and spun away, one hand slapping against the wall to support her as she bent over, wrapping her other arm around her belly.

Garrus understood her reaction. In the center of the space, under the lights, two quarian bodies lay on tables. At least, most of them was quarian. Tables next to the bodies held a wide array of surgical equipment and tools, all of them covered in blood. Once the shock broke, Garrus hurried forward to check if the two victims were alive. Neither was, and he counted it a mercy. Nearly a third of their bodies had been replaced with grafted on geth parts.

After a closer look, he suspected the first body of being their screamer. Their bottom jaw had been removed and replaced by tech … some sort of vocal synthesizer that could explain the horrible sounds. As well, his visor read the body temperature at normal. It couldn’t have been dead for longer than a few minutes.
He winced away from the brutalized quarians. Who or what could have butchered them that way? Finally allowing himself to turn his back to the carnage, he looked down at the two now nonfunctional geth. Both were the new platforms. Their chassis were covered in blood, but … . In the corner next to the tables, a pile of partial geth platforms lay heaped in a jumbled pile. Garrus counted six. All of them new platforms. That accounted for eight of the missing platforms, but what of the runtimes?

What the hell had been going on in that cave?

Swallowing the urge to throw up, he reached up to his radio. He needed to get everything packaged up in stasis containers. Dr. Chakwas could autopsy the quarians, and they could take the geth back to Omega … try to figure out what the hell was going on.

“Tali,” he said, his voice cracking. He cleared his throat. “Call back to Base One, get them to do a head count. We need to know who these people are.”

Spirits, I could use your insight right now, Kahri.

Instead, he opened a channel to get everybody in motion.

* * * * *

“Neural activity rising. No, not so fast. Keep an eye on her sedative levels. Can’t risk her going into shock.”

“We’re showing rapid eye movement.” Delighted laughter and a single, resonating clap of hands. “She’s dreaming. Damn it, she’s actually dreaming.”

“Jane Gwendolyn Shepard, what are you doing?”

The serving wench’s reflection passed through the background of the full length mirror, but Jane did her best to ignore the interruption. After all, she was Captain Jane Shepard of the pirate ship Doom Bringer. Small things like nagging wenches meant nothing to the scourge of the seven seas. Besides, she’d just taken a fine beaver-felt tricorn off the captain of a british ship of the line. Running her fingertips along the brim, she tipped her head and gave herself a rakish smile. Stunning.

The brigand returned, hands on her hips, mouth set in the ‘I’m two seconds from starting to yell’ position. “You have studying to do, young lady.” The wench turned away, but then spun back. “Is that my garden hat? What have you done to it?” She snatched the tricorn right off Shepard’s head. “Staples? You stapled my hat?” The wench stormed off, taking the hat with her.

“Woman! Bring back that hat! It’s the finest beaver!” When she received no reply, the fearsome buccaneer turned back to the mirror, admiring the rest of her regalia. Before her, skinny arms and legs clad in overalls and a striped t-shirt transformed into muscled limbs outfitted in velvet, leather, and gold braid. She dusted off the wide lapels of the velvet jacket. “Very nice.”

Brandishing what appeared to be a feather duster to the uneducated eye, Shepard sliced the air, the polished steel of her cutlass gleaming, its hilt wrapped in gold wire and studded with jewels. “Do any of the rest of ye scurvy dogs dare to side with the woman? If so, step forward and prove your challenge against the skill of me blade.” She laughed as the first mate stepped forward. “Ah,
Williams, I knew ye wanted me ship. Too bad she’ll never be yours!” Riposting, parrying, feinting with nimble grace, she fenced her opponent to the ground. With a decisive thrust, she stood over the vanquished mutineer. “Anyone else?”

“What are you doing?” The mutinous wench returned. “Put this all away where you found it and get to your studying.”

“What am I doing?” Shepard asked and crowed. “Why ye scurvy, underhanded bilge rat. How dare ye question your captain? I be the pirate queen of the caribbean seas, the scourge of three navies, the true ruler of the oceans, and I’ll never bow down to the likes of ye.”

“You’re the ... what have you done to my duster?” The woman snatched Shepard’s cutlass from her hand. “Go! Study! Now!”

Chains wrapped around the pirate queen’s arms and legs. “I swear to ye. I’ll escape this bondage and wreak bloody vengeance upon ye all!”

The wench cuffed Shepard in the back of the head. “I’ve had about enough out of you today, pirate queen.” A hand between her shoulder blades shoved Shepard out into the kitchen and into a chair. “Now, the asari transcendentalists ... .”

The mutineers tied a massive book around Shepard’s neck, weighing her down with yards of chain and a couple of really ugly sculptures. “So, it’s to be the plank, is it?” she said, her voice a low growl.

“Paintings, now.”

Letting out a long, defeated sigh, the pirate queen sank beneath the waves. “Fine.” She looked down at the first page. “Time Bends, the third painting by Lanail F’aril,” Shepard recited, keeping her voice as monotone as humanly possible. It amounted to a small protest, but a protest nonetheless. “The painting was praised as being one of the first non-religious depictions of the asari place in the cosmos.”

“Value?”

“It is insured for 2.8 billion credits, but has no sale value as it is housed in the Thessian National Archives in Armali.”

“Very good. Next painting.”

Shepard turned the page in her mother’s massive agent scrapbook. As she looked down at the painting, pain bloomed behind her eyes, as hot and fierce as if someone had poured molten steel into her skull. “Mom?” She clapped a hand over her forehead, the pain making her retch.

“What is it, Jane? Let’s just get this over with. Why do you have to make everything so difficult?”

A tickle under her nose diverted Shepard’s attention from her splitting head and rolling belly. When she reached up to scratch it, her hand came away bloody. “Mommy?”

“Put her all the way back under. Now! I told you to watch the sedative levels. You let her come too far up.”

“She’s fine. The levels will normalize.”

“She’s bleeding from her nose and ears, on what planet is that normal? Do what you’re bloody
Mass Effect - Future Complex Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

What is happening on Rannoch?

Garrus walked to the edge of the escarpment and looked down over the city, his mandibles fluttering in a warm smile as he saw the lights glowing in his parent’s domin. He needed to go home when he finished on Rannoch and Tuchanka. Lowering himself to sit in the grass, he watched the city below with a homesick stare. Cipritine was beautiful at night, a vast sea of lights and flowing lines.

“Guess this means I managed to fall asleep,” he whispered, hoping for an answer, but not expecting one. His mandibles flicked when only the silence and distant sounds of the city replied. “Why did you leave, Kahri? I don’t care if things never grow past where we are.”

“You need to wake up.”

Garrus spun toward the voice, hope exploding firework-hot in his chest only to die. Of course she wasn’t there; Shepard said she was leaving, and she kept her word. He needed to accept it, as impossible as it seemed. He just didn’t understand why. It didn’t make any sense. Did she think she could force him to move on? A yawning hole opened up inside him as he tried to imagine living the next ten decades or so without her.

Do you love her enough to last a century? What about everything you wanted to have with her? Just going to give all that up?

He shoved the doubt aside. It was just the exhaustion talking. After a couple nights of decent sleep, he’d be back to his old self. Besides, his odds of living to reach old age worsened all the time. Once the Reapers descended, he’d find his way back to Shepard’s arms eventually.

“You need to wake up, Garrus.” This time, the soft whisper of breath caressed his neck.

He closed his eyes and turned toward the voice, smiling as soft lips kissed his mouth. “Shepard?”

“Wake up. You need to wake up, love.” The lips withdrew.

Garrus opened his eyes to a darkened room. Even with a wide shaft of light shining across the floor it took him a couple of breaths to recognize the house he and his team had been given on Rannoch. He scowled, leaning up a little. Why had Shepard told him to wake up? Was she just trying to torture him? It wasn’t enough that she deserted his dreams, she had to keep him from getting any sleep as well?

His breath caught as he heard the whisper of fabric against stone from behind him. Shifting to look out into the other room, he saw Martin sitting at the table and Kasumi sleeping in a reclining chair by the fireplace. Who was in the room with him? He flipped over, throwing the covers straight off the bed as he leaped to his feet.

A slim figure hung most of the way out the window. Lunging for its foot, he managed to just catch a corner of their cloak, tearing it loose. The intruder fell out the window, and by the time Garrus
made it there and looked out, they had disappeared into the shadows.

“Who the … ?” Garrus closed and latched the window, then turned to look over the room. Martin hadn’t alerted to their presence, and all the evidence from the cave was in the main room with him. What had the person wanted?

“You need to wake up,” Shepard’s voice whispered through the hush.

A pale red glow bathed the room. He blinked. Still there.

Garrus scowled and bent down. A red light glowed across the floor. Grabbing his blankets, he threw them back up onto the bed. He lowered himself onto all fours, bending down so his mandible pressed against the floor, and looked under the frame. As he watched, the number on the small container changed from 2:48 to 2:47, Garrus froze just long enough to register: bomb. Snatching it out from under the bed, he leaped up and sprinted out of the room. He hurdled the crates and stasis units, hitting the door control so hard that his wrist popped.

“Come on!” he hollered at it as it crept open, squeezing out as soon as he could get his cowl through. Adrenaline pounded through his veins, pushing back the exhaustion and granting him speed he hadn’t tapped in a decade. Watching the timer, he ran until it clicked over to 0:45 then threw it as far into the desert as he could.

Timer or not, the second it hit the ground, it exploded, the blast wave knocking him back almost ten metres, and pepperling him with shrapnel.

Garrus laid there, his hearing ringing, eyesight fuzzy, his entire front side stinging. “The perfect end to the day.” A long, weary groan dragged out of his throat as he rolled onto his side and lifted up onto an elbow.

“Garrus!” Martin and Kasumi raced toward him, the former sliding to a stop and crouching at Garrus’s side while the latter continued on to the blast site.

“What the hell was that?”

Garrus held out a hand. “I believe it’s known as a bomb. Luckily, it was a small one.” He shifted around a bit. “Help me up.”

“Good thing you’re a light sleeper.” Martin crossed to the center and crouched down. “Why, though?” He twisted, looking around, the area visible in the moonlight. “It wasn’t big enough to take out the whole building. The evidence, Kasumi and myself would have come through, especially with it under the bed.”

Garrus nodded and leaned a hand on his hip. “It was meant for me. They didn’t want the evidence destroyed. They’re worried I’m going to cover it up. If I’m killed or badly wounded, it draws
attention to the evidence.” He shook his head and turned back toward Base One. “I wish I’d gotten a decent look at whoever planted it.”

Martin stood. “You didn’t get anything?”

“A two-toed foot hanging through my window by the knee.” He shrugged. “I grabbed the cloak they were wearing, but that’s it. Could have been quarian or geth.”

He glanced back, looking for Kasumi, but she’d cloaked. As he clicked over from sleep-deprived bombing victim to general, he walled away his reactions. Fear and shock, even the comfort of Shepard’s voice calling him from sleep, pushed aside to make way for logical and reasoned action. The evidence had to be removed from the planet, and he needed to make sure everyone on Rannoch remained secure during his absence.

“Martin, get the shuttle,” Garrus called. “We’ll load the evidence up now. I’ll grab Tali and we’ll head to Dholen, have the Normandy pick us up there before continuing on to Zaherin. The Archangel frigates can report to you, here. The Passch will stay in orbit if you need it.”

Lifting a hand to contact Tali, Garrus saw the quarians hurrying through the moonlit village, no doubt awakened by the explosion. Tali and Kal pushed to the head of the group, jogging toward him.

Garrus stopped and turned to Martin. “You and Kasumi will stay here, keep going through the data of Legion’s last whereabouts. He left from that upper door for a reason. If we’re going to find him, we need to know why. Find out.” He turned toward the house, climbing the short slope up to the door. “You’ll be in charge of the Archangel forces while I’m gone. If it looks like shooting is going to start, park our ships between them and call me. Don’t start any wars. I’d better be back in a couple of days at the outside.”

“Yes, sir,” Martin called as he dashed off to get the shuttle. “Kasumi, with me.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming,” the thief grumbled from somewhere to Garrus’s left. “Just had to go and leave him in charge, didn’t you, General?”

“Behave yourself, and back him up,” Garrus replied, snapping his mandibles tight on a smile.

Tali ran up, sliding to a stop a couple metres away, and just stared at Garrus long enough to make him uncomfortable. After maybe twenty seconds, she shook herself and looked up into his eyes. “What happened? You’re bleeding everywhere.”

Realizing he was standing in the middle of Base One wearing just his undershorts, Garrus spun around and hurried up into the house. “It was a small bomb. Someone put it under my bed. Luckily, I woke up while they were still sneaking out and found it.” He continued on into the bedroom to get dressed.

“A bomb?” Chair legs squeaked across the floor as Tali flopped onto one of the seats. “A bomb under your bed. So, they were trying to kill you?”

“Yes,” he replied, shrugging into the light tunic he wore beneath his armour. “You and I are going to take off as soon as we get the shuttle loaded with the evidence. We can rendezvous with the Normandy in Dholen.” He looked out the door, meeting her gaze. “Are you packed to spend a couple of days away? Got everything arranged? If not, better get to it. I want to be on our way within the next ninety minutes.”

“Okay.” She pushed off the table to stand. “I’ll be ready to go.”
Garrus wedged himself between the pallet of evidence and the shuttle’s bulkhead to hit the vidscreen control and activate the forward cameras. He let out a heavy breath. “Damn, she looks beautiful right now,” he said, watching the Normandy as the frigate lowered the ramp to let them dock. Backing out of the tight space, he glanced over at Tali. “I’ll be glad to be aboard her again, even if just for a couple of days.”

The quarian just nodded. Hunched in her chair, arms wrapped tight around herself, she sat shrouded in a heavy miasma of misery. The weak slump of her shoulders and the way her head hung like an impossible weight felt like a tear in the fabric of reality, a small piece of some backwards universe intruding into the reality where Tali’Zorah vas Rannoch bounded through life full of energy and fire.

Shuddering, he rubbed his hands together, suddenly chilled. “Are you cold? Must feel like a refrigerator in here after being on Rannoch for so long.” He sat next to her and put his arm around her shoulders, for comfort more than warmth. His armour pretty much negated the second. “It should be warmer on the Normandy.”

Shaking her head, she leaned into him. “No, I’m not cold. Well, not enough to mention, anyway. It’s just … .” She reached out and placed a hand on one of the stasis units. “Did I cause this, Garrus? Was it too soon?” As she continued, her voice barely registered over the shuttle engine. “Is it the geth? Did they lure us in, or did the heretics make them turn on us?”

A silence lapsed between them that grew heavier by the second, and Garrus knew that, in those moments, Tali forced herself to look into the worst, ugliest parts of who she was and what it meant. He wished he could spare her that long stare into her own darkness, but the questions needed to be dragged out into the light and asked.

A heavy shudder ran down her spine, and her voice dropped even lower. “What if my people did this, Garrus? I know some of them are afraid that the geth are setting some sort of trap for us. I’ve even heard people say that it’s an insult to accept our home from the geth, to live there as equals. They believe we should go to war, take back Rannoch and make the geth servants again.” The silver reflections of her eyes stared into his. “What if my own people committed these atrocities because I’m pushing for peace and resettlement?”

He squeezed her tight, proud of her courage and honesty. “First of all, whoever did this, did it because of their own messed up agenda, Tali. None of it is your fault.” A talon jumped up between them to halt her next words before they made it out. “You’ve put yourself on the line from the very beginning to give your people back their homeworld. This is just the result of sapient beings having free will.” He patted her shoulder and released her as the shuttle landed inside the Normandy’s cargo bay. “All we can do is make sure the minority don’t derail what is best for the majority, right?”

After a moment, she nodded and straightened a little. “If I give up and let them remove us, I’m letting everyone down. I can’t do that. We can live in peace with the geth. I know we can.”

“That’s more like it.” He stood and opened the hatch. “Come on, let’s go make sure the quarians get back their homeworld.”
Nihlus stepped into the shuttle as soon as the hatch raised. The Spectre gripped Garrus’s shoulders, looking him over with an intense, hawkish stare. “Spirits, you look even worse in person.” After a moment, he looked past Garrus at the pallet of crates. “What’s all of this?”

Garrus smiled and gripped his fratrín’s shoulders, the embrace settling something deep in his gut. He’d come to rely on Nihlus over the months, the Spectre a volatile counterpoint to Garrus’s insistence on reason and planning. As they’d supported, bullied, inspired, and argued, they’d become brothers in truth, and although he’d never admit it, Garrus missed Nihlus while the other torín went about Spectre business.

“I’ll explain everything in a minute,” he said and clapped Nihlus on the back. “I’m glad to see you. It’s been a hell of a week.”

Releasing the Spectre and looking out the door, Garrus called, “Permission to come aboard, Captain?” He reached out to take Anderson’s offered hand as he stepped down into the Normandy’s cargo bay. Giving the captain a warm smile, he said, “It’s been too long.”

“Permission granted. Welcome aboard, General, and yes, it has.” Anderson smiled at Tali and extended his hand. “Good to see you again, Tali’Zorah.”

“Thank you for coming out here to help us, Captain,” she answered, quickly sidestepping out of the way. Looking over at Garrus then back to Anderson, she said, “Is it all right if I hide out in Liara’s old lab, Captain?”

“Of course. The cots are still in there, and there should be blankets in the crates if you need to get some sleep,” Anderson replied. “If you need anything, just let Kaidan know.”

“Thank you.” She turned and hurried toward the elevator.

“So, this is … ?” Nihlus asked again, peering into the top crate. “Blood-covered rocks. You always get me the nicest gifts.”

Garrus spun back. “It’s crime scene evidence, including two bodies that I could really use Dr. Chakwas’s help with.” He glanced back at Anderson. “If you would be willing to lend her talents to the cause, Captain?”

Anderson scowled, but nodded. “Whatever you need, although I presume an explanation is forthcoming?”

“Thank you.” Garrus let out a long breath, sagging a little. “And yes, I’ll tell you both everything in exchange for a hot cup of amarceru and the use of a rack for a few hours.”

Nihlus ran the pad of his thumb talon over the worst of Garrus’s blast damage, a long furrow a chunk of the bomb had carved out of his crest. “Your explanation will include this?” Lifting a brow plate, he leaned in, forcing Garrus to meet his stare.

“Yes. Just cut me a little slack, Nihlus. I haven’t slept in days and now, I’ve been blown up.” He staggered toward the elevator, needing to collapse into a chair at the table in the galley. “Could you take the bodies up to the doctor, please?”

“Yeah,” the Spectre called. “I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

Garrus ended up drinking three cups of amarceru while he brought Nihlus and Anderson up to speed. Nihlus even managed to force some eggs and drellak roast into him, but pretty much the second he finished eating, unconsciousness started to suck him under. Adding to the full belly, the
relief of finally being able to share some of the burden and insanity of the situation on Rannoch had his eyes preparing for rebellion if he kept them open any longer.

“Take my rack, son,” Anderson offered, startling him back to full consciousness with a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll have Alenko find you a couple of pillows and blankets. Someone should have brought your footlocker up already.” He glanced over his shoulder at the lieutenant, but Kaidan was already in motion.

Garrus nodded, too tired to argue, and far too tired to want to cram himself into one of the crew bunks just to spend his few precious hours of sleep time listening to a dozen people snoring, talking in their sleep, and passing gas. Besides, maybe Shepard would be drawn back to where they’d actually spent their nights in one another’s arms.

That decided it, and he nodded. “Thank you, Anderson. I appreciate that.” He squeezed Nihlus’s arm. “See you in a few hours.”

Faced with actually entering what he still thought of as Shepard’s quarters, Garrus hesitated, needing to take a deep, steadying breath before he palmed the door control. When it opened, he stepped right through, not wanting to draw Anderson or Nihlus’s attention, but once inside, he stalled just far enough over the threshold that the door closed.

Dear spirits, almost nothing had changed. But for her missing scent and a double picture frame sitting on the table next to the bed, she could have stepped out a minute before. He stared at one of the photos in the frame, the brilliant, mischievous smile on her sharp, pretty face freezing his talons to the ground. She was so beautiful, the image revealing how much she had truly faded, even in his dreams.

Kaidan broke the deadlock between Garrus’s brain and his legs, his knock ringing metallic and heavy. Garrus stepped aside to let the LT in.

“Here you go,” Kaidan said, setting a couple of blankets and two pillows down. “I’ve got your foot locker outside.” He strode out, returned a moment later to set the chest down at the end of the bed. He straightened, his eyes lingering on Shepard’s pictures. “You sure you’ll be okay in here?” he asked, his voice soft. “I’m sure we can—”

“It’s fine, Kaidan, thanks,” Garrus said, cutting across the LT’s concern. He nodded toward the door. “See you in a couple of hours.”

“Sure thing, General.” He gave Garrus a crooked smile. “It’s good to have you and Tali back, even if for a couple of days. We’ve missed you.” Without looking back, he headed to the door and out.

Doing his best to avoid the beckoning pictures, Garrus spread a blanket out over the bed and tossed the pillows over onto the far side. Peeling off his armour distracted him for another couple of minutes before all that remained was to lay down, cover himself up and try to sleep. For a moment, he considered folding up the frame and laying it down, but his throat closed at the thought. Instead, he stretched out along his side of the horrendous bed, his pillows hugged tight against his chest and fell asleep staring into the bright emerald of Shepard’s eyes.

505 Days ASD

Garrus woke with a start, the mattress moving under him. Halfway through leaping out of bed to deal with another assailant, he recognized Nihlus and let himself flop back down onto his pillows.
“You shouldn’t do that to people who’ve recently awoken to bombs being planted under their bed.”

The Spectre nodded. “It’s happened to me a few times.” He waggled his head back and forth a little. “Well, if you count grenades.” The Spectre chuckled and turned, drawing his knee up onto the bed. “If you’re trying to change the galaxy and people aren’t trying to blow you up, you’re doing something wrong, Garrus.”

Garrus settled his pillows back between his head and cowl. “What time is it?” Knowing Nihlus, they had hours yet before their rendezvous with the flotilla. He studied the other torin, looking for signs of wear and tear. For the most part, Nihlus had rallied, but between his drinking and working almost constantly, Garrus worried about burnout. Still, the Spectre looked good, clear-eyed and focused.

Nihlus looked over at the pictures, going rigid for a second before letting out a long breath. “We have three hours before our meeting with the Admiralty Board,” he answered. His hand reached out a few centimetres, then hesitated for a good thirty seconds before closing the rest of the distance to lift Shepard in reverent hands. “Huh,” he said, chuffing softly, “they’re very good images.”

Garrus nodded. He hadn’t looked at the second one for longer than a second. It showed a teenage Shepard. Somehow it seemed to him that version of Shepard belonged to Anderson’s memories—looking at it would be intruding—so he’d focused on the one who belonged to his.

“I came in early because I wanted to sit down and check in before we go up against the quarian government. I’m worried about you.” His mandibles dropped and he shook his head, a determined gesture that Garrus knew Nihlus meant as a warning to not try to slip any bullshit past him. “You look like hell, Garrus, and not the got blown up sort of hell. What’s going on?”

Garrus stared into Nihlus’s eyes for long seconds before he let out a resigned sigh. “Shepard left a few nights ago. She just said that the time had come and disappeared.” As he said the words, he knew how they sounded.

Nihlus nodded, a low thread of empathy running beneath his words as he said, “I’m sorry, Garrus.”

Garrus chuffed. “I looked for her, but when she decides something, it’s decided.” He winced again. Anyone else would be calling up mental institutions on their omnitool. Nihlus understood, though. After all, much of his attachment to Shepard stemmed from fifty thousand cycle old memories.

“That part of you is ready to start grieving and move on.” Nihlus held up both hands, stilling Garrus’s protest before it began. “I know, you swore to be faithful to her memory, but you also know she’d never want that for you.”

Garrus leaned up on an elbow and laughed, a bitter sound that tasted like sulfur. “Are you moving on, Nihlus? Are you out dating or sleeping with anyone special?” The second the words came out, he wished he could suck them back in. Spirits, he could be an ass.

The Spectre just shook his head. “No, I feel like I’ve had the great love of my life thanks to the beacon. But you’re a young torin at the beginning of discovering all that, Garrus.” He smiled, a nostalgic smile that set off a flare of jealousy deep in Garrus’s gut. “Shepard would want you to live fully, and now the part of you that clung to her is ready to start down that path.”

Garrus threw back the blanket and sat up. “I don’t have the strength to do that, Nihlus. I’m worn to the bone.” He raked his talons over his fringe and rubbed the stiff muscles in the back of his neck. “Trying to build Archangel, trying to pull off the impossible every single day … it’s scraped me
paper thin. With Shepard, whether she was a spirit or my overworked imagination, I could rest. I needed that, and now it’s gone.”

Nihlus reached out and laid his hand on Garrus’s head. “I know. We’ll figure it out. I know you need to control everything—that you feel like you’re letting her down unless you’re doing it all—but maybe it’s time to let me and the others take some of the burden. Archangel is alive and well, Garrus. She’s sailing on her own. We can help.”

Garrus leaned into the contact for a moment before pulling away and getting up. “One thing at a time. First we’ve got to figure out what the hell is happening on Rannoch.” As he stood and stretched, the weight settled around his neck once more. As much as Nihlus and the others tried to talk about his needing to delegate, the promise had been his. The responsibility was his. The weight was his to bear.

“Dr. Chakwas wants to speak with you once you’re awake and functional,” Nihlus said, not entirely succeeding in keeping the resigned disapproval out of his subvocals.

Garrus had always wondered what it would be like to have an older brother. Nihlus was teaching him.

“Then Tali, you, and I need to sit down and decide how we’re going to approach the Admiralty Board. We can’t hide what you found, but with the way you found it, if we don’t handle things delicately, they’ll be bombing the planet before we can get back.” He stared at the pictures in his hand for another few seconds, then replaced the frame on the table.

Garrus watched the door close behind the Spectre, a slow ache spreading through his chest, but not for himself. He’d thought Nihlus weak because of his drinking, but at least the Spectre lived in the harsh glare of reality. Pushing Shepard and all his associated emotional baggage to the back of his head, he grabbed his blankets and started folding. Without Shepard, work would prove his salvation.

Once he’d minimized his presence in Anderson’s quarters, he made his way to the head, then to medbay.

“Ah, Garrus, good,” the doctor called, jumping up from her desk.

Garrus nodded. “Have you found anything, Doc?”

“Quite a lot, actually, although I’ve just started the in depth post mortems.” She walked to the foot of the first table. “I don’t know that I’ve ever had to deal with anything quite this disturbing.” Dr. Chakwas cleared her throat and held her hand out to one of the two victims. “I have no idea what the purpose of all this was, Garrus. Or at least, nothing more than guesses.”

She opened a file on her omnitool. “The female was dead when the parts and pieces of geth were attached. There is some blood loss just from the massive trauma, but its passive. Her heart wasn’t pumping.” Letting out a long, agonized sigh, she stepped up to the end of the next bed. “The male was not so lucky. He awoke at some point, tried to move … there are signs of the implanted tech
tearing away throughout his body.” Shaking her head, she patted the dead quarian’s foot absently, as if she could comfort him.

“So, he woke up before he was finished?” Garrus shuddered. “We heard him scream.”

“No, Garrus, that’s just it.” The doctor met his eyes, her expression grim. “He was never meant to work. None of the attachments were functional. Saren had a geth prosthetic that was very functional. This … .” She gave a helpless little shrug, her mouth working trying to find the right words. “Near as I can tell, this was just meant to horrify.”

Fury exploded in his gut, his vision flashing white stars streaking across a wash of cobalt, and he stumbled beneath the weight of fatigue and dizziness. Catching himself against the bed, he let his head hang for a second as he reined the rage in. “This was staged?” he asked without looking up. “Someone did this to these people for no reason?”

“Other than to incite that reaction right there,” she said quietly, reaching out to squeeze his arm. “Tali said someone is trying to provoke war?”

He nodded and shoved himself onto his feet. “Yeah.” Taking a couple of steps toward the door, he policed his horror and revulsion. He needed to keep his cool if he was going to figure it all out. “Is there any evidence that leads you to believe that this was done by either geth or quarian hands?”

The doctor turned and walked up alongside the bed. “The incisions are precise, methodical, and professional despite the results. The individual who did this is versed in quarian anatomy and physiology, and has experience either in surgery or dissection.” She shrugged. “But I can’t say that rules out the geth. Their platforms are capable of delicate and precise work. With the right data, they could easily have done this.”

Garrus nodded, and let out a short, heavy breath. “Thanks, Karin. Let me know if you find anything that will help me find the bastards who did this.”

“I will.”

He turned toward the lab, a supernova of panic looming on the horizon, sweeping toward Rannoch at light speed. Whomever it was spoiling for war, it seemed that war was exactly what they were going to get.
Mass Effect - Future Complex Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Summary

Meeting the Admiralty Board and perhaps a break in the case of the missing geth.

Chapter Notes

There are going to be three updates this week. Today, Thursday and Saturday, for N7 Day.

Vastator -- The turian version of the bogeyman. In ancient mythology, the vastator crept through sleeping armies, threatening or tempting the soldiers to see who would turn their back on honour and their brothers/sisters. Anyone who gave in to the Vastator was immediately consumed.

Trirco -- The most notable of the turian trickster spirits.

“Tali’Zorah vas Rannoch nar Rayya asking permission to dock with the Rayya.”

Garrus watched over Tali’s shoulder as she spoke over Joker’s. Despite wringing her hands almost constantly—only stopping to cross her arms and pace a few steps—her request came out strong, decisive.

“Our system has your ship flagged as Alliance. Verify,” the stiff voice of the controller called back, his tones clipped.

Although Garrus could pass the man’s attitude off as efficient or business-like, it unsettled him. It felt as though they were being brought in as enemies rather than allies. He tried to shake it off, to remain open and calm. Approaching the Admiralty Board as an adversary wouldn’t smooth the process or help him get their cooperation for his investigation.

Tali sighed, but her shoulders squared, her spine stiffening instead of softening. "After time adrift among open stars, along tides of light and through shoals of dust, I have returned to where I began."

A small, wry twitch of his mandibles answered the quarian’s resilience. A couple of hours worth of sleep and she’d sprung back, biting a little harder, but with her usual energy and guts.

“Verified,” the controller said simply.

“We need a security and quarantine team to meet us. Our ship is not clean,” Tali replied, her voice becoming just as curt and cold as the one on the other side of the comm.

“Understood. Approach exterior docking cradle 21. Do not disembark until the security team clears you and your escort arrives.”
Escort. Garrus looked to Tali, using her reaction as a gauge of how concerned he needed to be, but she didn’t move other than to give the controller an icy, “Acknowledged.” She turned toward Garrus, practically vibrating with indignance. “If the frost in the air is any indication, we’re in for an uphill battle,” she said, striding past him and out of the cockpit.

“No, don’t worry about me,” Joker called over his shoulder. “I’ll just connect all the calls and fly the ship and coordinate all the decon. Can I wash your undies? Sort your socks? Anyone who hasn’t called home to mom? My pleasure.”

Garrus chuckled and patted the pilot’s shoulder. “You’re underappreciated. Get over it.”

The pilot winced. “Ouch. Don’t sugar coat it or anything, General.”

Garrus followed Tali. “So, I wasn’t imagining the extra layer of attitude there?” he asked as he fell in step beside her.

“Since we’re expected, I wasn’t anticipating that level of suspicion, but this is an Alliance ship.” She shrugged.

“So, it might be nothing,” Garrus filled in, stepping ahead a little to look down at her face, hoping for some hint through the mask, “but your gut is saying it is.”

Tali paused, but didn’t even tic in his direction. “We’ll find out, I suppose.”

“Garrus,” Joker’s voice snapped off Garrus’s next thought. “You have a call on the QEC. It’s Weaver.”

Hope broke through Garrus’s growing dread. Maybe they’d managed to track Legion. Halfway down the CIC, the darker possibilities registered. Maybe the quarians or geth had fired opening shots. He sped up, running the rest of the way to the comm room and down to hit the control connecting the call.

“Martin,” he said, listening for the sounds of bombardment in the background. “Are you and Kasumi all right?”

The kid nodded. “Better than. Kasumi rigged me a cloak. Not quite as good as hers, but good enough.” Preening, he said, “I like it; I’m considering switching over to infiltration.”

Garrus sighed. “Martin, we’ve arrived at the flotilla. Brevity would be appropriate.” Despite trying for gruff and forbidding, a smile tugged at his mandibles. “Why did you call?”

“Kasumi and I staked out the upper entrance. We were there about twelve hours when Arox came out and headed off into the desert alone. He was scanning, like he was tracking a signal. After hiking up into the mountains for nearly two hours, he found a transmitter.” Martin started acting out the story as he told it, hands gesturing wildly with his excitement. “He’d just started investigating the transmitter when a shuttle came out of nowhere—it was cloaked! Completely cloaked!— and eight people in black robes jumped out, grabbed him and took off.” He held up a foreign-looking datapad. “He dropped this. It looks like he was tracking Reaper signals within geth transmissions.”

“Did you get a look at the one in robes? Enough to tell me quarian or geth? And the shuttle?” Garrus held off on the celebration. “Any idea where it went?”

The kid shook his head, his expression falling for a half second. “Negative on the ID. Their entire heads were covered and they moved fast. They weren’t playing around or doing the snatch and
grab for the first time. They moved as a single, well disciplined unit.” He grinned. “Now as for the shuttle … .” Martin rooted in one of the pouches on his belt and pulled out a card of trackers.

“Please, Garrus. I graduated from the school of slap trackers on everything and always carry four days of rations years before you did. I’m on the Passch right now. We tracked the shuttle to the relay. That was a no brainer, because it’s a primary, so we jumped into Dholen and tracked the shuttle to Haestrom.” He stuffed the trackers back in his pouch. “What do you want us to do?”

“Wait. Keep the Passch in Dholen, full stealth. Scan for Reaper signatures, heretic geth signatures … communications from everyone.” Stripping off his glove, he scratched at his temple. “Damn. Haestrom is our biggest ship manufacturing facility.” Running through scenarios, he replaced the glove, pacing back and forth across the pad a couple of times before he turned back. “I can’t do anything from here. Keep an eye on everything, but unless missiles start flying, don’t move. Make sure Kal’Reegar and the rest of the Archangel frigates keep in touch hourly. I want to know if anything in those two systems sneezes.”

He heard the door open behind him and glanced back. “I’ve got to go meet with the Admiralty Board. I’ll be in touch as soon as I’m out, but if anything happens, don’t wait. Call.”

Martin saluted. “Yes, sir. Weaver out.”

Garrus returned the salute with one starched crisp by the chance he could end this without blood being spilled. He turned to face Nihlus. “We’ve caught a break.”

“Our escort has arrived, as has the team to decon us.” The Spectre winced. “Took three months to get the reek of their decon agent out of my armour the last time.” He nodded toward the door, a sliver of impatience embedded in his stare. “We’d better go. You can fill me in on the way.”

“Okay.” Garrus followed, retrieving his helmet from the cockpit before following Tali and Nihlus into the Normandy’s airlock.

After their very thorough decontamination, the trio stepped through into the docking tube and made their way down to another airlock. On the other side, a quarian reception committee awaited them, eight Marines in a one-metre flanking spread. Never a good sign.

A single male at the center stepped forward and held his hand out to Tali. “Welcome back to the Rayya, Tali’Zorah. I’m just sorry it’s under such troubling circumstances.”

The weight of those words tore down through Garrus’s belly, landing hard at the bottom. His gaze slid over the people in the dock. Every single one bore arms, and every single one jumped at every move the three of them made. The atmosphere pressed in on him from all sides, not quite heavy enough to be suffocating, but definitely uncomfortably close.

“Thank you, Captain Danna.” Garrus didn’t miss the Marines stiffening as Tali stepped forward, taking the quarian captain’s hand for a moment before retreating. She swept a hand toward he and Nihlus in turn. “Captain Kar’Danna, this is General Garrus Vakarian and Spectre Nihlus Kryik.”

Garrus accepted the captain’s invitation to shake his hand. “Excuse my saying this, but the armed reception committee and your greeting seem fairly ominous, Captain.” The weight began to somersault, tangling itself into his entrails.

The captain replied only by stepping to the side and indicating the way forward with a beckoning arm. “The Admiralty Board and Rannoch Resettlement Committee are waiting.” He cut a glance at Tali as he fell in stride beside her, leaving Garrus and Nihlus to follow. The Marines brought up the rear, the hands on their guns far too twitchy for Garrus to feel good about having the weapons
A moment of awkward silence stretched long and thin, their footsteps ringing hollow and metallic on the deck plating, before Kar’Danna spoke again. “The quarians you reported killed on the surface … the committee hasn’t released their names. It wasn’t anyone from the Rayya?”

A lilting, pained sigh formed Tali’s only answer to the question for so long that Garrus thought she didn’t intend to answer it. But then a tiny lip smack announced her words. “They were not from the expeditionary team, Captain. We are all accounted for and quite alive. We don’t know who those people were.” Her shoulders rolled in a small shrug.

Garrus felt a specter of fear murmured through the Marines behind them. It launched the dread in his belly, sending it ricocheting through him like a large caliber bullet.

“How did the geth take our people right off our ships?” one of them whispered.

Garrus blanched at the question, knowing that it would echo through every corridor in each of the flotilla’s vessels within the hour. Accusations of people being geth agents wouldn’t be far behind. Damn, he wished Tali hadn’t given Danna an answer. They’d just played right into their adversary’s hands, and it was a stunningly brilliant move. If the geth were the villains, they’d just devastated the quarian’s sense of security and morale. Within days, the witch hunt would begin, leaving them weak and vulnerable.

On the other hand, if the quarians had orchestrated everything, they’d just turned the geth into the Vastator, setting everyone up to start jumping at shadows until they all screamed for war just to kill the uncertainty. Not to mention that the threat of infiltrators facilitated the easy disposal of anyone who opposed the war. Accusing people of being geth agents would go a long way in an atmosphere riddled with enough paranoia.

As the ground beneath Garrus’s feet shifted—solid stone turning to heavy sand that quaked under his tread—he wished he’d turned the Normandy toward Dholen and Martin’s heretic geth lead. A specter loomed over him, whispering that before the day ended, he’d be up to his chin in quicksand without a rescue line in sight.

The sand turned to bog as Captain Danna opened the door to a large garden area, half of which looked like a sunken amphitheatre. At the bottom, standing on a raised platform, four members of the Admiralty Board waited, while off to the side, seven quarians sat behind a narrow table. Even though all of them were masked, their stares impacted like icy slaps.

Garrus cleared his throat, his mind racing. He needed to think of something to get them all free of the swamp before they sank, and he needed to do it quick.

* * * * *

“So, that could have gone better.” Nihlus leaned back against the bulkhead and stretched his legs out along the cot. Garrus heard the Spectre’s jaw crack as he let out a hearty half-yawn, half-sigh. “I wish I could take this damned helmet off.”

“You don’t really think they’ll charge us with anything, do you?” Tali asked, pacing along the front of her cell. “How can they think that I’d side with heretic geth and Reapers against my own people? Treason? It’s insane!” She stopped wringing her hands to slap both palms hard against the transparent barrier. The silver reflections of her eyes sliced straight across the corridor and through Garrus’s armour. “This is all your fault!”
Garrus shrugged as he turned away to pace the depth of his cell and back. “The head of your Rannoch Resettlement Committee punched me, not the other way around. I still have a piece of broken visor stuck under my eye and my left mandible doesn’t move.” He grumbled. “I really liked this visor.”

Nihlus settled into the corner and let his head loll back. “Who knew someone that size could hit that hard? I thought you were going to go down for a minute there.” Crossing his arms under his keel he shifted a bit, then yawned again.

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” Tali said, her voice lowering to a growl. “We were supposed to be finding a way to convince them to cooperate with our investigation.” Smacking the barrier again, she spun away and went back to pacing. “Who knows what they’re doing out there. They could be pulling all my people off Rannoch, or … or bombing the geth without evacuating anyone.”

“They aren’t, Tali. Relax.” Garrus sat on the side of the low cot. “Right now, all the Admiralty Board is doing is feeling like a bunch of ineffective, short-tempered idiots—”

“Shhh!” Tali hissed, storming back to glare at him. Or at least, he assumed she was glaring at him, the reflection of her eyes had narrowed to slivers. “They’re listening.”

“Good, because they should be embarrassed by that performance. If I led Archangel that way, it wouldn’t have lasted the first three months.” Garrus twitched his left brow plate and nose, trying to work the broken piece of composite out of the tender skin beneath his eye. Medigel had stopped the blood flowing down his jaw from a torn mandible and eased the pain back to a five on the Shepard scale—slammed my toe in the bathroom door—but still, he wanted to rip his helmet off and yank the damned glass out of his eye.

He stretched his neck, grumbling as his spine crackled like walking on spilled cereal. After cracking it the other direction, he said, “So, yes, the Admiralty Board is feeling like a bunch of bickering children, the absent Admiral Xen is surely still working to cure the plague on her ship, and Beret’Zol is realizing that she admitted to committing sapient rights abuses against both the geth and your people on the planet before she punched me.” As he finished, he allowed a thin vein of pride to pulse through his words.

Nihlus chuckled and shook his head. “Shepard would be proud.”

Garrus closed his eyes, Shepard’s image appearing behind his eyelids, her features hard and sharp with Trirco’s smile. He caressed his thumb along her bottom lip then opened his eyes as he replied, “I did learn from the best.” He grinned at the assortment of dismayed noises fired at him from across the corridor.

“You mean, you caused all that on purpose?” Her barrier hummed like someone plucking a high tension cable as she slapped it again. “You big, stupid, spiky … bosh’tet. You could have gotten us all killed. You could have gotten all my people killed. You still could.”

He shook his head and turned to lift his legs up onto the cot. “They won’t attack the geth. I’m willing to bet the entire fleet that the Admiralty Board had no idea about the committee ordering tests on the geth and trying to confine your people for medical reasons.” Leaning back against the bulkhead, he let out a long breath and closed his eyes. Exhaustion wafted down like snow, building up in drifts. He yawned, and shifted until he found a mostly comfortable position on the too-short cot.

“Don’t worry, Tali. Right about now, they’re going over the fake scans the committee used to get
the conclave to order your removal from Rannoch and comparing them to your actual suit data. When they realize that everything they’ve been told is complete bullshit, they’ll come and get us.” At least, that’s how he hoped it would play out. He was new to the whole ‘piss them off and bring them back around’ method of solving disputes and getting what he needed from people.

“When I get out of here, I’m going to break your other mandible,” the quarian threatened, her voice a low growl. He opened one eye to watch her stalk over to her cot, throwing herself down on the side, her arms thumping down across her chest like security gates.

His one working mandible twitched. “Get some sleep. You’re going to need it when we get out of here. We have a busy couple of days ahead of us.” He closed his eyes again and let himself drift.

* * * * *

“General Vakarian?”

Garrus bolted upright, heart racing, pain blaring through his face like a trumpet blast. He blinked quickly, trying to clear his vision, realizing dimly that it just made the pain worse. Where was he? A second before, he’d been aboard the Normandy.

“General?”

He turned toward the voice, finally registering the slender form of Shala’Raan through the fog of sleep. Swinging to his feet in a single motion, he replied, “Admiral Raan. My apologies.”

The admiral looked across the corridor at Tali and Nihlus, both also just rousing from sleep. “It’s been a long few days,” she said, making it sound like an explanation for both sides. “The Admiralty Board is prepared to speak with you again. Do you need a few minutes?”

Garrus almost laughed. To do what? Wash up? Have a shower? They couldn’t even use the toilets in the cells. Looking to his companions, he saw they were awake, on their feet and ready to go. “That won’t be necessary, thank you, Admiral.”

The admiral turned to her shadows, two Marines who looked even more wary than the ones who’d accompanied Kar’Danna, her order crisp and decisive, “Release our guests.”

Garrus stepped back away from the cell door, looking to appear as unthreatening and cooperative as he had belligerent before their incarceration. “Will Admiral Xen be joining us this time?” he asked, waiting until the Marine moved across to Tali’s cell before stepping through the door. Guarded, he stepped up to face the admiral. She’d seemed a strong force for resettlement when they first landed on Rannoch. What had happened in the intervening months?

He frowned as he looked down at her, taking in the sloped shoulders, the roundness between her shoulder blades, the low set of her neck. How much of this was his fault for believing that given a chance to move back to their homeworld, the quarians would be eager to embrace peace? He should have kept a closer eye on the process, given the Admiralty Board more support.

Should have. What the hell good was should have? What he did from now on mattered, not the past.

After considering his words carefully, he leaned down, keeping his voice low so his words wouldn’t travel further than the pair of them. “Is the Admiralty Board being extorted, Admiral Raan?”

She inhaled a deep, almost revelatory breath, the conviction and energy behind it making him
think of a long-held POW or slave taking their first breath outside the wire of their captivity. Before his eyes, she grew … magnifying as she straightened, squaring her shoulders.

Letting out the breath, she looked up into the dark visor of his helmet. “Not anymore. The board has informed the conclave that should we need to, we will use our veto to override any actions taken against the settlers on Rannoch or the geth. We will approve no military action until an independent investigation brings us conclusive proof as to who is behind the geth disappearances and the attack on our people.”

Nihlus and Tali joined them, the Spectre stretching a little before he stood at attention, facing the admiral. “Is Admiral Xen aboard her vessel as she claims?” he asked, his tone as blunt as his words.

Raan shook her head. “The Moreh has been under quarantine for six months. She contacts us via communicator and appears to be aboard her vessel. Her people all claim that she is there, working on her cure for the virus.”

“But you have doubts?” the Spectre prompted.

Garrus withheld his instinct to halt Nihlus’s interrogation and preserve the admiral’s goodwill, wanting to know the answers for himself. The problems on Rannoch had two main suspects as far as he was concerned, and if one of them truly had been locked aboard her ship for six months, that altered the landscape considerably.

Raan turned away, leading them down the corridor. “People move very freely amongst the ships. Friends and family visit one another, techs are shared as needed, and resources are transported back and forth.”

Tali inhaled sharply, making a connection that Garrus hadn’t. “Even if the virus had an incubation period of a single day, unless people weren’t infectious before symptoms presented, the whole fleet should have it.”

“Yes,” Raan spoke up, “we’ve seen the victims, tissue samples … everything says that the Moreh is suffering an outbreak. People have died. They were buried in space using contamination protocols.”

Garrus nodded, raising a hand to halt Nihlus from continuing the interrogation. “Admiral Xen will be speaking with us now?”

The admiral opened a door, leading them out of the small cell block and into a main corridor. “Yes, via the comm.” She led them in silence until they reached the amphitheatre. “Expect Xen to resist your stance on everything, General.”

Garrus nodded, appreciating her desire to keep that day’s meeting less confrontational than the previous. “I think she’ll prove quite open to what I have to say.” He held out a hand, inviting her to proceed, when she just gave him a dubious tilt of her head.

“Well, that went much better,” Nihlus said and chuckled as he stepped through the Normandy’s airlock.

Garrus nodded and reached up for the seals on his helmet, removing it gingerly. “It’s amazing what happens when you say that you have evidence the heretic geth may be behind the entire thing.” He turned to face Nihlus. “For the sake of all that’s merciful, pull out this spirit-forsaken chunk of
glass out of my eye.”

The Spectre removed his helmet, then plucked the offending bit of visor from Garrus’s hide and passed it to him. Cocking his head, he leaned in to look at the torn mandible. “You better see Dr. Chakwas about that one. It looks like the tendons are torn.”

“I will be. Thank you.” He laid a hand on Tali’s shoulder as he passed her. “Told you it would work out.” A heavy grunt answered her elbow burying itself between the sections of his armour.

“Next time, tell me the plan.” She strode out of the airlock just ahead of him. “Now what?”

Garrus paused to lean into the cockpit. “Best speed to rendezvous with the Passchendaele, Joker. Full stealth.”

“Full unappreciated grunt mode, aye, sir,” the pilot barked sharp enough to echo.

“As you were.” Garrus turned to Tali, giving her a painful, one-sided smile. “Let’s go find out who’s behind all this.”

“You told Admiral Xen that you believed that heretic geth were to blame,” Tali persisted, following Garrus doggedly down the CIC.

“No, I said that I had evidence that they could be. That’s the truth.” He didn’t look at her until she ran in front of him and stopped. “What?”

“You didn’t ask her anything about the virus or her influencing the committee. Why?” Her silver glare bored into him like a mining drill searching for platinum.

Garrus stopped at the door to the crew deck. “If she’s behind all this, what’s she going to do if we show suspicion? She’s going to try to cover her tracks, wipe away everything that could lead to her, including any people in the way.” He shrugged and lifted a hand, buttressing it against the wall. “If she thinks we’re looking at the geth, doing her work for her, she’s not as defensive.” Shrugging, he pushed off the wall and walked through the door. “And if it is the geth, we’re looking in the right direction. Both towers covered.”

“Towers?”

He let out a long-suffering sigh. “It’s a Hideth Turram thing.”

Tali sighed. “You’re still a big, stupid bosh’tet.”

He nodded. “Yeah, most of the time.”

* * * * *

“Captain?” A dark shape appeared above her, blurry and washed out into shades of grey. “Captain! I need you to remain calm. You’re going to experience a great deal of pain, but we’ll get this over with as quickly as possible. Try to remain still.” The shape withdrew, moving around the edges of her vision.

The pain started small, termites gnawing at her cells, but as she blinked, trying to force the blurry world of unformed shapes into something that made a little more sense, the termites began to grow.

“Miranda, what are you doing?” Another shape formed of greys and black ran in from her side. It
peered down, it’s face thrusting so close to hers that a thin mewl of fright crawled from her throat, and she tried to pull away.

But as she struggled to retreat, the termites swelled into cockroaches, their jaws devouring her from the inside out. As the pain roared, it awoke fear. Where was she?

“Moving her.” The one who’d spoken to her slipped down her side. She registered pressure and touch as the woman threw objects over her body.

She tried to move, to push away the shackles and chains before they could wrap around her, but her hands didn’t obey. Fear kicked at her heart until it raced. Its hard, erratic thumping chased panic out to run screaming along every nerve and muscle fibre.

“She can’t be unhooked from the machines. You’re going to kill her.”

“When I came in to check on her five minutes ago, her duty nurse was trying to do just that.” Something flew through the air, just a faint streak across her vision. “By putting that in her IV. By the time you sauntered in here after your third cup of coffee, Shepard would have died of heart failure.”

The figure with the male voice dashed down her side, startling her. “Good lord, Miranda, you killed Carrie Peters?”

“Not before she admitted that the council knows about this project and intends to ensure that it doesn’t succeed.” The shape with the accented female voice rushed around her head, a dizzying blur of constant motion. “Now help me get her moved to L Wing.”

Panic grabbed hold of her diaphragm, yanking at it all she could do was gasp in short, shallow breaths that didn’t pull any air into her lungs.

“L Wing? The labs don’t have half of what we need.” The male shape bent over her, blurry features becoming partially visible as he leaned close to her face. “God, she’s awake, Miranda.”

“I know she’s awake, I had to unhook her from the IV. We’ll start another one when we get there.”

The man’s face withdrew. “What are her vitals? God, she’s got to be in agony.”

Pain, fear and panic all laughed at that as baby alligators burst out of the cockroaches’ bodies and continued eating her alive.

“Yes, enough to send her into shock if her brain stem doesn’t shut down first, so stop dithering and help me.”

The world moved. She thought that was supposed to happen when the right person kissed her. Panic giggled. Not a set of kissable lips in sight, and still the world rushed by in dizzying streaks and nauseating swoops. The alligators dug in claws to hang on, every cell of her body screaming at a hundred different pitches as the surface under her back rocked her one way then jerked her another. The edges of her vision darkened, night falling. Night meant sleep. Yes, sleeping through the pain.

“How did the council find out about us?” the man demanded, a harsh, whispered attempt at clandestine shouting. She felt the rough edges of fear sawing along the underside, but it wasn’t the same fear that rode along with her. Struggling to understand what she heard, she floundered through the steady current of torment, losing ground as the undertow caught her.
The woman laughed, but it cut like a shard of broken mirror. “The same way we find out everything they don’t want us to know. It doesn’t matter now. They know, and they won’t stop at sending one assassin.”

The world came to a lurching stop, the jolt pulling a thin wire from her throat as pain hooked a scream to the end.

“It’ll be over in just a few more moments, Captain,” the woman said, the blur of her face leaning over. “Just stay calm and breathe slowly.”

Breathe slowly? She couldn’t get any air.

“She’s hyperventilating,” the male shouted. Why did he need to shout? “Did you even give her anything for the pain?”

She winced away from a bright, orange light as it exploded above her.

“Heart rate is becoming erratic. Damn it, Miranda, she’s going into v-fib. We’re going to lose her before we get out of the damned elevator.”

Someone threw something heavy onto her legs.

“Get the pads on her chest. We’ll shock her if we have to.” The woman’s face appeared above her again. “Captain, I know it’s difficult, but you must try to stay calm. We’ll be in your new room in moments.”

The alligators ate away at her until darkness closed in, opening a chasm between her and the agony of their teeth.

“Shepard,” a voice whispered through the darkness. Her heart calmed the moment she heard it. “I only want this, Kahri, when it comes because this …” A hand pressed heavy and warm over her struggling heart. “… belongs to me.”

Who are you? She reached out, trying to span the chasm, knowing that if she could just touch the memory of that voice, everything would be all right.

The darkness drew back as the world stopped moving, and the man and woman hurried around her.

“Hold tight, Kahri. It’ll just be a few seconds before it kicks in.” The voice whispered right next to her ear. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you.”

Her fear vanished, the voice chasing it away even before the pain and movement faded, drawing back behind the curtain.

“Thank God. She’s stabilizing,” the man sighed. “You’re insane, Miranda. Who’s going to look after her down here?”

“Us, until it’s safe to wake her. We can’t trust anyone else.”

“I’ve always got you.”

Hideth Turram -- A game played by two teams of fifteen players. A drellak hide is hung on a six metre tall pole in the center of a field that measures one hundred and fifty metres long by thirty metres wide. A twenty-four metre tall scaffolding tower stands at either end of the field. The field,
which begins as turf, is soaked to provide a further obstacle, one that becomes only more and more difficult to surmount as it gets churned to mud.

The object is simple, although the execution is anything but. Teams compete to take possession of the hide and move it down the field to their tower, climbing to hang it from the pole at the apex of the tower. There are few rules regarding what means may be used to take possession of the hide from another player, and center on conduct once another player has hit the ground. They may not be struck once any body part above the hips touches the ground. Games are not considered to be good sport without “Blood hitting the mud”.
Chapter Summary

Complications and tests.

Chapter Notes

So, I failed in meeting my posting schedule this week. I know, no one is overly shocked. I am going to get my special chapter up today however, even if it kills me. I've been planning Chapter 16 of this act for N7 Day and I am going to make it! :D So two chapters today. Happy N7 Day. Do lots of good, Mass Effecty things. *hugs*

**Siccerta** -- A large (average size 3-4 metres in length, 100-150 kilos), desert dwelling lizard-analogue known for its long fringe, which it can extend out to impress mates or intimidate competitors, and its dual toned, raspy hiss. The mythos on the Siccerta’s origin is that the leader of one of the great ancient clans called all his rival clans to a gathering on neutral ground. While they slept, he ordered his people to slaughter the other clans down to the babes in arms. The praeta’s having witnessed the horror of his treachery, punished his entire clan by turning them into beasts and exiling them to the desert.

**508 Days ASD**

It didn’t matter how many times Garrus visited Haestrom, the place gave him what Shepard called the willies: the superstitious, irrational tingle down his spine. It became even more unreasonable when he never went down onto the hellish surface of the planet. The Archangel, geth run shipyard remained fixed on the dark side of the planet to avoid the worst of the solar radiation.

Garrus shifted as he stared out the *Normandy*’s fore-facing ports. If he had any say in the matter, he’d never set foot on that graveyard. Unlike the devastation that it visited upon Rannoch, the war passed over Haestrom. The people who lived there during the Morning War fled at the first sign of incoming geth, so all their colonial, slab architecture remained standing. From orbit, the deserted shells, smoke drifting up from the rock as the sun baked the planet to death, felt haunted, as though warning the living to keep their distance.

His eyes shifted from the planet looming large before them to the sun. There it was, the reason the system incinerated his every nerve like dry fir needles in a fire storm.

Dholen …

… dying early for no apparent reason, as if some great, dark intelligence of the universe just reached out a hand to decree the system’s annihilation.

“Three hundred cycles ago,” Tali said from just behind Garrus’s elbow, her voice hushed, almost reverent, “Dholen was a caretaker, a source of life. Now it’s betrayed its charges, a monster intent on extinction. The geth say that dark energy is concentrating within the core, and the process is
accelerating.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her wrap her arms around herself, stiffening as if she felt the same specter hanging over them as he did. “The sun has only cycles left to live before it tears this system apart.” She nodded toward the relay. “And if the relay is destroyed or thrown into space like the one to Ilos, my people will be months at FTL from the rest of the galaxy.”

Joker glanced back at them. “The Passchendaele is hailing, General.”

Garrus nodded for the pilot to open the channel. “Passchendaele, this is Vakarian. Go ahead.”

“Hey boss. Glad you’re here,” Martin called. “The tracker died, so we have no idea if that shuttle is still on the surface, but it didn’t move the whole time the tracker was transmitting. What’s the plan?”

Garrus stepped forward, bracing a hand against the back of Joker’s chair. “Have you picked up any transmissions?”

“Nothing, not even from the shipyard, which appears to be completely shut down. We scanned it, but not a single reading, not even the power core. It’s dead in the water. I called back to home base and asked when the yard last reported in.”

Garrus held his breath. Their biggest shipyard, at least a hundred workers of all races and their families, thousands of geth platforms containing hundreds of thousands of runtimes, one dreadnought, a cruiser, and two frigates nearly ready for delivery. Spirits. “How long?” he managed to ask past the talons of dread and guilt that closed around his throat.

Looking down at Joker, he said, voice mimicking the dry rasp of a siccerta, “Scan the shipyard for lifesigns, our ships, and active power signatures, please, Joker.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Omega last heard from the shipyard the day before we left.” Martin answered. “Not even a distress beacon or a partial call for help. It just went dark. It’s a safe bet there’s no one left alive. Do you want us to board?”

Garrus shook his head. “Who knows what we’d be walking into.” He raised a talon despite Martin not being able to see him. “Give me a minute.” Garrus paced as he waited for the word from Joker. So many Archangel personnel working with the geth onboard that station. Wouldn’t they have tried to get out some call for help if attacked? Although, with the number of platforms, if the geth turned on them, they wouldn’t have stood a chance. Not to mention that the geth could easily have jammed communications.

Everything he’d eaten in the last week tried to force its way up his throat. All the families he’d sent there … .

“No lifeforms, the ships are gone, there are no power signatures and no computers. The station is dead, General.” The pilot pulled up a screen displaying the scan results and looked back, shrugging a little. “Maybe the geth downloaded themselves back to the servers on Rannoch? Maybe they took the ships?”

“Reroute Weaver’s call to the comm room, Joker,” he called, already striding out of the cockpit. “Ask Anderson, Alenko, and Nihlus to meet me there.” On his way past, he snagged Tali’s forearm, asking her to follow with a gentle tug.

“The ships, Garrus,” she said, nearly whispering. “They could be anywhere.”
He nodded, not needing her to remind him that depending upon which set of hands controlled them, those ships could be running silent in orbit of Rannoch or headed for the flotilla. One of the frigates was the prototype of a new Stinger class. It would drop the shields on even the most protected ships in the flotilla with a single hit. Combine that with the dreadnought’s firepower and a surprise attack, and live ships would be nothing but chaff before the heavy fleet even responded.

He strode into the comm room, his talons cutting a rushed, irregular triangle across the deck plating as he paced.

*Think, Vakarian. Think. Xen doesn’t have the firepower or the bodies to take out the station and run off with so many ships. That leaves the geth.*

Could the heretics really have been infesting the consensus the entire time, picking off any geth who began to suspect?

He looked up. “Martin, send me everything on that datapad you found when Arox was taken. Then I want you and the *Passch* to head back to Rannoch.” He activated his omnitool. “I’m sending you my access codes. Go through my files—here’s the path data—get the IFF and transponder frequencies for those ships. When you find them, send them to all vessels, *Normandy* included. If any of our boats appear, disable them. Don’t try to hail. Don’t ask questions. Take out their weapons and engines then worry about their intentions.”

“Yes, sir. Are seven heavy frigates going to be able to take that dreadnought?”

“Take out the Stinger first, then the dreadnought.” Garrus spun toward the door. “Get moving, Martin, and fill in Kal’Reegar.” He stopped, suddenly realizing he’d misplaced his thief. “Where is Kasumi? Is she still on the planet?”

“Yes, sir. She wanted to stay and keep an eye on the geth base,” Martin replied.

His one mandible fluttered in a faint smile. She might prove more of an asset than he’d imagined. Reality splashed sharp and jagged as the comm room door opened, cutting off the brief levity. “It might be a very good idea for Kasumi and Kal’Reegar to move the expeditionary team into the caves under the ruins, and to make sure they are all armed. Both you and Kasumi need to check in with the *Normandy* on the hour.”

“Aye, sir. Anything else?” Martin’s voice trembled a little, but steadied.

*Spirits, you’d be proud of him, Kahri.*

“Take care of yourself and keep sharp. Good hunting.” As the call ended, Garrus spun to face the captain and the Spectre. “We have a new problem.” The Mako balanced on his shoulders rolled backward, and he stumbled, sitting down hard in one of the chairs.

“Because there aren’t enough knots tied in this string already.” Nihlus sat in the chair next to Garrus, Anderson in the one beside that, both of them watching him. “What’s happened?” the Spectre asked, his scrutiny supportive, but Garrus could see the unknowns wearing at the his calm.

Drawing in a breath, Garrus checked for the scent of alcohol, then cursed the unconscious habit.

No, it wasn’t the habit of checking Nihlus for signs of drinking that he hated, it was the accompanying expectation and then disappointment. Damn. As functional as Nihlus was drunk, he couldn’t lead a team. He probably shouldn’t even be allowed on the mission.

Garrus held his reply for long seconds, the silence roaring in his ears, the *Normandy*’s pulse throbbing a deep bass counterpoint to his. Questions started marching through him, pounding
through his head before moving down into his chest, chanting to that two-fold beat. How had he let things get so far out of hand? Why hadn’t he seen these possibilities and been ready for them? Why had he allowed families onto a base controlled by geth? Why had he been so quick to trust?

“General?”

Anderson’s voice dropped through his thoughts, a heavy stone stilling the turbulent water, and he inhaled, a quick exclamation of breath, in the vacuum that followed.

“Our shipyard is dark,” he said. “No lifeforms, no power. I think it’s safe to assume that anyone remaining there is dead.” He looked up as he opened a channel to the cockpit. “Joker, what are the conditions aboard the station?”

“Gravity is out,” the pilot reported. “Low levels of oxygen, high concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane, but pressure is nominal. Temperature is minus fifty centigrade and dropping.”

“Thanks, Vakarian out.” He looked to Anderson. “Mind if I borrow Alenko and four Marines? We need to go over and try to figure out what happened before we put an armed space station and possibly four of our own ships at our back when we head for Haestrom.”

The captain nodded. “They’re yours, General.”

Garrus looked over at Alenko. “We have no idea what we’re walking into other than what Joker just told us. Have your people prepped—one weapon with tungsten and one with incendiary ammunition—and ready to go in an hour.” He looked to Tali. “You coming?”

“Chaktika and I will meet you at the shuttle.” She stood and beckoned to Kaidan. “Come on, you can put the incendiary rounds in my shotgun for me. Last time I caused a spark and burned a hole through my suit.”

Garrus nodded when Kaidan looked to him. “Dismissed, lieutenant.”

“General? The Passch just hit the relay,” Joker reported. “Are we all alone out here, expecting to get our asses shot off by our own ships?”

“That’s about the shape of it, Joker. Stay sharp.”

*And keep your eye on the sun. Shadows move across its surface.*

Garrus shuddered as he watched Tali and Alenko leave, and tried to knock away the sharp, bony finger that dug into his gut, working its way under his plates. When the door shut behind them, he turned to Nihlus. “How much have you had to drink?”

Anderson cleared his throat and stood. “I’ll be out in the CIC watching your backs. Be careful over there.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Garrus’s focus followed Anderson until he stepped out of view, then turned back to Nihlus. “How much? Do I need to leave you behind?”

“I’m fully in control of my faculties, Vakarian.” Nihlus stood and strode to the door.

“If you want to join the mission, report to the doc, and get some of that crap flushed out of your system. Then meet me in the shuttle. You can second my team.”

Nihlus whirled around to face Garrus, eyes flashing, mandibles lifted and spread in fury. “Report to
you?” His laugh hit hard enough to sting. “Is the title going to your head, General?”

Garrus leaned back and sighed. “Would you like to punch me, too? I still have a good mandible you could tear off.” Brow plates lifting, he shrugged. “I’ve told you how it’s going to be if you want to come on my mission, Nihlus. Throwing a tantrum and trying to hurt my feelings isn’t the best argument for your sobriety, either, just for future reference.” He stood. “So, if you want to go aboard the station, get your ass in gear, Kryik.”

Letting out a resigned, weary breath, Garrus waited to see which spirit Nihlus would listen to—the one insisting on breaking Garrus’s other mandible, or the one whispering to just go sober up and be ready for the mission.

A helical zephyr—a draft from the air vent?—curled between them, carrying a glimmer of sound, a sigh like silver dust, on its back. Garrus saw Nihlus freeze, knowing from the way the torin’s mandibles dropped and fluttered that he’d not only heard but understood that sound. The Spectre nodded, spun into a rigid, military turn, and strode out.

“Do you speak to him?” he asked the air, turning a slow circle. “Do you come to him, even when he’s awake?” His voice rose, a fist balling in his throat, strangling both larynges. “Why? Damn it, Shepa—” Jealousy? A harsh cough of laughter smashed through the block. After all those months, after watching her go on dates and share the bizarre relationship of the visions, it took an imagined whisper to provoke his jealousy.

“You’re losing it, Vakarian, and you can’t afford to,” he grumbled, heading for the crew deck. He needed a shower and some food before he left the Normandy.

As he stood under the hot spray, steaming billowing around him, he closed his eyes only to discover the image of Dholen etched onto the inside of his eyelids. The surface seethed, exploding outward in rage, screaming in the face of its death.

And the shadow. Always the shadow slithering beneath the light like the endless fathoms of black beneath the bright sparkles and reflection of the ocean. Cold, pitiless—

“General, aren’t you twenty minutes from a mission?”

Garrus jumped, his entire body spasming so rigid that he slipped and left talon gouges in the deck plating. Scrambling, he caught himself and glanced over at the crewman … Rawali? One hand grabbed for his towel as the other slammed off the water control. “Yeah, thanks. It’s been too long since I had a decent shower, I guess. Thanks. Who knows how long I’d have been there.” He chuckled, the sound so cold that even Rawali’s lips just thinned as he retreated out the door.

“Yeah, definitely losing it, Vakarian.” He dressed and ran to grab some meal bars and change his ammo.

He kept the ports shut on the way to the shipyard, using sensors instead. No matter how much he told himself that he was being a superstitious idiot about the system, looking out chilled him to his core and hollowed him out. That was no way to go into battle.

The shipyard’s shuttle bay door stood open, a mouth gaping in a silent scream. Decompression when the power went out and the forcefields died had set the station drifting, its massive bulk tumbling slowly through the black. It crept toward the light, a corpse hungry for warmth and life. Garrus knew that once the sun touched its skin, it would discover only something colder and more terrible than any death. The shadow would skitter into its soul, peeling back the layers of what it had been, transforming it—
Garrus growled low in his throat and rolled his neck. High time to stop doing that.

“Absolute cold and darkness just crawled right into me, C-Sec,” Shepard whispered, still clinging to him. He could feel her trembling through the touch. “I couldn’t do anything to stop it. It spoke to me. It was afraid. I felt that it considered me a threat, and it was trying to figure me out, discover my weaknesses.”

Indoctrination?

No, he just needed to calm the hell down and focus on the mission, rather than superstitious jitters. There was nothing on the Normandy, or the shuttle, or even in the system to indoctrinate him.

“Get it together or you’re going to get someone killed,” he whispered to himself, forcing his focus onto the controls. He saw Nihlus glance at him, but felt no need to explain. They’d followed Shepard to hell and partway back, and she’d had a lot more crazy going on than just talking to herself.

_Spirits, I miss the crazy_, Kahri.

Garrus’s scowl deepened as he swung the shuttle around, steering past a couple of shuttles, zero-g lifts, and an assortment of small equipment expelled during the decompression. He guided the shuttle into the bay, the searchlights on its front corner panels sweeping across the absolute black. Shuttles hung suspended, their awkward postures unnatural and sinister as the lights glared off the planes and threw the angles into deep shadow. Passing through the huge door, he maneuvered between them, setting it down just inside the interior doors.

“We’re going to get beaten to hell getting through their airlocks, even if they were vented before the outer door field went down,” Nihlus said as he unbuckled himself and stood.

Garrus nodded. “I brought a power cell. If there’s no back up power source for the airlocks, Tali and I will be able to rig something. We have some moderate skill with tech.”

“You’re a pretend engineer, aren’t you?”

Everyone put on their helmets, then Garrus vented the air from the shuttle. The hiss of the vents echoed, a deep exhalation that whispered from every dark corner. When he opened the hatch, he felt as though he’d gone blind, the black so absolute that it swallowed the light from inside the shuttle before it even reached the next object.

He pulled Roger from his back and turned on the flashlight. Shuttles, and pieces of equipment reflected back his light, but no bodies. Not even any of the detritus he’d expect from combat, but then, maybe the fighting just hadn’t gotten that far.

“All right,” he said, stopping a few metres in. He turned back, facing seven expressions that mirrored his own. “We’re going to break into two teams of four. Alenko, you’ll take Tali, Peterson, and Englestein to engineering. See if you can get the power turned back on. Teung and Rogers will come with Nihlus and I. We’ll head to the bridge. Everyone go slow, keep your eyes open, and watch for survivors. It’s extremely cold, so there’s always a chance.”

Nodding to Tali, he headed for the airlock. Next to the door, he crouched and removed the panel cover. “We need to restore power to this airlock.”

She nodded and crouched at his side. “They almost always have backup power cells. Can’t have people getting locked in and suffocating during a power failure.” She examined the inner workings. “Someone took out the power cell.”
Garrus nodded and pulled the spare from the pouch at his waist. “I just happen to have one.” He stuck it into the slot, and hit the button to switch over to secondary systems. The door control lit up. “Success. We make a good team.”

She straightened. “Sure, when you’re not lying to me and insulting my government.” Despite the frostiness of her words, her tone came across warm and teasing. Too bad the elbow that knocked him in the back of his head didn’t.

“Hey,” he groused despite being grateful for the lightening of the mood, “I’m still healing here.”

“Get wise enough to leave your visor at home this time?” she asked, hitting the controls to cycle the airlock.

“No choice, it’s in three pieces. Your committee owes me a new one. Maybe one of the new PanOptiks 4500X.” A quick tilt of the head ushered the others into the airlock. “Let’s move, people.”

“Aye, sir,” Rogers groaned, her gaze darting so quickly that she stumbled backing into the airlock. Garrus grabbed her shoulder, holding her upright. “Slow your breathing. Yes, it’s dark, but there isn’t anything on this base that you haven’t faced before.” He leaned down and stared into her eyes until some colour began to return to her face and her breathing slowed. Once she’d regained control, he nodded. “Good. Let’s go.”

“If the geth turned on the people here,” Nihlus said, “some would have hidden, but most would have tried to get their families to safety. They would have rushed the docks, tried to get onto shuttles. Judging by the number of shuttles still in the bay, they didn’t make it that far.” He let out a long breath and pushed through to the inside door as Garrus shut them in and began the cycle. “Be prepared for what could be on the other side of this door. Especially if the heretic geth had dragon’s teeth like on Eden Prime.”

Garrus winced. That possibility hadn’t even occurred to him. Did the husks give off energy signatures before the dragon’s teeth lowered them? The conversion spikes had to, though. The Normandy would have picked them up.

The fight to get out of the main chamber on Ilos flashed through his mind. The Reapers’ capacity for creating horror knew no bounds. He joined Nihlus at the front of the airlock. The red light on the panel turned to green. Raising Roger to his shoulder, he brought the assault rifle’s scope to his helmet, ready. Seven safeties clicked off, and the sound of breathing, harsh and quick, filled the airlock. Hand leaving the gun, he pressed his talons against the door control.

It slid open, letting out a slight hiss that plucked his nerves, making him stiffen. Sucking in a thin, hissing breath, Garrus cursed his own jumpiness and stepped out. Roger’s muzzle swept a wide arc across the dock waiting room. His visions of heaped bodies, mowed down in a panic, or a mob of roaring tech zombies vanished, replaced by a reality far more terrifying.

The large waiting area sat empty, the room in perfect order—the furniture bolted to the floor. Not a body, not a drop of blood, no damaged geth platforms, not even scorch marks on the walls awaited them.

“What the hell happened to everyone?”

* * * * *

“Captain Shepard, my name is Miranda Lawson,” the familiar voice called across the vast, black
chasm. “Can you understand me? If you understand me, open your eyes and blink twice in a row.”

She didn’t want to open her eyes, and she certainly didn’t want to bark, clap her flippers, and balance a ball on her nose. No, the darkness wrapped around her, warm and comforting. She’d stay inside it.

“Captain, I need you to do this for me. I must assess your neurological stability.” A hand gripped her forearm, the touch smelting her insensate, stoney flesh into magma.

Shepard’s eyes sprang open at the agony flowing out from that contact. Blinking twice against an orange light that burned into her skull, she used the simple motion to beg the woman to release her. She opened her mouth, trying to force out words, any words to make the pain stop, but only a series of garbled moans tumbled out.

The woman lifted her hand and turned away, her form solidifying into focus. She keyed information into her omnitool at dizzying speeds, muttering to herself about neurological bleed, synaptic transfers, and delta waves.

Confusion warred with fear. Why couldn’t she talk? She tried to move her hands, but couldn’t even feel them other than the fading pain where Miranda touched her. Why couldn’t she move? It all had to be a dream. Surely, she was dreaming.

More moans and stuttered sounds slumped from her lips, unformed lumps of clay that meant nothing. Fear kicked her adrenaline into overdrive, the hormone insisting that she flee or fight but it just turned her immobile body in on itself.

“Captain Shepard.” Miranda leaned over her. Blue eyes stared down from a pretty face framed by the sort of flowing black hair that always made Shepard want to yank it from spite. “Please take slow breaths and try to calm down.” An unconvincing smile curved the woman’s lips. “What did you think about? What did you remember the other day that helped you calm down when you were in so much pain?”

Just breathe. Just be here. Here with me.

Oh. It was him. The voice had calmed her down. It reached down inside her, slowing her heart. Who was he? His voice filled her with so many things: warmth, safety … love. Why didn’t she remember more than his voice?

“Spirits, Shepard.” A soft touch traced her collarbone. “You’re a mess.”

“Very good, Captain,” Miranda said. “That’s it. Just like that. I need to explain a few things, okay? Can you blink twice for me if you understand?”

Focusing back on the chill, professional, blue eyes, Shepard blinked. Twice. She understood the words perfectly well. What she needed were some answers.

“You were shot.” Miranda brought up an x ray and turned it so that Shepard could see. “The bullet entered just under your jaw and exited out through the base of your skull. It destroyed your brainstem and upper spinal cord.”

Shepard scowled at the screen, feeling a mild flush of relief as her face muscles moved. With that injury, she should be dead. Beating her mouth into submission, she managed to get out, “ … d … ehd.”

Miranda nodded, the expression on her face one of pride as she said, “Yes, you died. Your crew
buried you in space three days after you passed. We recovered your body.” She lifted a hand as Shepard opened her mouth to force out another word. “Don’t try to talk for now. I understand it must be difficult, but I’m hoping to get your implants calibrated so you can speak.”

“What are you doing, Miranda?” The man hurried in from out of Shepard’s field of vision to square off against Miranda across Shepard’s bed. “We nearly killed her two days ago just moving her.”

“Wilson, two days is my limit for listening to you whine and question my every move,” Miranda shot back, her tone cold and hard enough that Shepard waited for the sound of a gunshot. “Stand there and shut up. I’ve nerve blocked her from the neck down …”

But, then why had her touch seared Shepard’s arm the way it did?

“… and, as you can see, she’s perfectly calm. Get to work on the new batch of nanites.” Miranda threw a careless hand toward the other end of the space. “We need to accelerate her tissue healing so that I don’t have to paralyze her to have her awake and functional.”

Shepard listened, watching every shift in the black-haired woman’s face. Miranda considered her a challenge, a puzzle, a science experiment. Not a trace of humanity or compassion looked out of those eyes or softened the lines around that perfect mouth.

Miranda looked back down, another one of her pasted-on smiles apologizing for the interruption. A faint line creased her forehead for a moment, her eyes shifting down. Trying to remember where she was, no doubt.

“We recovered your body and began the process of bringing you back. It’s been a long road, but we achieved independent neural function three months ago. Ever since, you’ve experienced continual improvement.” The calculated smile returned. “You’re still several months from full healing, but we’ll be waking you from time to time, like today, to run tests.”

Tests? If she could move, Shepard would run a test to see how far up Miranda’s ass she could shove her foot. How dare they? How dare they snatch her body out of the black like an unclaimed piece of luggage and run experiments on it for who knew how long before they managed to Frankenstein enough of her together to call her alive?

Flashes of faces flickered past like a bad vid, people she couldn’t put names to, but somehow she knew they’d all mourn her. No, it wasn’t right. It wasn’t natural. If you died, you died.

Do you trust me, Shepard?

The moment the voice murmured through her head, she knew the answer. Whoever he was, she trusted him implicitly. That trust flickered and glowed down at the very core of her.

You’re the bravest person I’ve ever met.

She let the anger go, breathing slowly until it evaporated.

“Okay, Captain Shepard,” Miranda continued, oblivious. “Even though it was unexpected, having to move you the other day yielded some of the best data we’ve gotten in months. It’s allowed me to calculate new settings for the implants that replaced your brain stem.”

She sighed, almost sounding annoyed that she had to interrupt her brilliant science to explain things to the dead woman. “We were able to use stem cells to repair your spinal cord, but had to develop extremely sophisticated technology to take the place of your brain stem. You now basically have a miniature super computer directing traffic between your brain and your body.”
Shepard wondered if the woman would look as excited about the whole thing if she’d just been told that she’d been brought back from the dead with a computer running the show. Somehow, she doubted it. The desire to stab the woman with a screwdriver or writing implement twitched down her arm. Sweet baby Jesus, how could Miranda be so cavalier about destroying the laws of nature?

Miranda turned back to her omnitool. “I’m going to adjust your implants to see if we can help you talk.” She paused, the line appearing between her flawless brows again. “Understand, Captain … you died and remained brain dead for just over a year. We kept your body alive and rebuilt it, but your brain suffered a massive trauma and an extended period of oxygen deprivation. You are going to have to relearn everything, including talking, walking, reading, and writing.” A small shrug tugged at her shoulders. “Everything.”

‘Then why did you bother?’ Shepard’s stare demanded. ‘Why didn’t you just leave me dead?’ A cold, bleak wind blew through her guts. What was she? Had they even brought Jane Gwendolyn Shepard back, or was she just an empty shell run by a computer programmed to believe it was Shepard?

“What I need you to do is repeat the sound ‘da’.” Miranda stared at her, brows raised, mouth open as if to form the sound herself, as if she could somehow prompt Shepard to follow suit.

Letting out an inner sigh, Shepard opened her mouth and forced out a drunken sounding, “Deh.”

“Very good,” Miranda coaxed. “Just keep repeating it.”

Over the next hour, as Shepard’s brain became fuzzier and fuzzier, a headache building up like a hurricane circling her brain, she repeated sound after sound. Despite the frustration and her skull feeling ready to split open, the exercise yielded results as her voice became clearer and her mouth cooperated with greater ease.

“Very good, Captain. Can you try to say ‘She sells seashells’ for me?” Miranda asked without looking up from her omnitool.

Shepard raised an eyebrow. Seriously? Ma da ra had proved an insurmountable challenge. Still, she took a breath. “Scheh schellch schehschellch.” Maybe they should give her six or seven shots of alcohol. Her diction might improve. It certainly couldn’t get worse. Acidic tears burned behind her eyes as terror and frustration erected a strangling dam in the back of her throat.

A harsh sob escaped before she could stop it. Burning with anger and embarrassment, Shepard pressed her eyes closed, not wanting to see Miranda’s reaction to her science experiment breaking down.

“I know it doesn’t seem like it, Captain, but you’re doing far better than I anticipated. You should be talking very well in a short time.”

Shepard peeked out of one eye, but the woman still wasn’t looking at her. Instead, she looked up at the other side of the room. “Wilson, are you done with those nanites? I want to get them started on the speech center.”

Nanites? In her brain? “Nooh,” she protested, the fear setting off every nerve in her body, a thicket of nettles … or a billion tiny limbs, all waking up, struggling to help her defend herself against the abomination of what they were doing to her.

Miranda just smiled that terrible, empty smile. “I’m going to put you back to sleep now, Shepard. Rest well.”
“Noh!” She struggled to get any part of her body to move. She didn’t want to be sent back to oblivion while they stuffed machines into her body, warping it further from what it had been meant to be.

No amount of fighting or hoping did any good and the darkness rose up to claim her. Just before everything disappeared, throwing her back across the chasm, he spoke:

*It’s all right, Shepard. Go to sleep. I’ve got you.*

She prayed he did. Oh sweet voice, I really hope you do, because I don’t even know what they’ve turned me into.
Mass Effect - Future Complex Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Summary

Once more unto the breach dear friends...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 1 ASR

Completion.

It always seemed that death would bring completion. At least, that’s what they promised her.

She grew up, a child filled with the sunshine of Jesus in a manger, promising to take her to heaven to live with Him there. Her faith-filled mom and dad said that all she needed to do was believe in Jesus and His Father to live on after death in a place more peaceful and beautiful than she could imagine. They promised a reunion with everyone she’d ever loved, her existence distilled down to pure joy.

It was a beautiful dream.

Their preacher always said that you couldn’t believe in God without believing in His opposite. Shepard never bought that. Satan proved far too easy an excuse for succumbing to weakness in all its forms. Give in to greed, hatred, or fear? It was the devil, naturally. No, she took responsibility for her actions, so Satan had no place in her life.

And then the batarians came.

Those twenty-seven hours taught her how wrong she’d been about evil. Satan existed and he’d sunk his claws into her that day, embedding a hell deep down inside her that burned like the flames of myth.

People assumed that she became a drug addict after Mindoir in an attempt to cover over the memories of what the slavers did to her. They couldn’t have been more wrong. She wore her scars—all of them—like medals, each one dedicated to another soul killed or taken during that very long night. She loved her scars, as perverse as that might seem, as an integral part of who she was.

No, the Hallex broke down her prison. Under the influence of the drug, her world blossomed, everything becoming so intense, so powerful, and so beautiful that it smashed the hatred inside of her. It set her free. At least for a little while. It allowed her to rest.

The hatred sank its roots in so deep that nothing could dig them out. It spread, infecting every aspect of her life, darkening the sky and poisoning the earth. Even after Anderson rescued her from that mental ward, and then again off the street, his love and support had only been able to ease back the hatred from a four alarm blaze to a smolder inside the walls.

The Alliance gave her the perfect focus for the hatred, each shot a strike for the good guys—the innocent that God, in all His great power and glory left to suffer and die. He stood by and watched
evil despoil and destroy, she would not. Yet through it all, somehow the faith instilled in her on her knees beside her bed all those years before, never died.

*God bless Mommy and Daddy, and help me to be a better girl every day. Amen.*

After all, you couldn’t hate a God you didn’t believe in.

After everything she lived through, after all she suffered, all she’d ever truly needed from Him was the fulfillment of that one promise. And He’d failed her. No peace. No torrent of joyous tears as her father swept her up into his arms to tell her how much he’d missed her and loved her. No beauty or rest.

Only darkness.

Then she woke to discover that once again, she’d been abducted by slavers who had brutally raped her, and maybe in an even more horrific way. During that long night, the batarians had abused her body, but she’d been able to lock her mind and her soul away. She didn’t know if the new monsters had left her a soul.

The sharp chatter of gunfire punctured the darkness, low and distant, the sound like glass marbles dropped on tile. Of course, she recognized it instantly. One didn’t confuse the sound of bullets being fired with other noises after being shot at. This particular chorus consisted of assault rifles and the odd metallic ping of an SMG. No, she pinned down their identity without more than a second’s consideration. Their origin, however, presented more of a problem. Mindoir? Some memory she couldn’t pull forward?

*A man screamed, shattering the stillness as it echoed along a corridor, or maybe through a barren room. Who? Who screamed? Daddy? Panic froze her in place as half of her insisted on racing out to discover who screamed … to find her mother and father and make sure they were all right. The other half demanded that she run as fast and as far as she could.*

Or the present?

“*Shepard, you need to get up.*”

*The floor thundered under running feet. For a breathless moment, she listened, awaiting the crash of the door flying open. Daddy? Please, is that you? Every inch of her body trembled as she prayed for her father to appear, to take her away and protect her. The door opened and then slammed shut. She heard the locks engage.*

“*Get up, Janey. You’ve got to get up. They’re coming. Use the window.*” *His voice slapped her hard, shattering the ice that held her in place.*

Heart racing, entire body poised to flee, Shepard jumped up—

“*No, Shepard—*”

—and swung her legs off the mattress before Mindoir shattered, allowing her to register the stark, white walls; antiseptic reek; and electrical buzz of equipment between the shards. Not Mindoir. Hospital.

She’d died. Miranda—her doctor?—dragged her back from the dead.

*Oops, Janey. You didn’t stop at the edge of the bed. This is going to hurt.*
She hit the floor face down, the tile surface reaching into her lungs and yanking out all the air before it bludgeoned her from head to foot. Blood seeped from tooth-holes in her tongue, but she felt remarkably little pain. After biting it hard enough to bleed, her face should feel like it was going to explode. Maybe the batarians had killed her after all.

“Shepard!” Miranda’s heels clicked toward her, her tread as brisk and efficient as the rest of her. “Are you all right?”

Awkward and boneless, like someone trying to function with broken limbs, Shepard managed to drag one hand underneath her to push her face up off the chill tile. Blood and saliva trickled from the corner of her mouth, splashing crimson against the white.

All right? What about her patient lying splattered on the floor looked all right to Miranda, and why did she keep using her last name?

Miranda crouched by Shepard’s head, letting out a sigh of such annoyed disappointment that Jane almost felt the need to apologize for being so careless and clumsy. Almost.

Boots appeared in front of Shepard’s face, next to Dr. Frankenstein. “She can’t even sit up, Miranda. Why don’t we just move her on the bed?” The voice was male but not Wilson. Deeper, resonant rather than nasal.

“No, she’s too vulnerable.” A hand pressed against Jane’s shoulder. “Shepard, listen to me. The council paid Wilson to kill you. This base is compromised. We need to move you somewhere secure.”

Council? Was that some sort of batarian slaver oversight committee? Turning her head, she looked up into the tight, blue glare, rage countering the terror as it tried to jumpstart her heart. “You shud hayv just led the bahtareeahns—” The low, raspy growl of her voice stopped her mid sentence. Miranda’s nanites must have worked overtime. Although still slurred, the words made sense.

“We can discuss the ethical implications of bringing you back once we’re in a shuttle on our way to another base,” Miranda said, her anger crackling like static sparks on wool. She slid an arm under Shepard’s shoulder to hook through her armpit. “Try to help us get you up.”

Thrown by the fact she’d uttered an almost coherent sentence, it took Shepard a second to process Miranda’s words. She slid her other hand along her side, wincing at the angle of her hand.

“Broke wrist,” she said as she placed it in front of her. That time, although the words dragged out in slow motion, she enunciated perfectly.

“I gave you enough painkillers for five people, Shepard. We’ll fix you up when we get to the other end.” She looked up. “Jacob, Kelly, help me get her into the chair.”

Gunfire. Shepard froze, holding her breath. Pistol that time, four shots, so more than likely a single target, but close. A lot closer than before. No. No no no. Why would they come back for her? She was just one, beaten up girl.

“We need to move,” the man, Jacob, said. He rolled Shepard over, lifting her easily in strong arms, his armour hard against her side. “Kelly, roll that chair over here.”
More shots punctured the steady, mechanical background hum. Shepard twisted in Jacob’s arms, fixing her stare on the door.

*Please don’t find us. Please don’t find us.*

She wouldn’t let the batarians take her. Not again. She’d grab the pistol from Miranda’s hip and send herself back to oblivion first.

Jacob settled her in the chair, then stepped past her, pulling a shotgun off his back as he jogged to the door. Pressing his back to the wall beside it, he palmed the control. When it opened, he leaned out, sweeping his weapon one way, then the other.

*He knows what he’s doing, Janey. Look at him. Tough and professional. A soldier to the core. The big gun doesn’t hurt either. Just relax. It’ll be fine.*

Watching him, rapt and hopeful, Jane scarcely paid any attention to the people fastening her into the chair. Miranda had ripped her from the natural order of God’s creation, turning her into some sort of barely functional golem. The other one was just a name, but Jacob would get them out of there. She knew it. Her pulse slowed, jumping a little as Miranda jogged past her, the pistol coming off her hip in a very practiced, confident grip.

*Okay, looks like Dr. Frankenstein’s got some skills too, Janey. Things are looking up. You know, if you forget the whole died for a year before being brought back from the dead thing.*

Why?

The question drifted, disappearing between the thoughts fixated on trying to hear where the batarians were and those working out how best to make sure the bastards didn’t take her alive. Maybe they’d come to kill her, cleaning up one last loose end, and she didn’t have to worry.

Two soldiers in black and yellow armour strode out of a cross corridor, looking both ways before they spotted Jacob and Miranda. Their guns swung around, but Jacob’s shotgun let out three harsh roars and the men hit the ground before they could take aim. A tiny smile lifted one side of Shepard’s mouth. At least her grave robbers could shoot.

Three corridors and two more dead attackers, they arrived in the shuttle bay. Miranda ran ahead, flinging open the hatch of the closest craft. A gurney stood inside, strapped in against the wall, an entire bank of machines at its head. As the so far faceless Kelly pushed her toward the open portal, Jane realized that Miranda intended to put her back to sleep, to send her back into a state of blissful helplessness.

No.

Sliding her feet off the footplates, she braced the best she could. One foot held, the other rolling over at the ankle, sending the wheelchair into a hard turn.

“Did your feet fall off?” a gentle, feminine voice asked. Kelly stepped around in front of Jane, a friendly smile on her pretty, freckled face. A redhead, just like her. The woman bent down to lift Jane’s feet back onto the supports, but Shepard shoved with her one foot, managing to back up out of reach.

“No.”

“What’s going on?” Miranda strode toward them, the same ‘enough of this nonsense’ look on her face that Jane’s mother wore most of the time. “Shepard, there are people trying to kill you. Do I
need to say that this isn’t the time for you to get difficult?”

“Not gohing bahk to sleep.” She shook her head and pushed back, timing it to avoid Miranda’s hand every time she made a grab for the chair. “No mohr exparument.”

“Again, not the time, Shepard.” Miranda lunged, managing to snag the armrest and turned the chair toward the shuttle. When she tried to push, Shepard set her feet against the deck plating. “Oh for pity’s ….” She waved to Kelly. “Get her feet up before we’re all killed.”

Jacob backed toward them, his gun covering the door. “What’s going on? Why isn’t she loaded?”

“Not bagghdga.” Shepard shouted, proud of her volume even though she sacrificed clarity. She kicked at Kelly’s hand, just a violent, spastic twitch to warn her off.

“She doesn’t want to be put back to sleep,” Kelly said, shrugging. “Not that I blame her. Put yourself in her place, Ms. Lawson. Yesterday, you told her that you stole her corpse, filled it full of tech, and brought her back to life a year after she died. I wouldn’t trust you with my unconscious body either.”

Shepard stared at the woman, surprise warring with gratitude. Maybe some of her body snatchers weren’t all that bad. The unexpected kindness knocked a chink out of the wall, letting a couple of tears loose to roll down her cheeks.

Kelly smiled and whisked them away with a quick, gentle thumb despite Jane shying away from the contact.

“Impossible.” Miranda pushed against the chair, only managing to move it a hand’s width before giving up. “Shepard, you have a lot of healing to do. Your implants need constant readjustment.” A harsh sigh punctuated her annoyance. “You’d be in constant pain, unable to move yourself around. It’s in your best interest.”

“No. Know payhn. Can take payhn. Not gohing bahk to sleep. Heel behtar awayk.” It didn’t matter how much pain she had to face, it couldn’t be as bad as being the helpless victim of Dr. Frankenstein.

“Look,” Jacob said, walking over to look down at Jane, “Captain, you need to get on the shuttle. You can be as stubborn as you want once we’re in there and away from the people trying to kill you.”

“Captin?” Jane laughed, a sharp scowl creasing her brow. “Uf whut? The pirahnt ship, Ravelng?”

Gunfire. Jacob ran back toward the door, Miranda dashing after him.

“Get her on the shuttle, Kelly,” the woman shouted back.

If she resisted just a few minutes more, the gunmen would make it past Jacob and Miranda and finish what the batarians had started. Of course, that meant Jacob and Kelly dying along with her. Well, Dr. Frankenstein too.

*Imagine how happy Anderson is going to be when he finds out you’re still alive.*

The image of her guardian’s face filled her with warmth. Anderson must have been gutshot when she died after everything he’d done to save her.

*Why did you die? How? You were recovering from the batarians.*
Kelly crouched next to Jane’s knee, startling her out of her thoughts. “Look, I know this sucks. You didn’t ask for any of it, but it has a pretty big upside to it as well. You’re alive. You’ve got a chance to do everything that you didn’t get a chance to do.” The redhead sucked in a strong breath, and nodded, a stubborn, decisive shake of the head that Jane knew very well. “I promise I won’t let them put you back to sleep. We’ll figure out a way for you to stay awake for the rest of your rehab. We just really need to leave.”

Staring into the young woman’s eyes, Shepard saw only sincerity. Anderson’s face appeared once more, his face stoic, but his eyes bright. After a second, she nodded. “Okay.” For Anderson and for hope she could try to see the gift rather than the curse.

Chapter End Notes

I made it. You know, if you live on the west coast of North America, it is still N7 Day.
:D And she's back.
Chapter Summary

Into the darkness

1 ASR

Garrus knew darkness. The intoxicating, adrenaline-soaked shadows of lying in wait for a suspect, and the deep, black fury of watching the criminal escape justice. The warm velvet ebony of lying with Shepard pressed close, her breath soft on his neck, and the obsidian blades that flayed his soul from his flesh every night he went to sleep without her.

Yes, he knew darkness, but the black aboard the station couldn’t be considered anything as innocuous as the absence of light. It loomed over him and tried to climb inside him, the conclusion of entropy—the frozen, still end of everything. Or the end of all life, anyway, for shadows moved just beyond the beam of his light, vanishing beneath chairs or along the edges of counters when he glanced their way. Before he reached the door leading into the interior corridors, he knew all too well why Shepard feared the dark.

How have I never seen this before?

For the third time that night, he wished she was there. In the face of the nothingness on Noveria, he’d pressed closer to her, drawing from the life and light that burst from her like solar flares. For someone who harboured so many fears, she’d been a source of indefatigable courage for them all. Spirits, he missed that glow, always just an arm’s length away.

“See you on the other side,” Kaidan said, pulling Garrus’s attention back where it belonged. The lieutenant’s low whisper eased Garrus’s shame at his superstitious fear. At least he wasn’t the only one who felt as if breaking the silence would draw the attention of things best left oblivious.

Garrus replied, a single nod, then watched after the second team until the last one disappeared around the curve of the station’s outer corridor. Once they moved past the beam, his light glared through the emptiness, reflecting off the indecently polished floor panels. Warzones should be scarred and littered, dust and smoke filling the air, not looking as though the cleaning crew had just gone through.

“We go straight on?” Nihlus asked, even though the orange glare of the facility map glowed above the Spectre’s forearm.

Garrus knew Nihlus’s intention, answering the question only with a sharp glance as he struck out toward the bridge. He needed to police himself, get his imagination and emotions under control. Distraction could get them all killed. Focusing on the hallway before him, he edged down the left hand wall while Nihlus moved to cover the right, leaving Teung and Rogers to watch their six. Further along, the corridor opened into several offices and a large electronics lab. Maybe the workers had all been taken totally by surprise and died at their desks or in their living quarters.

“I’ll be just fine once we find someone alive. Someone we can question.” Shepard chuckled, but it came out hard and dry, edged with hysteria. “Hell, right now I’d settle for someone to shoot.”
A door broke the flow of the bulkhead, the smooth metal lined with cables and narrow pipes that all curved suddenly upward to sweep around the portal. Garrus held up a fist to bring them all to a halt, then beckoned Nihlus over to cover the other side. The Spectre pressed his back to the wall, his shotgun pointed into the dark ahead of them, guarding their twelve.

When the power had gone out, all the door mechanisms had released, leaving the doors open a couple of centimetres. Holding Roger with one hand, he slid his talons through the crack and pulled, stepping back to stay behind the cover of the door as it opened.

No Reaper horrors or rampaging geth raced out to attack them, and he let out the breath he’d been holding, feeling more than a ridiculous. He straightened, rolling his shoulders, then cracked his neck. Roger leading, he swung around the door, stepping just over the threshold.

“Clear.” Spotting scarring on the far wall, he called back. “Rogers, Teung, keep an eye out. Kryik, with me.” He strode across the room, his light darting from the dark corners to the hidden spots behind furniture. “Between everything being bolted to the floor and the chairs floating, who can tell if there was a struggle?”

He headed straight for the scarring on the wall. No blood accompanied it, just the blast mark from a shotgun. Rubbing it with the pad of his talon, he scraped a little off. A couple of days old, as expected. Incendiary rounds. That he hadn’t expected. He crouched to examine the floor. No sign of charring, which would happen if someone fell after being hit.

“This is insane.” He turned a slow circle, shining his light over the walls, searching for more hits. Nothing. “How did they subdue all these—”

Nihlus spun to face him when he clacked his mouth shut on the end of the sentence. “What?”

Garrus took a couple of steps toward the door then stopped. “We asked the same thing on Noveria. All the people who worked on Peak 15 vanished without a trace. We never found out what happened to them. Now here, again.” He took another step.

“The colonies.” Nihlus froze for a second, his entire body practically vibrating with tension. Then, as quickly as it had appeared, it vanished, and he nodded toward the door. “Let’s keep moving. Staring at empty rooms and jumping at shadows isn’t going to tell us anything.”

“Yeah.” Garrus paused, head cocking a little as his voice echoed oddly through the space. Invisible talons raked down the back of his neck, sinking into the soft flesh where his cowl and neck met. As geth construction, the base’s angles and slopes bounced sound around in strange ways, he knew that and thought he’d gotten used to it. Still, as he moved down the corridor, the space warped every noise, stretching and twisting them enough to set his teeth on edge.

All the way through Noveria, he’d listened to Shepard mutter to herself about how something was off. He hadn’t given it much thought, more focused on the next step in front of him. The place had been creepy as hell, but until they found the dead rachni, having Shepard in charge allowed him to let all of that go. She’d acted as his lightning rod. Now the creepy came straight at him, and he had to admit, he didn’t care for it.

The last door on the left led into the electronics lab. Unlike the office doors, its locking mechanism hadn’t released when the power went out. Due to both security and static-free cleanroom protocols, the lab had a series of manual locks he needed to unlock in the right sequence in order to trigger the latch. Once Nihlus took position to cover the way ahead, Garrus opened the panel and unlocked the door.
The lab didn’t look as though anyone had broken into it, and it should have remained locked at all times. As he forced the door open, he hoped someone managed to hide. An empty station with the odd scorch mark here and there wouldn’t help solve the problems on Rannoch. They needed evidence; someone they could point to and say, they were behind everything. Taking point, he moved through the door, sweeping Shepard’s old rifle from corner to corner. Nothing.

Nihlus entered a few seconds after Garrus, moving to cover the right, the pair of them moving without needing to coordinate. The Spectre moved more smoothly than Garrus, not starting every time their light cast an odd shadow. Maybe going into a mission at least partially drunk had its advantages.

“Do you have the code for the cold room?” Nihlus asked as he approached the thick, insulated glass. Despite his body language remaining completely calm, the torin’s subvocals gave away his tension. Perhaps Nihlus’s appearance of calm owed more to cycles of dealing with the unknown than the alcohol. Maybe both. Nihlus pressed his light to the glass and peered through. “There’s something in there. Between the glare and the glass, I can’t tell what, though.”

“Yeah, just a second.” Garrus made his way toward the cold room the long way, checking behind the work stations along the far wall before turning his back to them. No one hid under the desks, living or dead. As far as he could tell, whomever attacked the facility hadn’t made it that far in. Or, he reminded himself, the staff all just obediently walked out, mindless and indoctrinated. But that didn’t account for the geth. What had happened to all the geth? How could there be nothing left behind? Well, nothing except for the talons drilling through the base of his skull to work their way into his—

“General!” Teung shouted from the corridor, enough edge in his voice to send Garrus bolting for the door, Nihlus’s boots pounding the tile right behind him.

Eight strides carried him to the door. He burst through to see Rogers watching the corridor ahead, her eyes so large that he could see that her pupils had shrunk to pinpricks even past the reflection of the lights off her visor. The woman backed away from them, her gun barrel jerking back and forth across the empty hallway as if she saw enemies everywhere.

“Rogers? Teung, what’s going on?” Acted on a hunch, Garrus hung Shepard’s rifle on his back and held out his hands. Who knew what Rogers was seeing. “Rogers? Are you okay?”

“I saw them, sir. I saw … .” She continued to back away. On the edge of hysteria, she breathed so shallow and quick that her visor fogged in short, rapid puffs.

He nodded and stepped toward her. “Okay. You need to slow your breathing, or you’re going to pass out.”

“They’re out there, sir, moving in the darkness. They’re trying to crawl into my thoughts. They want my memories.” She let her rifle drop a little as she raised one hand to the side of her head. Her gaze dropped to the floor, becoming unfocused, and she swayed on her feet. “They’re dead, but no … .”

Garrus took another step, moving to catch her if she fell. He needed to get a shot of the indoctrination serum into her.

“No. No, they were never alive.” Surreal, almost dance-like, she jolted rigid, rising onto her toes and stumbling backwards as she wrenched her gun back into both hands. Then she just stared at it as if she had no idea how it had arrived in her hands, let alone how to use it. “They’re out there, in
the darkness, sir,” she whispered, her voice dropping two decades, a little girl lost and alone with no idea how to find her way home.

Garrus nodded. “I know.” He looked toward Teung, and whispered, “First name?”

The Marine took a moment to answer, his eyes shifting about as if beginning to see monsters as well. He shook himself. “Amanda, um … Mandy, sir.”

Garrus popped open the pouch with the syringes of serum and tossed one to Teung. “Take that, now, before it gets any worse.”

The soldier nodded and stuck it into the medigel injection port, allowing Garrus to focus back on Rogers. Sharp legs skittered up his spine, on the inside, burrowing in where the invisible talons weakened his defenses, and cementing his guess at what Nihlus had seen through the cold-room glass.

“Nihlus, take yours,” he called back without turning, keeping his eyes fixed on Mandy Rogers.

“Everyone who worked here … they’re all dead, sir,” she whispered, “but they’re still here, trapped in the shadows, screaming. Can’t you feel them? Hear them?”

A sharp nod answered the question, his muscles holding his vertebrae so tight that they let out a serrated snap. Rogers jumped, her rifle slipping from her fingers to clatter across the floor. Letting out a braying yelp that drove a spike of black, rotted ice straight through his armour, piercing both lungs, she dropped to her hands and knees. A child whose security blanket had been torn from trembling fingers, she scrambled across the tile, knocking it out of reach in her panic. Once she caught hold of it, she lurched to her feet, clutching the weapon tight against her chest.

“I feel them,” Garrus replied, layering his voice with calm confidence, ‘but they’re shadows, Mandy. They can’t hurt us unless we let them in, unless we let them strip away our courage.” He held up a syringe. “This will help.”

Tears streamed from her eyes, glistening slick and wet in the light, as she stared at his hand. “Will it take their claws out of my head?” Her whisper echoed, a chorus of ghosts murmuring the question down the corridor.

“Yes. I need to inject it into the medigel port. All right?” He closed on her, keeping everything slow and steady.

Her eyes cleared, and she shook off terror’s blinders to close the distance at a strong march. Of course. She was a soldier. All she needed was to be given an effective weapon. “Yes, sir, although sooner would be better than later.”

A weary chuckle accompanied the injection. “If the pressure doesn’t back off completely, let me know,” he ordered. “I’ll give you another.” Garrus glanced over to the other Marine. “Teung, you okay over there?”

“Yes, sir, but I’m ready to get the hell out of here,” he replied, moving up beside Rogers.

“Me too.” Garrus gave himself an injection, then turned to Nihlus. “Let’s head back in there and get into the cold room.” Even as he headed back into the lab, he called back. “Watch one another as well as the corridor.”

Garrus ran across the large room, ducking between desks, almost positive of what he’d find inside the back room. Sure enough, when he entered the manual code and the door opened, one of the
black orbs sat dead center on a counter. Without even a heartbeat of hesitation, he pulled Roger, pelting the nightmarish globe with rounds until it exploded.

Instant relief pulled a ragged sigh from his throat, the claws loosening.

“Is that what attacked Shepard on the Citadel?” Nihlus asked, pushing up behind Garrus’s right shoulder. The Spectre shuddered. “It’s not the only one. I still feel them crawling around inside my head.”

Garrus nodded and turned on his heel. “Take another injection before it gets any worse.” He opened a channel to Kaidan’s team. “Team two, report in.”

“Team two, here, General,” Kaidan’s voice came through, sounding strained. “We’ve run into some trouble. All of us are experiencing visual and auditory hallucinations. We’ve taken a shot of the serum Dr. Chakwas gave us, but it’s not helping as much—”

A cry came through the radio, but not from Kaidan. A savage, male howl of hopelessness was followed by the ceramic ring and crunch of armour crashing into armour. Garrus could hear Kaidan grunting with effort as he grappled with someone, then the LT returned, gasping and breathless. “Peterson just attacked me, then took off screaming about monsters inside his head.”

“All of you take a second shot, and don’t bother going after Peterson, yet. Somewhere close by there is a black, iridescent orb. You’ve got to find it and destroy it.” Garrus strode for the door as he barked the orders, as if he intended to march straight to their position. Instead, he stopped just outside the lab door. “There will be more of them, Alenko. If the symptoms start getting bad, it means you’re close to one. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” After a pause, the lieutenant let out a sigh. “Tali found it. Orb destroyed, General.”

“Good, but there will be more. Stay sharp and head for engineering. Get the power on so we can get the hell out of here.” Garrus waved the others forward, continuing toward the bridge. “How close are you?”

“Ten minutes, if we don’t have any more of that. We’ll get there and get it done. Alenko, out.”

“They’re having problems as well?” Nihlus asked, taking the right flank again as they moved out into the large, open heart of the station.

“Yeah.” He looked up into the dark, wishing for his visor. The corridor opened into the central hub of the station, a great space of metal walkways and stairs. In the light, one could see up through the station’s dome to the docks where they assembled the dreadnoughts, and beyond them, the planet. Garrus could barely make out the slightly lighter area of the dome, what little sun made it around the planet certainly doing nothing to ease the pitch black in the belly of the station.

Seventy metres across, ten floors down, ten floors up. Spirits, help us.

The void felt alive, breathing and shifting around Garrus as if he stood within the chest of a great, sleeping beast. Their footsteps on the metal grating rang out, echoing from everywhere, an army of pursuers, racing to get to them before they could restore life to the station. The oppressive emptiness pressed down on Garrus until his head throbbed and his knees trembled beneath the weight.

“You will reveal what you are.” A few spiders wriggled into his skull, whispering as they squirmed and scraped against the bone. “Your mind is ours.”
“Push through,” he ordered, practically grunting the words.

A few steps into the open space, their flashlights became all but useless, the darkness gobbling down the beams. Panic belched sulfur into his blood, yellow and stinking, as he felt the shadows crawling in through his eyes, nose, and ears. He reached up to swipe them away, smacking his talons into his helmet.

“You’re strong,” the whispers rasped, skittering along the pathways of his mind. An image flashed through his mind of Shepard on her hands and knees in the Presidium markets, the shadows stealing her senses, raping her memories. “She was strong, but no more. She’s wasted away, weak and vulnerable. So very easily overridden.”

“I’m turned around already,” Teung said, snapping Garrus back. A harsh gasp marked each of the Marine’s inhalations. “How do we find the bridge if we can’t see more than a couple of metres ahead?”

How long had Garrus been standing there? Ten seconds? A minute? Five minutes? He looked down, shoving the whispers back, forcing himself to focus. The metal edge of the floor panel ran straight. He didn’t think he’d turned at all after entering. If they followed the floor, they should find something better able to help them orient themselves. At least if they got close enough to the center, their flashlights would work.

Was it their flashlights that failed? Or, as they’d done to Shepard, were the shadows—the terrible, tar-slick spiders—stealing their vision?

“You can tell the geth didn’t build this place with organics in mind,” Nihlus spoke up from Garrus’s right. The Spectre edged closer, closing ranks. “They probably never need any sort of emergency lighting.”

“I’ll take point,” Garrus said, injecting as much confidence into his voice as he could muster. “Rogers, Teung, then Nihlus. Keep your light on the person in front. If you need to stop for any reason, call out, wait for us to halt before stopping. If you get separated, watch the edge of the deck plating. We just need to head in a straight line.”

He waited for them to sort out their order, then turned his light to the floor up ahead. The space only measured two hundred paces across, and the bridge sat at the center, surrounded by labs and the geth server rooms. That left maybe a hundred steps in the wasteland.

More spiders broke through his defenses. True to his fears, as more of them invaded, his flashlight beam weakened. “Everyone take a second dose of the serum,” he ordered, fishing into his pouch to grab syringes for Teung and Rogers. He passed them over, then took his own. The pouch was empty. He hadn’t anticipated walking under an overwhelming indoctrination attack. Not a mistake he’d ever make again.

“Not again,” Nihlus whispered.

Garrus spun to face the Spectre. The darkness drew back, and he let out a relieved sigh. Spirits, he’d never take the light for granted again.

“I can’t. I can’t live with them crawling around inside my head any longer.” The Spectre shook his head, backing down the corridor away from them.

“Nihlus?” Garrus glanced at the other two as he strode toward Nihlus. “Did you two take your shots?”
“Yes, sir,” they replied in tandem.

“Nihlus, what’s going on?” Garrus held out his hand and continued to close. “Don’t take off on me. Talk to me.” He cursed under his breath as the Spectre’s retreat sped up. “Don’t run. Tell me what they’re saying.”

Nihlus stopped. “It’s not me. They’re attacking Tashac.” His gun clattered against the floor, dropping from his fingers as if they’d lost feeling. He reached up, clamping both hands against his helmet. “They’re torturing her.” He stumbled, almost going down. “I’m trying to block her out, but she’s screaming.”

“General!” Kaidan shouted in Garrus’s ear. “We’re in the engineering room. There are three orbs. Tali took one out, then disappeared. I took out the other two. Englestein is lying in a ball on the floor. I’m trying to get the power on, sir.”

“Understood, Kaidan. We’re deep in the shit here, too. Once the power is on, head for the bridge. We’ll figure out how to get our people back once we’ve got lights.”

“Yes, sir. Alenko, out.”

Garrus looked toward Rogers. “You holding together, Mandy?”

She nodded, her eyes huge as she watched Nihlus flail. “Yes, sir. Shaky, but holding.”

“Keep talking to him, and get that second shot into him. Don’t let him run off. See if you can get him moving toward the bridge.” Garrus waited for her acknowledgement then started to back away. “I’m going to go to the bridge and destroy any orbs, then we can rally there.” He reached out a hand toward Nihlus. “Keep Tashac calm, Nihlus. Don’t let her panic, whatever you have to do. Can Merol talk to her?”

The Spectre didn’t reply, his hands still clutching his head.

“Have Merol keep her calm. You know he can. I’ll get you out of here as quickly as I can.” After another second, Garrus turned, able to see the flashlight gleaming faintly off the walkway to the bridge. Thank the spirits for Dr. Chakwas, the crazy salarian, and their potion. His brain felt like the spiders had started tearing up neurons like someone ripping wiring out of a electronics panel, and he’d been dealing with it for a couple of hours.

Spirits, how much of the time since that day on the Citadel had Shepard fought off the poison left inside her head by the orbs? The woman never ceased to—

The spiders … no, the whispers, he needed to stop thinking of them as physical beings … said she was strong, but that she was weak and vulnerable to them now. They couldn’t torment her even in death, could they? Surely they’d meant that to help break him down. Dear spirits, sweet baby Jesus, the blessed enkindlers, and every other entity or belief known to sapient life, let them have just been tormenting him.

Pushing himself faster, running a little blind, Garrus raced toward the bridge. He needed to destroy the orbs before they pushed back into his head and stole his senses. Before they stole his sense, and he ended up running or curling up in a ball, the vision of his Kahri, alone in the dark, tormented and afraid, robbing him of his hope and reason.

“Sir! Nihlus just took off,” Rogers called out. “Dammit, I just about had him, and then he just turned and ran.”
“Understood. Get to the bridge.” He dug in harder, straining with every last scrap of resolve and strength to get there. Then his hands slapped against the panel next to the door. The code … he couldn’t remember the … but his fingers moved on their own and then it cracked open. Pulling the door back, he stayed in cover, not sure what awaited him other than more orbs.

The lights flickered on, died, and then slowly began to glow, growing brighter and brighter. All around him, equipment hummed as it woke up, some of it letting out alarming sputters in the freezing temperatures. The generators deep in the bowels of the station sent reassuringly normal vibrations through the deck into his talons, and computers bleeped and winked on. He let out a relieved laugh. Thank the spirits. Power. Power would ease back the fear and banish the slippery, wet-tar shadows.

Glancing around the door, he saw the bridge coming back to life, but as with everywhere else, no geth, no workers. He stepped over the threshold, glancing around at the different computers. What did he need to figure out where everyone had gone?

As he walked into the space, Roger finding its way back into his hand, he spotted six orbs around the room, sitting on desks, innocuous as you could hope for. Did the geth or the people there even know what the things were? Had they brought them in for study? He’d have to send out an advisory to all Archangel facilities to destroy the orbs on sight. He raised the rifle.

“Holy shit,” Teung whispered from just behind Garrus’s shoulder. “Five … no, six of them.”

Garrus jumped a little as the man spoke, then froze solid and still. Four, bright, gold lights appeared on every monitor and screen in the room. Four lights that looked like … eyes. They flashed, as bright as the sun for a second, blinding him, then the power died, the spiders swarming into the darkness left behind.
Chapter Summary

Shepard's recovery might proceed more quickly if she cooperated a little. Ha! Like that'll happen.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for sexual abuse in the Kai Leng conversation where you see the double asterisk. **

(A-N: Sorry it took so long to get this chapter out. I've been eyeball deep in Thedas, running the Inquisition, and I've been suffering a sort of writing crisis of faith, so it came slower and took a lot more rewriting than usual. I am going to just post as I get things done until after Christmas. Garrus has been insisting I get him out of his hot water, so I probably should ... or let him cook. ;) Thanks for reading, as always. Hugs for those who like them. ;) Kim)

12 Days ASR

“Shepard! What are you doing, now?”

A crooked grin broke across Shepard’s face before she policed herself back to an expression of guileless surprise. Rolling over part way, she looked up at her Dr. Frankenstein. “Art therapy.”

God, something in Miranda’s cool, haughty expression just brought out Shepard’s twitchy inner bitch. In spades. She struggled to choke it down.

In the last week, she’d made it a rule—well, maybe more of a suggestion—to not poke the mad scientists who routinely played around inside her brain. Miranda had brought her back from the dead. Who knew what other tricks the woman had up her way-too-tight-catsuit’s sleeve?

“Shepard, we thought you could use a set of hanar tentacles. Don’t they look marvellous?”

“On the walls?” Miranda strode to the bedside, blue eyes flashing exasperation. “Must you behave like a child?”

“Seems so, yep.” Shepard shrugged and continued her doodle, tossing tiny glances over her shoulder. “Kelly says I need to draw my feelings.”

“And your feelings express themselves as stick figure murals?” Miranda crossed her arms, hands laying over her elbows primly. She cocked a hip and did that head tilt that Shepard translated as ‘I disapprove of every cell in your being’. “That explains a great deal.”

“In this case, yes. These are my musings on your big, bubbly buttocks.” She pointed to a group of male and female stick people standing in a line, their mouths gaping open and their eyes bugging
out of their heads. “See, these guys and gals here are the ones who are huge fans of your tight pleather, rubber, or whatever, catsuit.” She drew a circle around another group, all of whom wore ugly frowns. “These ones here are the ones who call you a bitch and say you got where you are with your legs open.”

_Yep, definitely more of a suggestion. Oh well, can’t win them all. Point to twitchy inner bitch._

She gestured up to a single stick figure way above the rest. “That’s whoever is in charge of this zoo, watching and not giving a shit because your insecurity over being nothing more than a perfect set of genes keeps you working like a maniac to prove otherwise.” Grinning, she tapped the pencil against a stick figure with boobs and a pronounced backside. “And that’s you in the center of it all, oblivious as the day is long because the aforementioned fear keeps you running too fast to notice.”

Miranda nodded and turned toward the door. “Although your perception appears unaffected, prior to your death you did not have a reputation for cruelty,” she said. “In fact, witness interviews say quite the opposite.” She activated her omnitool.

“Yeah, well, it’s a mostly all-new day starring Jane Shepard, living corpse.” Shepard sighed and let her arm hang off the edge of the bed. “The circle of death; dead dogs learn new tricks; a nasty doodle in time saves nine; great bitches from little, dead acorns grow; and all that crap. Take your pick.”

“Honestly, Shepard, I’m surprised at your attitude. This entire program is designed to get you back to your prime, and give you a second chance. Don’t you want to do the work and get back to your life? Why fight us?”

Shepard rolled over and grabbed the bar above her bed to pull herself up. “Why fight? You and your little crew of Igors sneak in here at night, cut me open, adjust and implant whatever you want, and the next day, viola, I’m talking like I never took a bullet to the head.” She laughed, but it felt and tasted like throwing up. Reaching up, she pushed her hair away from a fresh scar on the back of her neck. “Oh! Why, listen to me talk. Not a slur or stutter to be heard. It’s almost like you’ve already done it.”

A small muscle in Miranda’s jaw tightened before she let out an exasperated sigh. “We’re bringing you back from a catastrophic brain injury, Shepard, and you woke up six months earlier than scheduled. If you’d just let us put you back into the induced coma, all this time and pain would pass effortlessly. You’d wake up completely functional but for some physical conditioning.” She walked slowly to the door, keying information into her omnitool. “Your speech is almost one hundred percent thanks to our adjustments, so perhaps a little gratitude and trust are in order.”

“Gratitude? Your idea of help amounts to the worst sort of violation, Operative Lawson. What you people have done and continue to do to me is unconscionable. At least the batarians were upfront when they raped me. They didn’t roll that shit in sugar, stuff it into a candy wrapper labelled ‘helping’, and then ask me to be thankful while they shoved it down my throat.”

She stared into Miranda’s eyes as the woman spun to face her, shock and disgust trying hard to break through the practiced mask of inscrutable professionalism. After a second, Shepard laughed, but the sound sliced its way out. “Sweet baby Jesus, you actually buy all the bullshit you feed me, don’t you? You don’t even understand why I’m angry.” Shepard shook her head, incredulous, then leaned forward. “You’re fucking me without my permission, Lawson. Get that through your head. Let it register, and then ask yourself if you even considered sitting down and asking me if I’d agree to your procedures.”

Miranda straightened, her expression haughty, even for her. “You’d just refuse.”
Shepard shrugged, a bare twitch of one shoulder. “Maybe. That’s my right.”

The operative shook her head. “In your current state, you’re incapable of rational decision making when it comes to your welfare.” A tiny wince broke through the mask, as if she realized she’d cracked open a door to nowhere good.

Shepard slid off the bed, clinging to the bar with one hand, and walked unsteadily to stare directly into Miranda’s face. “Then take me to the Alliance, have me tested, and declared incompetent. The courts can appoint someone to decide what’s best for me.”

“Shepard … .”

The captain nodded and jerked a thumb back toward her wall doodle. “And then you call that little jab cruel, but it’s petty at best. It amounts to a tiny, baby morsel of cruelty compared to the hell of being your ‘guest’. So thank you, really. I’m so grateful to be your lab rat, held without even the most basic rights or expectation of humanity.” She choked down the rotted tangle of terror and helplessness that clawed its way up her throat, her stomach heaving a little as she swallowed it. “If it’s okay with you, I’ll need a bit of time to work on the trust,” she said, her words soft but sharp.

The glimmer of understanding that flashed through Miranda’s eyes eased Shepard back from the edge before she saw the moment of humanity swept away.

The operative let out a sigh so sharp it could have sliced a tomato into ten pieces and left it looking whole. “You aren’t a prisoner, Shepard, and I’ve explained this. We brought you back to help with a situation that requires your skills. We’re asking for your help, not demanding it.”

“Then why won’t you tell me who you work for? Why can’t I contact Anderson?” Shepard resisted the urge to look away as she backed up, returning to lean against her bed. She stared straight into Miranda’s eyes, clenching her jaw as tears pooled along her lower lashes. She missed Anderson so keenly that thinking about him snatched the air out of her lungs. He was her only family, and she longed to hear him tell her one of his ridiculous stories, performing all the characters despite grumbling about it. A single tear muscled loose to trickle alongside her nose, but she didn’t acknowledge it. Wiping it away would give her grief, and Miranda, more power than she was willing to share.

“Shepard.” The clinical attempt at sympathy in the operative’s voice evaporated Shepard’s tears in an instant. “Look at your reaction to merely mentioning him. Your brain is still regenerating, still learning how to process emotion and memory. It’s not prepared to handle the intensity that seeing him would provoke.” She pressed a control on her omnitool and then turned the device off. “When you are ready, I’ll connect the call for you myself.” She flipped a hand toward the doodle. “For now, enough childishness. Go to physio. Your other lessons begin in under an hour.”

Shepard deflated in a single, long breath, her shoulders dropping. “Fine, now go away. Your monster needs to run rampant and terrorize the villagers.”

At the door, Miranda turned back, nodding toward the cameras in the corners of the room. “Oh, and since you refuse to allow anyone to assist you, at least uncover the cameras so we know if you fall over and injure yourself.”

“I don’t want your creepy security people staring at me.” Shepard glanced toward one of Big Brother’s offending eyes.

“There are no security people watching you,” the operative said, her lip curling a little, as if the admission pained her. “Kelly, Vincent, and myself trade off as needed.” She drew herself taller. “It
seemed appropriate given that your desire for privacy has resulted in nine orderlies and nurses resigning due to outrageously abusive language and food throwing. So uncover them.” Another, much softer sigh escaped. “And, Shepard, as you’re gnawing at that bone you like to pick, consider that I’ve had several opportunities to put you back into the coma and save myself the headaches and staff rollover.”

Shepard scowled as she watched Dr. Frankenstein open the door. She hadn’t thought about that. “Why haven’t you?” she blurted out before the portal closed.

Miranda glanced back. “Because I gave you my word.”

Once Miranda left the room, Shepard pushed herself onto her feet, clinging to the railing until she caught her balance. Six days earlier, she’d woken up oddly exhausted from a peculiarly long and uninterrupted night’s sleep to discover greatly improved motor control over her arms and hands. Four nights after that, another very strange night followed by a drastic increase in her leg function.

She reached up to grab hold of the bar that hung from a track along the ceiling, then took a shaky step toward her hoverchair. Grinding her teeth so hard they squeaked, she fought down the pain of the invisible iron maiden that clamped shut around her entire body. As terrified as she felt at being comatose and completely helpless in the hands of the mad scientists, the pain did polish up the appeal of sleeping through the next several months.

She glanced at the mirror over the sink, wincing a little at the web of open wounds spread across her face. When she asked why they weren’t sutured, Miranda gave her some sciencey mumbo jumbo about tissue cloning and growth rates. Shepard detoured over to the mirror, muscles trembling and joints rebelling as she clung to the bar and hobbled the metre and a half. She turned her head, then lifted her chin. Every ounce of flesh on her body—her corpse—had been dead, slightly decomposed, and then freeze-dried. Now, she looked the very image of Frankenstein’s monster, lights glowing through the cracks and gashes, the machine bursting out through her flesh everywhere.

And then …

Gripping the hanging bar with one hand, she tugged her shirt out of her trousers with the other. A soft moan whistled through her closed throat as the material rasped and scraped at the raw, meaty edges. She lifted the t-shirt, gripping the hem in her teeth, and stared at her torso.

In giving Shepard all new flesh and skin, Miranda had stolen her scars. The regrowing flesh didn’t cover her completely—a clear sealant filled the gaps, providing some protection from weeping, infection and wear—but the ribbons of raised flesh from the whips; the short, jagged marks from knives; the punctures of teeth and claw had all vanished.

Just like most of your life, Janey. Sweet baby Jesus, you’re a disgusting mess.

“Yeah,” she whispered, meeting her reflection’s eyes and staring into the faint glow that shone through her pupils. Who was she without her past written across her skin?

She lifted her hand to a breast, sucking in a quick breath as pain shot to her brain, and a slower, warm wave of pleasure headed for points south. Running her thumb over her nipple, she scowled. She’d never understood why women went on about having their breasts fondled. The scar tissue had left hers with almost no sensation at all. Just one more thing that wasn’t Jane Shepard, but rather the creation of Miranda Lawson, mad scientist and necromancer.

“If you’re done feeling yourself up, I’m waiting in the physio room,” a thickly accented, male
“Stop spying on me, you pervert.” She dropped her shirt and glared up at the camera in the corner of her room, or more appropriately, the towel that covered it. “Hey, how are you spying on me? That camera is covered.”

“Infrared. Operative Lawson knew you’d try to hide.” The voice laughed. “Now, get that pathetically weak ass down here. Now! Or I’m coming up there.”

Startled, Shepard laughed. “Oh no! Not the universe’s most terrifying physiotherapist.” Still, she grabbed onto the bar with both hands and hobbled over to her mobile chair. “What are you going to do, Vincent? Count reps until I beg for mercy?”

“And one, and two, and three, and four. That’s it, come on, you can do it. If it doesn’t hurt, you’re doing it wrong. Four more.” He cleared his throat. “You know you fear the power of the counting. And three more—”

She dropped into the chair, stifling a sharp cry of pain by biting down on her bottom lip. “Oh, shut up, you slab of beef, I’m on my way,” she said, each word a hissing gasp. She leaned heavily against the armrest for a moment, just breathing through the screams.

“What I just said about it hurting doesn’t apply to sitting in your damned chair, Shepard,” Vincent shouted. “Damn it, woman. How many times do you have to tear all those wounds? Use the fucking bar to lower yourself.”

Shepard scowled up at the camera without lifting her head. “How about you just go get yourself a nice, big, steaming mug of shut the hell up?” she asked, fighting to keep the breathiness out of her voice.

“Shepard,” a new voice called through, “do what you’re told, and get down there.”

Unable to stop herself from grinning, Shepard sorted herself into the middle of the seat and lifted her feet onto the rests. “Hey, Red, why are you spying on me? You can’t play head games with the camera feed.”

“I can try,” Kelly replied, her ever-present smile radiating through her tone.

Shepard looked back up at the camera. “I sent a memo out to all departments, but in case you didn’t get it … the whole bringing me back from the dead was enough psychological torture for one … nope, make that two lifetimes.”

“You’ve been avoiding me for two days, Shepard” Kelly answered. “I thought I’d ambush you in physio—announcing myself may have undermined that effort—but you’re also avoiding Vincent by the looks of things.”

Shepard guided her chair to the door. “Well, right now, I’m obeying my masters like a good little monster, so ambush away, Red. I’ll be there in five unless I need to ditch the two idiots Miranda assigned to follow me around. The other day I managed to lock them in the pool shower room.”

Shepard left the oddly comforting sanctuary of her room and made her way through the space station, her eyes on the floor. Thankfully, the shower incident had made her point, and the two nurses that Miranda paid to shadow her kept well back. No one spoke to her, and she spoke to no one. She preferred it that way. Empathy, real or false, just grated on her. Besides, no one could manage to look at her for longer than a few seconds. Not that she blamed them for it. She could barely look at her own face, seeing the alien glow staring back, the lights blinking through her
Another wave of loneliness and longing for Anderson’s gruff comfort swept through her. He’d be able to take one look and then tell her if she still existed under the machinery … if she’d been brought back intact. How did she go out into the galaxy, try to rekindle friendships—ones she hoped she possessed, just didn’t recall—and trust herself if she’d been brought back hollowed out?

Either because of luck or because everyone was too terrified to get into the elevator with her, she rode down the twenty floors to the physiotherapy facility alone. Vincent awaited her at the door.

“What?” she grumbled, moving past him without even really looking up. “I said I was on my way. Don’t trust me?”

“Not like there isn’t precedent for you pulling a disappearing act between here and your room,” he grumbled. “At least Kelly confirmed that it’s not just my sessions that you ditch as often as possible.”

“Yeah, well, sorry about that. You aren’t special. I avoid everyone like the plague.” She stopped a meter or so inside the door.

Vincent stepped around her, walking over to a recumbent cycle. Rich, chestnut eyes stared at her, expectant but also patient and kind as he held out a large, square hand. “Your chariot awaits.”

A tiny singularity in her memory pulled at her, promising a great deal if she allowed it to drag her in. A heavy scowl creased her face as she spoke, her voice drifting out of … what? … a memory? “You’re starting to worry me, big guy. Did turians use chariots, or are you a student of ancient human history?”

“Turians?” Vincent asked from the other side of the chasm. “I’m almost tall enough, but I’m pretty sure I’ll never be mistaken for one.” He pulled Shepard back out of the rabbit hole as he crouched and placed his hands on her knees. “You remembering something, Shepard?”

Shepard shrugged and met his stare. “Hell if I know. The words just appeared there. No context or anything useful.” She lifted her feet off the rests and lowered them to the floor then held out her hands. “Just like everything else.” Before Vincent could take them, Shepard dropped them back to her lap. “Everything that made up Jane Shepard got left behind wherever I was.” Letting out a sharp snort of disgust, she shook her head. “Who gives a shit, right?” She held her hands out. “Come on, get me on the damned cycle.”

Vincent helped her settle onto the bike, then straddled the housing over the front mechanism and leaned forward, braced against the cycle, looming over her like a hawk. “Listen up, Captain. Everything that is Jane Shepard is sitting right in front of me.” The therapist sighed. “Do I understand how they brought you back?” Shrugging, he paused for a moment before continuing, “Not even remotely, but maybe you have a reason to be here.” Sucking in a quick, sharp breath, he shook his head. “No, that’s wrong. I know you have reasons to be here.”

Shepard took note of the emphasis on the plural. She lowered her gaze to the task of watching where she put her feet as she lifted them onto the pedals. “Are any of these reasons turian?” she asked, keeping her voice as vaguely casual as possible even though she knew Vincent would see straight through it.

“Shepard.” Her name came out as a plea. “You know I can’t—”

“A voice speaks to me sometimes when it’s quiet. Mostly at night.” She started peddling, the
motion absent and slow as she searched for the depths below the surface of the ghostly voices that kept her from sleep. “He tells me stories, and I’m pretty sure from the way his voice is flanged that he’s turian.” Glancing up, she met a remarkably mirror-like stare that gave nothing away, so either he didn’t know anything or he’d been taking lessons from Miranda.

Vincent straightened and stepped clear of the cycle.

“Yeah,” she whispered, “that’s what I thought you’d say.”

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Shepard grinned up at the camera in the corner of the physiotherapy room. “Hello, my name is Captain Jane Shepard, and welcome to another episode of Necromancy Bulletin. Today, I want to talk to you about the death-altering malady of Zombile Dysfunction.” She raised her eyebrows and nodded earnestly. “Chances are, there is someone in your life right now who suffers from Zombile Dysfunction. In this next hour, I’m going to give you some tips and tricks to help you and your undead friend or loved one overcome the stigmas and complications of rising from the grave.”

She glanced over to give Vincent her brightest, most fake smile. “Those of you, like me, who’ve come back from the dead, know that one of the first signs of Zombile Dysfunction is the elephant that moves into the room. No one wants to talk about the fact that a few days or weeks ago, you were a corpse … a freeze-dried body in a coffin. Well, ladies and gentlemen, if we allow that elephant to stomp around our lives, it’ll break all grandma’s fine china. We need to drag our zombpotency out into the light of day, as embarrassing and awkward as it might be.”

She sighed and shook her head. “I know that it isn’t easy to be dug out of your eternal rest or hijacked from a peaceful burial at sea, but you’ve got to keep your chin up and look to the positive. I’m here to tell you that zombpotency does not have to be the end of a happy and satisfying death. Nope, once you’re back amongst the living, you too can become a corporate asset enslaved to any number of evil organizations galaxy wide.”

A bright giggle from the door tore Shepard’s attention from the camera. “Shepard!” Kelly exclaimed. She seemed to be trying for some combination of disapproval and disappointment, and might even have succeeded if not for the odd giggle that broke through. “You’re so bad.”

“So bad, I’m good?” Shepard countered, pedalling with as much vigor as she could muster.

The psychologist shook her head, her eyebrows taking flight for her hairline. “No! Just bad. In fact, it’s progressing to abusive, and no … phrasing it as a joke doesn’t make it any less hurtful or beneath you.”

Kelly crossed the room, her expression finally managing to switch over to serious. “You’re not a prisoner held captive in the lair of some comic book villain, Shepard. If you stopped spending all your time dreaming up new ways to be a pain in Miranda’s ass and just did the work, you’d get out of here.” Her eyebrows arched in challenge, lips quirking in a slight smile. “It could be a gift, you know? A chance to do everything you never got around to.”

“You died at thirty, Shepard,” Vincent added, stepping up beside his co-worker. “There has to be a long list of crap you would have done given more time.”

Shepard gave them one of her pointed laughs. “My last thought was ‘Thank God, I don’t have to fight the war’.” She raised her eyebrows and popped her shoulders. “How does that rank on your imaginary bucket list?”
Kelly smiled and stepped around Shepard’s hoverchair, sitting on the edge of the seat. “You’re not railing about being brought back to life, are you? You’re not even really acting out because of all this.” She lifted a finger, circling it to encompass more than just the room or the station, but everything involved in bringing her back to life. “You’re afraid of what going back out there means.”

“And?” Shepard snapped, hard and fierce, but then stopped pedaling and lowered her arms, her hands flopping between her thighs. “If you mean that I’m afraid of leaving this dungeon just to be shackled to an oar of your company’s Trireme to fight a war against an enemy so terrifying that I considered death a relief? Damn straight, I am, Red. Damn straight, I am.” Rain breaking free from rolling, black thunderclouds to pound the ground clean, the words poured out, allowing the sky to lighten and the pressure to lift.

Kelly smiled and reached out to squeeze Shepard’s shoulder. “There’s nothing wrong with being afraid of going back out there. I’d be worried if you—” The psychologist looked toward the door as it opened, her usually rosy, cheerful complexion draining of all colour.

Alarmed by the young woman’s sudden pallor, Shepard followed her stare. An asian man stood just inside the portal. Dark brown eyes narrowed and full lips lifted into a crooked sneer as he looked over at them. Shepard watched him until she noticed Kelly slide from her chair and sidle over behind the cycle.

“Are you all right?” she whispered, her stare returning to the newcomer as he stepped onto one of the treadmills. He entered the settings, a panorama of deep space appearing on the screen meant to give you the illusion of running somewhere awesome or beautiful.

*He likes to run in a vacuum. Good for him.*

She looked back to Vincent and Kelly, watching them, her mouth quirked in an expression unable to decide whether to be a crooked grin or a twisted frown. “What?” she asked as the fear in the air coalesced into something with enough mass to have its own gravity field. Both of them kept shooting glances toward the treadmill and twitched at every sound. “Why are you two suddenly as jumpy as long-tailed cats in a room full of blind grannies in rocking chairs?”

Tracking their nervous glances to the fellow on the treadmill, she whispered, “Really? That guy?”

“Sh!” Kelly hissed louder than Shepard had spoken. The mystery man glanced their way, letting out a derisive sort of grunt before returning to his running.

Shepard ignored Kelly’s warning. “So, what’s the deal with Mr. Short, Dark, and Greasy? He the company assassin or something?” Her half-grin died as Kelly stumbled backward a step. “What? Seriously? What sort of fucking company is this?” The blood drained from Shepard’s face, leaving the flesh feeling slack and clammy. “You didn’t bring him back from the dead, did you?” She pushed herself up in the cycle, fighting down the panic that insisted she run far and fast. “Sweet Jesus, that’s not the mystery task they brought me back to do, is it?”

Kelly stiffened—Shepard hoped from surprise, not guilt—then eased down and laid a hand on the captain’s shoulder. “No, of course not, Shepard. No one wants you to assassinate people.” She took a long breath. “Just … just stay away from him.” She looked over her shoulder as if expecting him to have crept up behind her. “He shouldn’t even be in here. I asked management to transfer him to J wing yesterday.”

Vincent patted Kelly’s back and let out a dismissive laugh, but Shepard smelled the frozen iron tang of fear running under it. “Not that he cares what others say he shouldn’t be doing.” He nodded
toward the parallel bars. “You’ve got those next, Shepard, so let’s forget Leng and concentrate on getting you back on your feet.”

Shepard stared at the two of them for a couple more seconds then shook her head and did as she’d been told. “I won’t be turned into someone who sends everyone diving for cover when I enter a room,” she whispered. “You can tell that to your corporate overlord.” In the silence that followed, Shepard registered that the treadmill had stopped.

“Who’s this, Miss Chambers?” a smooth, masculine voice asked. The man stepped up beside Shepard, pressing in too close to Kelly. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to the one who replaced me?”

Kelly swallowed hard and nodded, jerking a hand out toward him as she backed up a step. “Captain Shepard, this is Kai Leng.” The psychologist looked up, meeting Leng’s eyes. “Whether or not Shepard replaces you is up to management, not me.”

He smiled, but it slid across his face in a way that flooded Shepard’s gut with ice water. “I was referring to your decision to transfer me to Dr. Peniski, not my employment.” He pushed right in, reaching up to stroke Kelly’s cheek with the backs of his fingers. “I’ll miss our time together. We were getting so close.”

Shepard slapped his hand away. “Back up, buddy.” Twisting her mouth off to one side in an exaggerated wince, she shook her head and clicked her tongue. “Wouldn’t want the lady to get stuck in all that hair product.” She shot Kelly a quick wink, a silent warning to retreat over to Vincent, which the redhead did.

Leng spun on Shepard, his expression all the more chilling as it warped his handsome features into an ugly, brutal mask. “Laying your hands on me can prove dangerous, Shepard. I wouldn’t want them to have to bring you back from the dead a second time.”

The assassin bent down until his nose pressed against her cheek. Running the tip along her cheekbone to her ear, he said, “My father taught me to hunt … to revel in the kill. I love sighting down a deer. It always freezes, sides heaving, eyes darting because it senses death stalking it, waiting for the right moment to claim it.” He clamped a hand down on Shepard’s shoulder, fingertips searching until they found one of the splits in her flesh then sinking in. His other hand stabbed out to stop Vincent in his tracks as the therapist leaped to intervene. “There’s nothing like the rush of watching it try to decide which way to run, instinct demanding that it try to live even though some part of it knows its time is up. It’s intoxicating.”

“Back off, Leng,” Vincent said, his voice a low growl. “You know Miranda’s already on her way, and you’re in deep enough shit without adding to it.”

“It’s remarkable how alike deer and humans react in that moment. Of course, deer show more dignity, not begging or pissing themselves,” Leng whispered, staying focused on Shepard, his breath prickling her skin like nettles. “You won’t beg, will you?” He chuckled as she stiffened despite trying to keep herself still. “No, you’re too strong for that. I’m going to enjoy playing with you.”

** “So, who was it?” Shepard asked, fighting with her voice to keep it steady and soft. Leaning back, she turned to look him in the eye. When Kai Leng didn’t answer except to squeeze harder, she raised an eyebrow. “Oh, I hit the nerve there, didn’t I?” She cocked her head, eyes narrowing as she studied him, trying to see through the ice and stone. Leng hid well, but not completely. “Uncle? Cousin? Grandmother? Much older brother, maybe.” Nodding, she pressed her lips tight in empathy. “I get it. It sucks to be someone’s little cock-puppet. It breaks something way down
inside that never quite heals.”

The hand loosened but didn’t release her. “Your smart mouth is going to get you killed one of these days, Shepard.”

“Actually,” she said, her eyebrows lifting toward her hairline, “I think it already has. And, yeah, it probably will again, but not by the likes of you.” She smiled her sweetest, most condescending smile, covering for the guinea pig squealing and freaking out inside her chest. “Now back off before this ‘been mostly dead all day’, weak-ass N7 kicks your sorry buttcheeks all the way back to your treadmill.”

“Leng!”

Shepard winced at the sound of what surely amounted to the cavalry and glanced over at Miranda, who stood just inside the door. “We’re just getting acquainted here, Dr. Frankenstein. Nothing to worry about.”

The man turned toward the door and Miranda’s furious, but icily controlled form. The gloved claws clenched around Shepard’s shoulder pulled up, stabbing an electrified pitchfork through the joint. “Operative Lawson. Come to save your little science project?” He laughed and released his grip only to slap the hand down hard. “I don’t blame you. This one is sure to win you first prize.”

Shepard clenched her teeth, fighting to keep her breathing even, but even so, drops of over-ripe, rotten torment squeezed from the corners of her eyes to slide down the curve of her nose.

“Leng, you were reassigned to J wing this morning. Get there,” Miranda said, her tone so condescending that Shepard wouldn’t have used it to scold cockroaches.

“I don’t recognize your authority,” Leng said, smoothly stepping away. “I take my orders from management.”

“Management has scheduled a meeting for eight weeks from now to discuss your future,” Miranda replied. She nodded toward the door. “After the Subject Zero fiasco, you’re lucky to get that.” Crossing her arms, she waited, head tilted ever so slightly. “Until then, consider yourself on a very short leash.”

Leng bent down until his lips brushed Shepard’s ear. He sucked in a long, wet breath and whispered, “Mmm, there it is. You can feel the crosshairs, can’t you?”

Mustering all her strength, Shepard reached up to grip his jaw, shoving his face away. “Fuck off, little boy. You don’t impress me.” In the peripheral of her vision, she saw Miranda move in and held up her index finger, a silent request to handle the situation herself.

Leng straightened, his hands held out in a mocking gesture of surrender. At a speed surely meant as some sort of rebellion against Miranda’s authority, he sauntered to the door. Just before stepping through, he glanced back at Kelly. “See you soon, Miss Chambers”

Miranda placed herself in his line of sight, earning her first Shepard-point as she blocked Kelly. “Harassment of any employee is grounds for retirement, Leng. Remember that. If I see you out of J wing for any reason, you’ll wait for your meeting in a cell.”

“Oh, I promise you won’t see me.” He chuckled and walked out the door.

“Well,” Shepard said, beginning to pedal again, “that was bracing. Lovely young man.”
Miranda’s lip didn’t relax out of its slight, disgusted curl as she approached them. “If he bothers either of you again, report it.” She straightened and folded her arms as if that ended the entire subject of Kai Leng, then nodded at Shepard. “Glad to see you at work, Shepard.”

The captain didn’t reply, not wanting to give anything away, particularly not the fact that she intended to work like hell if only to be prepared for Leng’s inevitable retribution. After a moment of heavy silence, she decided something needed to be said and looked up. “Kelly is very convincing. Gives one hell of a pep-talk.”

She looked around, eyes patronizingly shifty as she pursed her lips then pulled them back. “Soooo … Is there something we can do for you, Doc Frank? Or did you just come down to compare scary frowns with your pet assassin?”

Miranda barely flinched, cool and collected as she replied, “You have a guest coming to assist with your rehabilitation, Shepard. Her arrival is scheduled for a little over two hours from now.” She gave Kelly and Vincent curt nods, then turned on her heel and left.

“Wow,” Shepard said after the door closed, “she came to give that news in person. It must be important.”

“Well, and to rescue us from the psycho,” Kelly replied. “I wonder who it is. She hasn’t said a word about it to me.”

“Come on, lazy,” Vincent said, breaking through Shepard’s intended smart-ass response. “You’re just using that bike as an excuse to sit on your ass.” He held out his hands. “Parallel bars, now.”

Shepard grabbed hold of his hands and hauled herself to her feet, pausing to give the agony in her joints and the rents in her flesh time to numb a little. Once she could speak again without a scream breaking loose and racing around the room, she asked, “So, why are you here, Kelly? For real? Not that you aren’t a spark of sunshine in my otherwise dreary days, but you must have had an ulterior motive.”

The psychologist let out a very uncharacteristic snort at the sunshine remark, then walked around to stand at the other end of the parallel bars. “Actually, I do come bearing good news.” Stopping there, she leaned on one hip and crossed her arms.

Shepard was glad to see it was the normal, hands tucked into the elbow way, not Miranda’s ‘I’m too good to cross my arms like you normals’ way. Still, Kelly just stood there, watching Shepard gimp her way to the bars, a smart ass grin disguising any lingering upset Leng might have caused.

Shepard grasped the bars and leaned on trembling arms. “You’d better spill before I get there, Red, or there will be pain. Oh yes, so very much pain.”

Kelly rolled her eyes and shook her head. “You’re all talk, Shepard, but fine … I convinced Miranda to move you out of secure holding and into a regular room. Vid screen, no locks … even a computer, although it won’t have extranet access.”

Shepard forced a smile, not wanting to rain on the good news. And, it should have been good news. It was good news. She’d wanted proof she wasn’t a prisoner, after all. Getting an unsecured room was a step in the right direction. Now, if only she could get Kai Leng’s promise out of her head.

Centimetre by centimetre, she made her way down the bars, forcing her body past its limits, working until Vincent forced her back into her chair. When she caught her breath, she turned back
to the camera in the corner.

“Hey! Doc Frankenstein! Make time for me in your schedule later. I want to discuss your timetable for getting me back to one hundred percent. Consider me cooperative.”
Mass Effect - Future Complex Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Summary

Garrus wakes up somewhere strange after being whammied by the orbs on the shipyard.

Torin: Male turian of the age of majority.
Fratrin: Brother
Pari: Father
Praela: Ancient turian spirits of war

12 Days ASR

Oblivion drew back, pain driving the shadowy denizens of unconsciousness before it, more relentless than a turian square*. The slow, burning agony roared through his cells, incinerating his synapses as it laid claim to every centimetre of territory relinquished. For long moments, he thought the war might be a short one with a tragic end, but then he took a deep breath, shattering agony’s reign.

The scent of blood—blood and something else, something wrong—brought fear marching onto the field of battle. It planted its flag and sent out scouts, forcing Garrus’s eyes open. The blinding darkness held its ground even as fear threw itself against it, demanding that it submit. Slowly, grudgingly, it did; a pale, watery grey creeping through narrow gaps around a door. The faint light revealed a room made up of huge slabs of cut stone. Dark stains splashed the walls, black and gleaming. The smell gave him far too clear a picture of what made up those stains.

Pressing his hands to the stone, he started to push himself up, his talons squelching through at least a centimetre of foul-smelling slime before sliding across the stone. Digging the sharp ends of his digits into the floor, he halted the slide and shoved himself up onto one hip. Every body part he owned—and a few he was fairly sure he must have borrowed—formed a complaints committee and voted that the banging in his head lead them. He felt like he had after Virmire. Despite knowing better, he’d still hoped to never feel that beaten, raw, and bruised again.

Once sitting up, settled and steady with his back against the wall, he lifted a hand, watching the ooze drip from it, morbidly fascinated. He leaned forward to sniff at it. Something that smelled far too close to decaying blood made up at least fifty percent of whatever it was. He sniffed again, fighting down his gag reflex. Some sort of organic fuel?

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, the composition of the slime took a back seat to the sheer amount of it splattered everywhere. Was it some sort of abattoir? The chill in the air certainly lent credence to that idea of a refrigerator. For a moment, as he sat, shivering in the stink, the dark marks on the wall moved, swaying in the slow dance of hanging meat … meat with arms dangling, fingers brushing the floor. A hand wrapped around his throat, ephemeral fingers crushing his windpipe until only a razor-sharp whistle of air managed to squeeze through the fear.

“Stop it!” he called out loud, the sharp, strangled bark of his voice echoing back. Despite not knowing if he meant the order for himself or for the shadows, the sound grounded him, pulling him...
back from the edge of panic.

The shadows retreated into static stains on the wall. Better. Panic would kill him. He needed to focus, to try to remember what happened, and how he ended up in that room.

The last thing he remembered was the flash of brilliant, yellow light on the shipyard’s monitors in the moment before everything went dark. Nihlus had taken off, but Rogers and Teung were right behind him. He must have lost consciousness. Despite the popularity of transporters in fiction, the galaxy still hadn’t figured out how to dematerialize people in one place and rematerialize them in another a second later.

He closed his eyes, focusing on listening for any sign of movement outside his walls. Nothing, and he didn’t have a hope in hell of smelling the others over the sickly, sweet and acrid stink of the slime.

His missing people pushed aside the pain and fear. If they were alive, he needed to find them and get them to safety, wherever that was. He raised a hand to his radio only to discover that the external portion was gone—broken away judging by the sharp edges. Lowering his hand, he attempted to activate his omnitool. Dead. In fact, his armour had gone completely dark. No lights, recycling, or heater. Complete lack of communications and life support left him one option.

A groan rumbled like thunder in his chest as he shoved himself up onto one knee, dragging his other foot under him. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to keep moving despite the balls of white-hot lightning tearing through his flesh, guts, and bone. They ricocheted inside his armour and streaked across his vision, threatening to drop him back onto the floor. Still—as his father always said—he was nothing if not too stubborn for his own good.

Talons leaving deep scores in the stone, he clawed his way up onto his feet then slumped against the wall, gasping for breath.

“Come on, Vakarian,” he muttered, “keep moving.” He shoved himself away from the rock, but kept a hand pressed to the chill surface until the trembling in his muscles eased a little. “You’re going to need a gun.” Keeping contact with the wall, he turned, searching for any sign of Roger or Ingrid. He spotted Ingrid leaning against the stone a couple of metres away and stumbled over to pick it up. After checking it over, he let out a relieved sigh. Undamaged.

He found Roger halfway to the door. The three pieces of the assault rifle lay scattered in the muck.

“No.” The word came out as a soft moan. Bending down, he lifted the broken weapon, cradling it gently, almost reverently, in his hands. It looked as though someone had used it as a club. The tip of one talon picked bits of what appeared to be chitinous material out of the spaces small enough to hang on to it.

Turning an unsteady circle, he scanned the muck for any other signs of combat. Well, signs other than how badly every centimetre of him hurt. Nothing. Nothing but the blood, if that was what it was. If he’d been involved in a pitched battle that ended in slaughter, what happened to the bodies and the scorch marks and the chunks blasted out of the walls? Of course, even a hundred gunshots wouldn’t spill the amount of blood present in that room. Not every shot hit arteries, people fell on their wounds, blood pooled inside the body when it went down. No, to cover the floor and walls the way they were, he’d have to slit the throat of fifty or so people and hang them up to bleed out like animal carcases.

It couldn’t be blood. Under what circumstances would or could he brutally kill that many beings? No. It wasn’t blood. Another explanation awaited him outside that room. He just needed to go find
it. He latched onto the not-blood portion of the smell. It just might be some sort of fuel. Fuel made sense. Maybe he’d been stashed in an old fuel storage bunker or something.

He hung the bulk of Roger on his back and shoved the other two pieces into pouches on his belt. He’d stood around speculating long enough. Time to get answers.

Steadying himself with one hand on the wall, he picked his way to the lines of faint light he’d rightly assumed surrounded a door. The dead control next to it threw his hopes on the floor, but before he crushed them underfoot, he saw the door remained open a couple of centimetres. He slid his fingers into the space and pulled. It refused to budge. Too heavy. He’d need something to pry it open.

“Sorry about this, old man,” he said as he lifted Roger’s remains from his back and shoved the barrel into the space. “Kahri would kill me if she saw this.”

The door gave way reluctantly, metal screaming across stone as though it hadn’t moved in decades. For a moment, fear whispered that maybe he had been down there for long cycles—cold, alone, forgotten. He shuddered, throwing off the fanciful, debilitating idea.

However, the thought brought back a childhood tale his mother used to tell him about a torin who’d fallen in love with a praela. One day, while he tagged along beside the spirit, trying to get her attention, the torin accidentally followed her into her home realm. The praela noticed him then, and he spent a joyous day in her company before he realized where he was. He fled back to the mortal world only to discover that he’d aged nearly a hundred cycles. Garrus’s mother touted it as an object lesson about desiring the unattainable; Garrus wondered if the message didn’t come closer to ‘some things are just worth it’.

Shepard’s face ghosted through his mind, the image pale and worn. He’d spent more than his share of time in the spirit realm over the past two years. Strange that he hadn’t recalled the story until that moment, but then again, despite his grief, he’d never felt quite so old. Closing his eyes for a moment, he leaned against the door frame and focused on the bright green of her stare, drawing strength from it.

“I’m going to need you,” he whispered. “Do me a favour, and stick with me for a bit.”

The next second, he chuffed at his continuing foolishness and shoved himself upright. Time—and more than time—to move.

Stepping into the hallway on the other side of the threshold felt eerily like passing through the veil between dimensions. The oppression of the small, filthy space lifted, but at the same time, gravity seemed to fall away. Featureless, grey walls stretched ahead and behind him, the floor beneath his feet and the ceiling above his head identical and equidistant. The optical illusion made his stomach roll and his head pound in time with his pulse.

He braced a hand against the wall, that simple contact orienting him enough that the nausea backed off. “I could use your inside-out streak of luck to point me in the right direction, Shepard,” he said to the silence as he looked one way then the other. How could he expect to find any of his people without knowing where he was? Maybe they weren’t even there. He could wander until hypothermia and dehydration killed him.

Giving his head a good, hard shake that he immediately regretted, he picked the hall to his right and started walking. As he moved, some of the stiffness and pain worked its way out of his muscles. Still, he knew that under his armour, he’d taken enough damage to earn a lecture from Dr. Chakwas.
Corridors passed by. Doorways opened into rooms engulfed in darkness and silence. Throughout, the stone never changed, the floors coated in a layer of dust so thick that it must have been building undisturbed for centuries. As he made his way through the maze, he scratched markers on the wall corners and drew a crude map of the space on his gauntlet. Only when he’d covered the entire level did he take the stairs up to the next.

Once exercise drove the fog of pain and cold back a little, his mind started putting together bits and pieces, trying to form a picture of where in the galaxy he could be.

Stone buildings with a vast underground presence. Ancient and deserted. The only other place he’d seen construction like that had been the ruins next to the base on Rannoch. So … Haestrom. It had to be.

He paused at the top of the stairs to listen, hearing only silence. He might as well have been the last living soul on the planet. Down below, he’d avoided calling out, not sure who or what he’d find, but other than the trails dragged through the dust where he’d been brought in, nothing. Might as well chance making some noise and up his chances of finding someone, he decided. Searching as thoroughly as he was, if someone was there, they’d end up finding him anyway.

He checked Ingrid again, making sure that she’d fire if anyone attacked him, but stopped at firing a test shot. Best not to completely test his luck. Shouting would carry far enough.

“Nihlus? Kaidan?” He marked the wall and struck out along the hallway to his right. “Is anyone there?”

“How do we always end up in these situations? I swear you do it on purpose.”

Garrus spun to face the voice, his mouth dropping open, mandibles spreading. Taking a step toward the apparition, he snapped his mouth closed, his teeth clacking together. “Shepard?” He stopped, his boots raising puffs of dust that swirled along the ripples in the air caused by his movement. When Shepard walked toward him, she just passed through the drifting tendrils, leaving both the ground and air undisturbed.

“You’re dead,” he said, feeling a little stupid for stating the obvious.

She shrugged, the quick, loose-jointed movement so familiar and missed that a thin moan of longing spooled through his second larynx before he could stop it.

“Things aren’t always that easy,” she replied. Nodding toward the way ahead, she said. “Maybe we should get moving and find the others. My delicate, magical turian flower looks like he’s getting a bad case of frostbite. If your armour is dead, Nihlus’s probably is as well.” When he didn’t move, she passed him by, taking the lead.

Garrus stared after her for several seconds, his eyes riveted by the undisturbed floor. “How did I get here?” he asked, at last, lifting into a rough jog to follow her.

“How am I supposed to know?” She paused at the intersection of a side corridor and pressed herself against the wall to peer out, checking the way ahead. “Clear,” she called back before moving on. “I just got here.”

He marked the stone at the corner so he’d know they’d passed that way and what direction they took. He followed for several minutes in silence before blurtng out. “Why did you leave me, Shepard? You knew … you know that I need you.”

The apparition’s shoulders slumped as she stopped, turning back to look at him. “Because it was
He approached her, stepping into her space in a way that would have made her uncomfortable in life. “Then why are you here now? Why come back?”

“Well, either because you needed me … “ She chuckled, her head tilting a little. “ … or due to your core body temp being seven degrees too low, combined with starvation, dehydration, and that massive lump on your skull.” A ghostly hand drifted up to caress his cheek with a touch he couldn’t feel. “You decide, but do it on the move, C-Sec. We aren’t playing with a lot of time here. If your body temperature gets much lower, you’re going to be doing a lot worse than talking to the hallucinations of dead girlfriends.”

“Would that be so bad?” he asked, keeping his voice low and flat.

She turned away and headed down the corridor. Throwing a gesture of disgust and dismissal over her head, she said, “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that, Callor. Sweet baby Jesus, did they yank out your spine when they smacked you on the head? You have over a thousand people depending on you, even if you forget about the quarians, the geth, the krogan, rachni … oh, yeah, and the entire galaxy.”

Her form faded as she drew away, disappearing into the gloom. Setting out after her, he forced his heavy, trembling legs to hurry. Even if she was just a hallucination, her presence held back the darkness as it pressed in, looming over him like a besieging force. Refusing to stop at the wall of his armour, it slipped inside, pawing at his hide like a corpse’s hands, greasy and gelid.

She stopped at another intersection, then scouted forward a few metres along each of the corridors. Cocking her head, she listened, her movements sharp and quick, just as he remembered. Damn, he missed following her through battle, watching her move as graceful and skilled as a dancer. Graceful, skilled, and … on edge. She flicked glances back toward the corridor on his left every few seconds, her teeth latching onto the right side of her bottom lip, her eyelid lower on that side—her planning face. Sensing something in the dark, she was trying to decide what it was and how to deal with it.

When she finished the cycle, she chose the hallway to the right. A silent signal beckoned for him to follow, but when he turned toward the long, black hole, his entire body locked up, refusing to move. The darkness seemed to infest that passage, the fetid shadows choking what small amount of light existed.

Shepard’s face appeared in front of his. “C-Sec! Focus. Eyes on me. I think I hear something, and I really don’t like the sound of it. We need to move.”

Instead of doing as she said, Garrus held his breath and closed his eyes, concentrating all his focus into listening. He heard it. A faint clicking, chittering sound. Geth, his brain spat out even as his gut tied in a hard knot and threw a grappling hook up to sink into his larynges. Taking a deep breath that made his lungs ache, he pulled the air over the pheromone receptors at the back of his mouth. Not geth. Geth didn’t come complete with pheromones. Whatever or whoever was making that sound did: a strange combination that smelled like blood and fuel.

He opened his eyes and hurried after Shepard, finding her waiting at the next intersection.

“Get Ingrid ready,” the captain whispered, crouching a little as if she expected to leap into battle. “Whatever’s coming after us is injured and moving rough, but they’re coming fast.” She surveyed the corridors, then headed off to the right again. “By the way,” she said as she moved, low and
keeping the side wall at her back, “I noticed what you did to Roger.” Shooting a glance over her shoulder that ricocheted off his armour, she shook her head. “Just be glad I can’t slap you silly. Do you know how much that old man and I survived together?”

Intending to argue the point, Garrus opened his mouth, but another glare convinced him to remain silent. He followed, keeping his eyes on their six.

As they made their way through the level, the chittering sound grew louder. Still, Shepard didn’t speed up. She took her time, almost as if baiting their pursuer, leading it on. When she stopped at the base of the stairs up to the next level, he knew he’d guessed right.

*How does that work if she’s a hallucination? My subconscious is leading it into a trap?*

“It’s following like it believes we’re oblivious,” Shepard whispered. “Head up to the first landing, and take cover. I have no idea what this thing is, so don’t take any chances.”

Garrus stared at her for a moment, his thoughts lumbering through the growing fog of pressure in his head. He needed to tell her something, but for the life of him, he couldn’t find the words amidst all the confusion and mental detritus. Giving up, he just nodded and strode past her, limping up the stairs to the landing. The stone railing supported him as he lowered himself to one knee and then Ingrid’s barrel as he rested it in a notch in the stone and sighted the center of the doorway.

Shepard remained at the bottom of the stairs, feet shoulder-width apart, back straight, hands clasped behind her back. Her apparition didn’t appear solid as it did in his dreams. Instead, he could see the stone and dust through her dress uniform. They’d dressed her in that uniform to bury her. It seemed perfectly normal at the time. After all, he’d been too out of his head to put any thought into something so mundane. But there, in the dark, it seemed incredibly sad, as if that uniform declared Shepard a one-dimensional being.

“Here it comes,” she whispered, backing away. “I can’t really see it, but it seems about a hand shorter than you, definitely bipedal. Blessed Enkindlers, its head is huge, but it has a center mass at about one and three quarters metres from the ground. There’s something familiar about it, but I can’t see it well enough to tell.” She turned and sprinted up the stairs to crouch at his side. “Ten seconds unless it gets cautious.”

He adjusted for her details, taking slow, deep breaths and focusing all his concentration down the sights. Vision softening, he allowed the world outside the doorway to register but not pull his attention away from the task at hand. At the back of his mind, his pari whispered the same instructions he had since Garrus was a boy—the voice as comforting as it had once been annoying.

Footsteps. Uneven. A shuffle, thump, step. Shepard had been right about whatever it was being wounded. How did her role as spotter work if she was a hallucination? If he ever got out of there, he really needed to allow for the possibility of mental illness. The footsteps slowed. The chittering, clicking sound got louder for a moment, then stopped.

Garrus held his breath. What was it doing? He hadn’t heard a body hit the ground, so it hadn’t fallen or died.

The floor inside the door darkened almost imperceptibly in the gloom, then a shape limped over the threshold. Even though Garrus could barely make it out, he recognized that it wasn’t any species he knew, and it had broken its leg. The limb stuck out at an angle so impossibly acute that the being walked on the side of its foot.

Garrus raised the barrel ever so slightly, then spotted four eyes. Four. Like the flash of light on the
shipyard monitors, but no brilliant yellow glow emanated from the large, milky-white orbs. Instead, they looked blind—the eyes of a creature used to living in the dark. It looked up, spotted him, and raised its arm, a strange, chitinous looking weapon clutched close to its side. He let out his breath and squeezed the trigger, beating the alien to the punch.

He stood and started down the stairs, but Shepard appeared in front of him, a hand slammed up like a wall.

“No,” she whispered, eyes flashing with both challenge and command. “Even that one shot could bring more. We’ve got to keep moving forward. Come on. Once you’re secure and have a team at your back, you can return to investigate until your heart’s content.” When he didn’t immediately turn and do as she’d said, she bristled, her shoulders rising, all angles and points. “Don’t test me, C-Sec. You know where that leads.”

Browplates lowered over his eyes, mandibles dropped, Garrus scowled at her. Seriously? Being threatened by a figment of his imagination created by concussion and hypothermia had to be a new low. Still, as much as he hated the idea of giving in to his own subconscious, it had a point. Hurt and exhausted, he wouldn’t be able to defend himself from even a half dozen. After glaring at Shepard for another moment, he turned and climbed the stairs.

“You’ve got to do so much better than this, Garrus,” Shepard said as she stalked past him to take point again. “You’ve got to just let me go. Let me be a woman you once cared about.” She paused, head cocked as she listened. Seemingly satisfied that the way ahead remained clear, she nodded for him to follow.

“I don’t want to let go of you, Shepard. Why is everyone so obsessed with moving on?” He hurried up behind her, suddenly furious. It was bad enough bearing the sympathetic, worried stares of his friends and the constant, gentle advice from his father. To hear it coming from Shepard … .

“Shepard spun and raced toward him, ephemeral hands grabbing the yolk of his armour. Somehow, that time, she managed to make contact, giving him a hard shake. “Don’t you get it, Garrus? You’re fucking useless like this. You’ve got to dig in, get angry, get happy, grab hold of the grace of the Enkindlers … do something … anything … and start fucking living.” She shoved him away. “You knew me a few months. Mourning … sure. I can see mourning. You loved me, and I died. But this … .”

Flinging her arms out to the side in a gesture filled with as much helplessness as anger, she turned a circle. “This isn’t even about me. You’re using me as an excuse, and that just pisses me off. You’re scared, and you’re using me to hide. Stop it!”

“I don’t want to fight this war, Shepard.” He stumbled, his talons raking furrows down the wall before he caught himself. “Having your back through the battles, being your right hand … that I could do. But this? It’s just too big. I’m not good enough. I’m not the general to lead this fight.”

“Well, that’s just too fucking bad, C-Sec.” She shoved him hard, both hands braced against his chest. “You have no choice. You’re the one they’re all counting on.”

He shoved back, actually staggering her. “Why not, Shepard? You were all too eager to step aside and let someone else lead the fight. Why did you get to give up, and I don’t?”

“Because you promised me. And if you don’t … .” She spun away, marching down the hall. “It means I failed.”
Her words stabbed through his armour, grabbed two handfuls of guts and ripped them out. He chased after her, reaching out to catch hold of her shoulder, but his talons passed straight through. “How do my screw ups mean that you failed?”

“I picked you. I made the misjudgement.” A tight, rusted-iron shrug followed the declaration. “Who cares though, right?” She ran up a flight of stairs. “Besides, we’ve arrived at my exit.” Turning, she took a single step toward him, and he saw the tracks down her cheeks, glistening like frost on a window.

“Shepard.” He raced up the stairs to meet her. “I’m sorry.” Longing to wipe away those horrible tears, each an accusation, taunting him with his cowardice, he reached out, stopping just short of her face.

“I love you, Callor. I really do, but this … this is so beneath you.” She stroked a strong, warm palm along his mandible.

*How can it be warm?*

“You are so much stronger than this.” She glanced behind her as if alerting to a sound. “That’s my cue. Time for us both to climb back out the rabbit hole.”

“Garrus?”

Garrus looked over Shepard’s shoulder toward the sound of the call. “Nihlus? Is that you?” Glancing back to where Shepard had stood the moment before, he saw that she’d vanished, not so much as a shimmer to prove she’d been there.

“Kahri,” he whispered, unsure about whether he meant to thank or curse her. Then it didn’t matter, because the familiar, sweeping lines of his *fratrin's familia notas* appeared, white against the gloom, moving unevenly back and forth with his gait.

“Nihlus!” He hurried toward the Spectre. “How serious are your injuries? Do you know where we are?” Turning on his talons, he swept an arm around Nihlus’s waist, taking some of the Spectre’s weight.

Letting out a long, guttural sigh that carried subvocal notes of relief and pain, Nihlus wrapped his arm around Garrus’s neck and leaned into him. “Haestrom,” he said, the word coming out in two syllables, broken by sharp gasps. “Has to be.”

“Have you seen any of the others?” Garrus looked behind them, but nothing moved in the darkness.

Nihlus just shook his head. “Searched. Four levels. Nothing. Then I heard ... gun shot ... talking.”

“Yeah, talking to myself is getting to be a bad habit.” He boosted Nihlus a little higher, then nodded the direction Shepard had been leading him. “Let’s go.”

Nihlus took a rough step, his left leg collapsing under him a little when he put weight on it. “You know the way out?” The talons on that same foot dragged through the dust when he pulled his leg forward. Garrus cursed under his breath. That meant damage up high.

“No,” he replied, “I have no idea where we’re going, but I’ve got a good feeling about this direction.”

Nihlus chuckled, the sound exhausted and weak. “Excellent. Broken hip … hypothermia … shock,
and rescuer … talks to himself … has a good feeling. Doomed.”

Garrus opened his mouth to snap back, but then the absurdity of the entire situation registered, and he let out a weary, bitter laugh. “Things could be worse. You could be hallucinating that Shepard is leading you out of here, so be grateful.” He stopped at the next intersection and marked the wall, pausing when he saw another mark. “Yours?” he asked, looking to Nihlus.

“Yes.” The Spectre blinked, his eyes staying closed for nearly five seconds before opening again. His weight bore down on Garrus’s neck, his bare hand clammy and cold, trembling in Garrus’s grip. “As I said … four levels.”

Garrus paused at the base of the stairs to look back. If the rest of the squad was there, he’d have to return to get them. Nihlus didn’t have time to sit and wait for him to search. They needed to climb, to find the surface and a way to communicate with the Normandy. He’d lost his mate, was losing his mother … no way he’d let Nihlus die on him too.

“You have your jaw set for this?” he asked, resettling his grasp to take more of Nihlus’s weight.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” the Spectre said, his words barely more than grunts. Leaning on Garrus’s cowl, he started up.

They managed two flights before Nihlus needed to stop. Neither one of them carried any medi-gel, nor did they find any dispensers. Still, after catching his breath and letting out a litany of foul curses aimed at his lack of indestructibility, Nihlus nodded for Garrus to continue.

Two more flights and Nihlus just slid down Garrus to slump on the floor. Despite landing on his undamaged hip, a deep, rumbling cry of pain clawed its way out of his chest.

“Just need rest,” he said, moaning as his eyes slipping closed.

Garrus shook his head. “No. You’ve got five minutes before I haul you up and carry you out of here.” Garrus didn’t know how he’d find the strength, but he could tell by the chill sheen clinging to his fratrin’s hide, Nihlus had maybe an hour before hypothermic coma, and two or three after that until death. He crouched by Nihlus’s side, the other torin’s talons gripped tightly in his—a silent demonstration of support and determination.

As the minutes passed, he listened, sure he could hear some sort of machine noise from above them. Maybe the geth used the compound for something.

The geth. Damn.

The geth being responsible for dragging them off the orbital shipyard and sticking them down there made the worst sort of sense. They could have disabled the organic members of the station’s crew, shut down the systems, and waited. But why? Unless it was a trap set for him or Nihlus.

Nihlus moaned softly, drawing Garrus’s attention. The Spectre’s head had fallen back to rest against the cowl of his armour, his eyes closed, breathing shallow.

“All right,” Garrus said, shoving himself up onto his feet, “that’s enough of that. Come on, help me get you up. This isn’t going to be pretty or comfortable for either of us.” Bending, he managed to wrestle the smaller torin into a fairly stable and balanced fireman’s carry.

Standing at the bottom of the next flight of stairs, he looked up, his gaze seeming to climb forever.

“You are so much stronger than this. Time for us both to climb back out the rabbit hole.”
Garrus nodded. Time to get the hell home. He grasped the railing with one hand and began hauling himself up, one stair at a time. As he climbed, the flights passing in a steady fog of pain and weariness, the light became stronger, until it matched the murk of a cloudy day. The mechanical sound got louder as well, the noise almost like a skipping gear, a metallic click-stutter-click. It settled into his brain and dug in claws all down his spine. Something in that sound set him on edge … something familiar … but he couldn’t form coherent enough thoughts to sort it out.

Click-stutter-click. Teeth chattering on the verge of freezing to death. *Come to us.*

Click-stutter-click. *Keep coming, we’re waiting for you. We can’t wait to meet you. How did you escape the tomb we put you in? Didn’t you like it? We made it especially for you.*

Click-stutter-click. *You know you can’t win this fight. Best to just go back down into the dark and rest. It’s lovely in the dark. So cool and peaceful.* The words followed the rhythm of the noise, taking on a sing-song cadence like some macabre children’s verse.

“Light,” Nihlus said, his voice snapping the chorus as it repeated for the fiftieth time.

Garrus looked up and stumbled to a halt, his talons catching on the stone. Not only did he see a harsh yellow light streaming into the space from narrow windows along the top of very high walls, but also that he’d followed the sound away from the stairwell. He didn’t know how far he’d allowed that siren call to lead him, but far enough that the corridor ended at a massive metal door twenty metres ahead.

Staring at it, he considered his options. First, he’d have to put Nihlus down. He couldn’t deal with the unknown with a hundred kilos of turian draped around his neck. Detouring over to the wall where the sun shone in, he let out a sigh of relief as the heat beat against his hide.

“You can cover me from here?” he asked as he lowered Nihlus to the floor, wincing as the Spectre cried out. It impacted Garrus all the harder for having weakened considerably. Despite his brave face, Nihlus’s time was running out.

“I can. It’s warm.” Nihlus turned his face to the light and closed his eyes. “Go ahead.” He turned back to look Garrus in the eye and nodded toward the door. Reaching behind him, the movement accompanied by a heavy grunt of pain, he pulled his shotgun from its holster in the small of his back. “Get us the hell out of here.”

Garrus straightened and shrugged Ingrid into his hands. He didn’t know if he had another fight left in him, but he settled the rifle and limped toward the door. The sing-song cadence of the chattering sound remained constant as he approached. Reaching for the door control—this one powered—he tried to picture the room, how many geth … every moment of it nothing but completely, bloody useless stalling.

Taking a deep breath, he pressed his hand to the control, then took a step back, lifting Ingrid to couch against his shoulder. The door whispered open. He stared, unable to fathom the sight it revealed. Limbs, parts hung up like sides of meat in a refrigerator, but alive. Alive and moving, connected to other parts, other beings. Most of the bodies—the people—strung out like some macabre web were geth, but he recognized human husks as well as what looked like some unknown, biological aliens.

“Dear spirits.” The oath drifted softly through the air. As the sound passed over the threshold, the other noise—the click-stutter-click—stopped, every face and flashlight turning to look at him.

“Come in,” a sharp, female voice called from somewhere out of sight. “I was just about to add your
friend to my creation.”

**Turian Square:** Unlike the Infantry Square, the Turian Square is a naval formation. Two dreadnoughts and a carrier take the center of the formation, cruisers arranged outside them, frigates outside that layer. Fighters circle the outside of the square providing cover, disrupting point defense, and softening targets.

**A-N:** Okay, so the Thedan madness has backed off a bit and Christmas is over, so my schedule will be getting back to normal, with an accompanying chapter a week. Thanks so much for sticking with me during this rough patch. It is so much appreciated. *hugs*
12 Days ASR

Shepard awoke shivering, teeth chattering, heart thrashing against her ribcage. Slapping a hand over her eyes to ward against the sudden, searing glare of her regen field, she flopped over on her back and let out a hearty, discontented grumble. “Thanks so much, people. I didn’t need these retinas anyway.” Peeking out through the cracks between her fingers, she glared up into the violet, hazy light. “Where are the goggles?”

The chill intruded upon her annoyance and sent a shiver racing down her length to lodge in her right calf muscle. Yelping, she bolted upright, scrambling to grab her foot and stretch out the back of her leg. “And for the love of the freaking Enkindlers,” she called, looking up at one of the cameras, “I could use a quilt in here. Sweet baby Jesus, it’s cold.”

“The goggles were right next to your head, and the temperature inside your regen field is seventy-eight degrees, Shepard,” Miranda’s even voice spoke through the intercom. “But I can see that you’re given extra blankets.” The intercom clicked off for a couple of seconds, then back on. “You appeared agitated in your sleep. Do you recall your dreams?”

Glancing up at the camera without lifting her head, Shepard said, “Agitated? Really?” Sarcasm snapped through every word. “Me?” Still, as she rubbed her relaxing charlie horse, she thought back, trying to recall any dreams. Nothing. A complete blank; a starched white sheet pulled tight, like so much of her life.

For long moments, she stared into the void, daring herself to push into that emptiness like a child gripping the doorknob of a haunted house. Miranda said it would all come back with time, that the cloning process replaced her memory cells with exact copies, ready to be triggered by the familiar. She prodded the gap in her mind, shining her trembling flashlight into the ghost-filled corners. The pale vacuity echoed back, taunting her.

“I don’t remember my dreams,” she said at last, her voice low, a thin sliver of bitterness traced through the words. She lowered herself back onto her pillows ignoring the protective goggles on the bed next to her. The violet light burned clean and honest. “How much longer do I have in this thing? I need to pee.”

“I’m on my way down. The cycle will be complete by the time I get there,” the crisp, efficient voice replied.

Shepard let out a small sigh and closed her eyes. From the cool tickle of her tears to the pulse throbbing behind her eyes, every sensation sharpened into a focus so exquisite that it became torturous.

Gradually, as the regen field warmed her, her senses reached out to follow the cracks in her flesh, the raw canyons of unhealed tissue. The pain—She opened her eyes as the door chirped then
hissed, signalling Miranda’s arrival.

Turning to look at her Dr. Frankenstein, Shepard scowled. “What have you done to the field? Did you tweak it?”

Miranda activated her omnitool and shut down the regen net arced over Shepard’s bed. She shook her head, one elegant brow arching. “It’s been on the same setting for more than a week.” With a practiced flick, she killed the orange glow around her arm. “Why?”

With all the speed and grace of a geriatric elcor, Shepard sat up, dragging her legs off the edge of the bed. A shrug lifted one shoulder a couple of centimetres before dropping it. “The pain has backed off a little, that’s all.” She glanced behind her left arm at her pillows. She’d fallen asleep within seconds of lying down. “You didn’t fill me full of drugs after physio, did you?” Staring at Miranda through narrowed eyes, she said, “I know how sneaky you are.”

A flicker of annoyance escaped Miranda’s control before she policed her expression back to careful distain. “I did no such thing, Captain. Perhaps getting off your backside and participating in physiotherapy stimulated endorphin production to combat the pain.” Miranda held out her hand palm up. “It certainly explains your exhaustion.”

Shepard stared at the waiting hand for a moment, but then dropped her wrist into Miranda’s gloved grasp. A tiny, vindictive smile bolted across her face when the operative jumped, startled by the abrupt compliance. Shame recaptured the grin a half-second later.

*So few hours after deciding to play nice and already failing. You truly are incorrigible, Janey.*

Miranda pushed Shepard’s sleeve up a little, her thumbs slipping under the material as she lifted it. A less bitter smile greeted the care Miranda took not to damage her company’s biggest investment. Costing a large organization a few billion credits to resurrect came with a few benefits.

“This would explain the lessening of your pain,” the operative said, lifting Shepard’s arm a few centimetres. “Your wounds healed significantly in today’s regen session.” She activated her omnitool and ran a scan.

Shepard watched the back side of the screen, able to pick up the gist of the tests. The tissue rejection had eased back in the last few hours, and judging from the crinkle of skin between Miranda’s eyebrows, the operative had no idea how or why.

*Should we be encouraged by that or terrified?*

Despite finding comfort in her body taking charge of its own healing, she would have hoped that Miranda—as the wizard behind the curtain—knew how it worked and could control it.

The crinkle deepened into a furrow. “I’ll schedule a battery of tests for first thing in the morning,” Miranda said, sounding more like she spoke to herself than Shepard. “I’m encouraged to see your healing accelerating, but I want to be sure it isn’t a sign of nanite malfunction.”

Shepard laughed, hard and bitter enough to abrade the back of her throat on its way out. “So … what? Your little machines just keep building flesh until I turn into the elephant man on my way to becoming Jabba the Hutt?” The confusion on the operative’s face provided another shameful little victory, that one requiring some sort of apology. “I’m supposed to heal, right? That’s sort of an integral part of the whole glory-hallelujah-she’s-back-praise-Jesus miracle, isn’t it?”

Easing herself off the side of the bed, Shepard tested the strength in her legs. As the soles of her feet hit the floor, she winced in anticipation of the javelins of agony stabbing up through her calves
and thighs to embed themselves in her hips. A throaty sigh of relief tumbled out of her when they didn’t appear. Pushing herself up off the mattress, she tested it. Pain arced between her joints and sizzled along the rents in her flesh, but it had dropped from a twenty-five to a fifteen on the Shepard Scale of Insane Pain Range.

One hand gripping the rail on the side of her bed, she took a single, tentative step. Her muscles and joints shook, but didn’t drop her in a pile on the floor. Progress. She started to take another step, but Miranda clamped one hand on Shepard’s shoulder while wrapping the other around her waist.

“Oh no, you don’t, Captain.” The operative eased Shepard back onto the side of the bed. “If you want to walk, that’s fine, but not without a walker and an attendant. A single fall will set you back weeks, and I don’t think the staff could bear that.” She stepped back and activated her omnitool again, keying in commands. “They’ve begun petitioning me for your early discharge.”

Shepard watched her for a moment, then sighed. “Fine, but I need to pee, so … .” She reached up to take hold of the bar hanging from the ceiling then nodded toward the bathroom door. “You’re standing between me and where I need to be.”

Miranda snapped her wrist, turning off her omnitool, then turned to the door. “Your guest has arrived and is waiting to see you. Make yourself presentable; you’re representing one of the most affluent and influential organizations in the galaxy.”

“A guest?” Shepard gripped the bar and took a couple of tentative steps. The pain eased back a little as her legs adjusted to holding her weight and numbed. Satisfied, she looked over at the door before it closed. “Are they the ‘here to enjoy my sparkling company’ kind of guest, or the ‘yet more poking fingers, cutting knives and scanning omnitools’ kind?”

“The ‘came to assist your recovery so be bloody grateful and polite’ kind,” Miranda replied, the door hissing closed behind her.

Shepard grinned. “Ooo, someone’s starting to bite back.” As she hobbled to the bathroom, the grin spread across her face a little more with each step. Healing. Her stupid, stubborn, dead ol’ corpse was actually healing. Hope ignited like a pilot light deep in her gut, stirring up embers she hadn’t realized still existed. Her steps came lighter, less plodding and her death grip on the bar relaxed.

*What is that, Janey? Surely that’s not some fight coming back, is it? A little drive to stop wallowing in what they did to you and return to your life?*

“Maybe I am ready. I certainly don’t want to spend the rest of my life here.”

The bathroom door opened as she approached, all thought of needing to pee evaporating as she caught sight of herself in the mirror above the sink.

*Something’s different about you today. What is that? It’s not your wounds … you still look like shit, but … .*

Something was different. She hobbled to the sink, releasing the bar in favour of bracing against the counter, and leaned close to stare into the reflection of her eyes. Some indefinable fire burned there, still shrouded but beckoning like a light shining in a distant window. If she could just get there … . She needed to get there.

Focusing back on her reflection, she smiled at the spark in her eyes, the flush burning under her freckles. “Well, look at you,” she whispered, reaching up to press her fingertips against the cool, slick surface.
The starched white sheet erupted from its rest, flapping as if caught in a tempest before tearing loose and blowing away. Shepard blinked, her reflection changing before her eyes. She still stared into her own eyes, but she wore lipstick … well, sort of wore it. It smeared across her face as if she’d been … . The blush along her cheekbones deepened and spread to her neck. Well, it looked as though she’d been making out with someone.

She pushed into the memory, desperate fingers grasping for anything beyond what she’d seen. Who smeared that lipstick, and why did she look so sad?

Regret smacked into her like a runaway Mako. Sweet lord. Tears burned sudden and hot in her eyes as she struggled to see past the reflection to its back story.

“I’m trying to save a galaxy … we … we’re trying to save a galaxy.” She stared down at the floor. She’d never be able to keep talking, to do what she needed to do, if she looked him in the eye.

She pressed her eyes closed again, battering herself against the memory, her voice strained as it forced its way between clenched teeth. “Look up, damn you! Look up and let me see him.” Instead, the sheet snapped across, and he disappeared back behind the impossibly starched, tight barrier.

“Shepard?” Miranda called from the other side of the door. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” The word caught halfway out. She cleared her throat and shoved herself away from the counter, forgetting the bar until she took a step and her knee trembled. “Yeah, I’ll be out in a few minutes. Do me a favour and stick a clean change of clothes inside the door? Please?”

“No of course.” Miranda sounded surprised.

The memory—the certainty that she’d broken someone’s heart—left behind a residue, thick and gritty. She needed searing hot water beating down on her skin, wounds be damned. Some things hurt worse than pain.

After finally relenting to her bladder’s demands, she stepped under the water and pulled the barrier shut. A wavering moan greeted the stinging spray. Dangling from the bar, she let her knees and hips relax, holding herself almost entirely with the strength of her arms. Not that she needed much.

“You’re what? Forty seven kilos soaking wet, in armour? Yes, you’re freakishly tiny … .” The deep, textured voice paused, its absence a vacuum that grabbed hold of a loose thread of longing and pulled. “… and freakishly strong, but you’re still too skinny.” It spoke with such … such regard that when the memory vanished, she felt it drag along that thread, unravelling her from the inside. Scrambling to catch hold of her emotions, she pulled back, reeling herself in.

“Who are you?” she whispered, feeling an entirely different presence and spirit than her previous memory. “Come on, show me more.”

“You’re the bravest person I’ve ever met,” that same voice whispered. Strong hands eased her back until she lay cradled against his arms. So safe. Had she ever felt as safe?

The memory vanished, a vicious slap of loss sending her stumbling. One hand slipped off the bar, almost dropping her into a heap on the tile. Reaching behind her, Shepard smacked at the water control until it turned off, then scrabbled at the barrier. Finally managing to shove it out of her way, she stepped out of the shower and collapsed onto the toilet. Elbows resting on her thighs, she let her head fall into her hands, wallowing in the absence.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Are you the reason I let them drag me back?”
“Shepard?” Miranda again, her voice sharp-edged and brittle. “I’m starting to get concerned.”

“And I’m starting to get pissed off. Let a girl shower for fuck’s sake,” she snapped back, not lifting her head. Damn it. Her anger snapped all the threads tying her to the memory, leaving her adrift on the same, murky seas. Closing her eyes, she allowed that fleeting feeling of absolute safety to fill her. Her recollections up until that day consisted of growing up, the batarian raid, Anderson, and most of her early military. She couldn’t draw a line where they ended, but it amounted to more than a decade … just gone.

But those … those brief glimpses were recent. She knew it as well as she’d once known her scars. They were recent, and they amounted to friendship and love.

A slow smile climbed up through the disappointment and loss. Yes, as much as she wanted her whole life back immediately, at least she’d remembered something. Even the smallest piece of the puzzle was better than an empty table. She reached for a towel.

“If you’re the reason I came back,” she whispered into that void, “I’ll find you.”

She hurried through dressing, a wide grin making her cheeks ache. Clutching the bar in one hand, she burst into her room. “Did you order that walker, yet? I want to start getting my—”

Two steps out the door, she stopped, her eyes riveted on the figure standing at the threshold between her room and the corridor. Her vision narrowed, everything outside the space occupied by that figure disappearing into darkness.

“Shepard?”

That single word—her name—drew all the air from her lungs, leaving her sucking vacuum.

*She waved to the blue figure trapped like a butterfly in amber. “Hey, lady, focus on the cranky human. Are you Dr. Liara T’Soni?”*

Giant hands clamped around Shepard’s chest, squeezing until she swore she heard ribs creaking and her heart felt as though it would implode. Memories, like a flock of starlings all taking wing at once, erupted in a storm of sound and fury. She managed to capture a couple before they escaped and clutched them close.

*An elbow smacked into Shepard from behind, but she didn’t take the bait. “Your mother is Matriarch Benezia. We believe that she’s helping Saren destroy the galaxy. Can you help me with that, or do I go back to my ship and look for someone who can?”*

*The asari in the net flushed a darker shade of blue, her mouth opening and closing like a beached fish for a second before an indignant squeal made it past her lips. “How dare you? I’m not some stripper in a seedy bar. I’m an archaeologist and an expert on the protheans.”*

*Shepard backed up, making beeping sounds. “Ship for the people useful to Shepard now leaving. Last call for boarding … all those useful to Shepard please get aboard.”*

Both of Shepard’s hands dropped from the bar, suddenly chilled and numb. “Liara?” Shepard stepped toward the door, sock-covered toes dragging over the tile. “Liara?” Brain and emotions short circuited, all she could do was gawk, and all she could think to say was the asari’s name. As Liara stood there, silhouetted in the door, her features muted by the bright lights from the corridor, she seemed a portal … or perhaps a barricade standing just in front of a million important things. Shepard squinted, trying to see past her, to catch a glimpse of the promises whispering just out of earshot.
“Move aside, damn it. For just one second, let me see.

“Shepard.” Liara stepped over the threshold, shattering the illusion. She strode into the room, closing fast, stuttering to a stop when Shepard flinched away, one hand slamming up to fend her off. “Goddess. Is it really you?”

Shock, need, joy, despair, and hope all battered at Shepard’s barriers. The great, dark sea, so still a few moments before, rose into massive breakers, swamping her tiny craft.

Too much. Sweet baby Jesus, too much, too fast.

“Yeah, I think so,” she said, finally answering the question. Dizzy, the massive flock of starlings wheeling in circles around the inside of her head, Shepard reached out, stuttering toward her bed until the cold metal railing impacted her fingers. A fingernail bent backwards, but the pain barely registered through the fog. She sank onto the mattress, the numbness replaced by a virulent tingling as if her entire body had fallen asleep.

“Operative Lawson told me that they’d brought you back, but I didn’t really believe it.” The young asari’s blue eyes shone with unshed tears as she stared, almost hungrily into Shepard’s. “I couldn’t believe it. It was impossible.” A wide, beatific smile erupted as the tears broke free, streaking down her cheeks like rain on a window. “But, goddess, here you are.” Clapping her hands to her mouth, she let out a slightly hysterical sounding laugh. “I can’t believe this. I … I … . You’re real."

Liara pressed a hand to her brow, her knees almost buckling. Nearly as wobbly-legged as Shepard, she lurched toward the chair at the end of Shepard’s bed, folding into it with a dramatic flair that Shepard recalled all too well. “Goddess … I was at your funeral … I held—”

“Dr. T’Soni!” Miranda practically jumped between them. “Please, remember what we talked about.”

Liara paled, the brilliant smile dimming for a couple of breaths as she nodded. “Yes, of course, Ms. Lawson. I just got overexcited. My apologies.” Sun glistening off new snow, the smile returned as Liara reached out, laying her hand over Shepard’s. “You’ve been so missed.”

Shepard slid her hand out and patted the asari’s before withdrawing. Sweet baby Jesus. Her funeral. She shook her head. No. It was too much. So very, very too much. A fierce, primal scream of panic built in her chest as terror bullied her legs, trying to chivvy them into fleeing the room and running until she escaped someplace solitary and dark.

She wanted to remember her life, but Liara’s presence—the desperation and hunger under the other woman’s joy—felt like an avalanche set to bury Shepard in a landslide she wouldn’t survive. Had her death formed a similar singularity inside everyone she’d known? Would she end up drowned by their love … their relief and joy?

“I … .” Looking up at Miranda, she cursed the operative for being right. “May I have a few moments?” Her stare flitted over Liara, afraid to look into those huge, blue eyes and see hurt there. “I just need to process all this.”

“Oh, course, Shepard,” Miranda replied, holding out an arm to usher Liara from the room. “I’ll escort Dr. T’Soni up to her offices, give her the tour, then we’ll return.” Despite phrasing the plan as a statement, the inflection in Miranda’s voice left room for Shepard to accept or refuse.

Shepard looked up, forcing herself to face Liara’s disappointment. Reaching out to squeeze the slender, blue fingers, she said, “Yeah, that would be great.” A tired, gentle smile eased across her
Disappointment turned to understanding and concern. “Of course, Shepard. Operative Lawson explained that you’re still very early in your recovery.” Her hand flipped over to hold Shepard’s in a gentle grip. “I’m sorry I came at you too strong. I just … .” A quick, heavy sigh brushed past the captain’s cheek. “I just … I don’t think I’ve ever felt so many things at once.” Releasing Shepard, she stood. “I’ll see you in a little while. Rest well, Captain.”

“Thank you, Liara.” Shepard smiled. “Good luck finding your way around this maze. Make Miranda give you a map.” She lifted a hand in a small wave, then let it drop, sighing as the door closed, leaving her alone in silence.

Once certain Miranda wouldn’t return, Shepard pulled her legs up onto the bed, rolling over to face the wall. Liara. Why had Miranda brought Liara of all people? She and the operative needed to have a talk about just springing people on her like that.

Liara. Shepard shook her head and closed her eyes. Well, at least the asari might be able to help her recall some of what happened before she died.

She wasn’t there, though, was she, Janey? She’d already moved on.

A perplexed scowl creased Shepard’s forehead. Liara had moved on. Where to? Damn all the little bits and pieces. She needed a corner piece, maybe an edge or two, so she could start fitting them together.

The last time she recalled seeing Liara … she remembered fear … she’d been really afraid, but not a life and limb sort of fear. A healthy dose of guilt tangled in there as well. Why?

Shepard grinned, surety settling in her gut as the squad of commandos blocked her path to Liara, their shotguns pointed at her belly. “Well, that’s a good sign.”

“It’s all right,” Liara said, letting out a nervous giggle. “That’s Captain Shepard. Um … stand down.” She stepped around her bodyguards. Despite claiming to be certain of her path, Liara held herself like someone facing execution. “Sorry, Shepard.”

Shepard waved off the apology. “Don’t be. I suddenly feel a whole lot better about you leaving.” She looked into the eyes of each commando, the steel that looked back easing the prickles of her inner alarm. Addressing them, she bristled, trying to become as imposing as possible. “If any harm comes to Liara T’Soni, you’d all better be dead or start running the very next second.” Some of them grinned, but her glare killed the smirks within a couple of seconds.

Shepard took Liara’s hands, pleased that young asari’s grip had stopped trembling. “You’re sure this is what you want?”

“Yes. You were right about using Mother’s resources.” Liara took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and smiled. “Consider me your Prothean Research Division. I won’t be more than a call away.” Her grip tightened. “Don’t worry about me, Shepard. Even though it isn’t what I thought I’d be doing with my life, it’s so much more important.”

Shepard pulled the asari into a hug. “I’m not worried about you. Not any more. Good luck, Liara. We’ll always be here if you need anything.”

Shepard backed up until a warm, solid presence pressed against her arm. A scent like sun-warmed sandalwood and spice enveloped her, setting loose a terrible, aching sadness. “Well, there goes the first one.” She forced out a laugh when he gave her a gentle shove, but it died almost instantly.
as the fear bled through, stealing her reprieve. Time to face reality. Time to do the right thing, no matter how much it hurt.

Flopping over onto her back, Shepard stared up at the ceiling. She’d never had a boyfriend … never really wanted one. Then … two?

One of the corner pieces settled into place. As hard as it had been, she’d chosen.

Whoever he is, he lost you two years ago. He’s moved on by now, Janey. Hell, he could have a big, pregnant wife by now.

Shepard closed her eyes, a sharp, thin wire cutting into her heart. “Shut up, Bunny. Please just shut up.”
Garrus has stumbled into something horrible ... but what?

**Trigger Warning for body horror and medical experimentation — if you want to skip this chapter, message me and I will tell you the plot so you don’t have to read it.**

**Casarurus** - Prison or dungeon with the connotation of horror: a place of torture and death rather than a penal institution.

**12 Days ASR**

Garrus stumbled into the chamber. Legs numb, he dragged his talons, lurching to a stop when his boot caught on a crack in the floor. “Spirits … what the … ?” Less than a metre away, a still living torso twitched within a web of wires, four stark white eyes wide, its broad head thrown back. It looked like the same species he’d shot just before finding Nihlus. Garrus stared, mandibles hanging slack, unable to look away from where cables and conduits ripped through the shell of a husk and punched into holes drilled in the alien being’s skull. Clamps and plating gleamed dully amidst meat, sinking metal teeth into flesh that still dripped the black blood-fluid. Revulsion tied his guts into knots and hauled them up into his throat.

“Fascinating, aren’t they?” A figure moved behind the horrifying, macabre display, no more than a shadow against the glare of the sun searing through the high windows.

Her words jolted him hard enough that he finally managed to tear himself away from what had to amount to fifty or more victims. He wouldn’t have wished that fate on the damned husks. Spirits … what madness … ? It didn’t matter. Mordin and the geth could unravel the insanity later.

Holding a hand up to shield his eyes from the brilliance, Garrus struggled to track the speaker through the room, squinting to see past the glinting spirals of dust that swirled in the air like spirits. “Fascinating is not the word I’d use.” He stepped closer to the wall of pieced together life forms, shuddering as a geth reached out a hand, grasping at Garrus’s gauntlet. It let out a stuttering sort of groan, then the hand dropped.

*Noveria.*

“Are they suffering?” Shepard whispered.

“Geth do not feel pain as organics do.” Legion replied. “This platform is experiencing a short in its motor functions. Higher level processes have ceased.”

He hoped Legion was right and tried to ignore the fact that reaching out could hardly be mistaken for a twitch. “Is this geth aware?” Garrus demanded, wincing at the tight rasp of sound that clawed its way out of his throat.
“Yes.” The shadow—female quarian by the sound of her accent—moved along the back wall, keeping just to the other side of a wall of shelves. “They must remain functional and aware to preserve their memory and hardware.” The dark shape beckoned to him. “Come in. I am not often provided a chance to show off my work.”

He took a step forward, keeping Ingrid levelled on the quarian best he could. “Why don’t you come out here where I can see you?” Sidestepping around a table covered in surgical instruments, he tried to open a line on her flank, but she scooted further in.

“I don’t think so, General. You appear far too competent with that rifle even in your current state.” She held out an arm, her hand appearing past the end of the shelf to gesture to a medical table and the geth strapped to it. “If you hang it up, you could assist me in salvaging this prototype.”

Garrus ground to a halt and stared, dizziness and fatigue sending his mind reeling as he tried to decipher what he was looking at. Geth. The lower legs and arms told him that much, but other than that, it looked like a jumbled together pile of parts. The left side of the geth’s head and neck had been cut away like some sort of macabre anatomical model. White fluid oozed out of tied-off hoses and from between parts. “What in … ?” He stumbled forward a step.

A small shower of sparks erupted from the remaining half of the geth’s head lamp. It tried to raise its head, an effort that resulted in a series of wrenching, spasmodic movements. Twitching hands grasped within their shackles, almost as if trying to climb free.

Garrus flinched and turned away, everything he saw in that appalling moment calling Legion a fucking liar. By any definition he could imagine, agony lay displayed on that table.

“Vak … k … kar … r … rian G … g … gen … er … er … er …” The stutter died.

Time slammed to a halt, stuttered forward, then collapsed, trapping Garrus in a singularity. “Legion!” Smashing the shackles of disbelief, he whirled back toward the geth. “Dear spirits, Legion.” Stumbling toward the table, he searched for anything he recognized. And then he saw it, Alliance armour shrouding Legion’s chest. The armour it used to replace the pieces taken from Shepard’s locker.

“Alliance armour?” He executed the question. Stupid. He didn’t need to question the geth as to its status, he just needed to get them out of there.

“It’s a fascinating prototype,” the quarian continued, apparently oblivious to the bad melodrama he acted out two metres away. “Integrating several of its unique components, I should be able to complete my device.” Slipping around Legion, she managed to move into cover behind the grisly web without exposing herself to the bullet he desperately wanted to send tearing through her skull.

“What the hell is this thing? Why have you done to these … ?” What did he call them? People? Exhaustion dropped the gates on his control just as a breaker of disgust and rage rolled in. It crashed through, finding form in an incoherent, guttural roar.

“The geth cannot be hacked for more than a few seconds,” she said, her voice sharp and excited. “Each time you override a geth’s core programming, it becomes more resistant to subsequent attempts. Following attempts also control it for a shorter period of time. Our scientists have thrown themselves at the problem for centuries to no avail, but then the so-called heretics joined the Reapers and sealed the fate of all geth.”

The quarian finally stepped out into the open.
“Admiral Daro’Xen?” How had the admiral ended up on Haestrom? Suppose that signed the death certificate for her claims of being quarantined on the Moreh. He raised Ingrid, couching the stock against his shoulder.

“Yes, yes.” She flipped a single, emphatic hand at him as if brushing aside an annoying insect. “I purchase several of the husk creatures from a human merchant and discovered within their brains and synthesized nervous systems the Reapers’ control matrices.” As she spoke, her words tumbled out faster and faster.

Garrus circled, keeping the rifle aimed solidly at the center of her chest. Was it madness?

She paused for a breath at last. “Fascinating technology, but not enough, even when combined with the new geth platforms based on the prototype on the—”

“Legion! Its name is Legion,” Garrus shouted, wincing a little as his voice echoed back. That echo bounced off Xen’s nightmare, and a wave of choked moans and howls swept down its length. For a moment, the whole structure writhed, its denizens screaming their … what … anguish? Did husks and body parts feel anguish? Garrus turned away, braced heavily against one knee, rifle forgotten as he pressed his forearm against his mouth, struggling to keep not just his gorge, but his entire being from spewing out.

The din died down as Xen walked the length of her creation, speaking softly and stroking here and there as if comforting children. “What you choose to call the machine makes no difference.” Either dismissing him as a threat or too enraptured by the details of her work to care, Xen stepped out into the open. A lover’s touch caressed the top of one of the alien heads, following the broad, chitinous ridges. “I found these specimens three days ago. They staggered in the door, full of bullets.”

Leaning down, she pressed her cheek to the cephalic shell, a melancholy sigh drifting from the speaker on her helmet. “The first one died before I could salvage its parts, but when I dissected it, I discovered something truly impressive. They’re designed.” She patted the still living one’s head then stepped toward Garrus. “Imagine. Once, probably a lifeform as mundane as you or I, but now transformed into something remarkable.” Her voice raised in pitch, words tumbling out faster as she spoke.

The last time Garrus saw Xen, she oozed an unruffled, relaxed sort of disdain, as if she considered herself so far above the rest of the galaxy that even moving would lower her to the level of her inferiors. Right then, her entire body vibrated with a frenetic, maniacal energy, and Garrus couldn’t recall anyone ever having seemed so terrifying.

“Don’t you see?” she snapped, grabbing the being’s head by the jaw and craning it back. When Garrus backed up a step, she shook her head and let the alien go. “Typical. No vision. Someone removed all weakness of the species they once were, creating the perfect servant race. The exact accomplishment the quarians attempted and failed. Inside that head is a node that allows one of its overseers to actually control it from the inside, to possess it. That and these …” She stepped back and drew his attention to several components. His eyes slid along the distinctive blue-black, slick lines, not wanting to come to rest on them. “… will allow me to correct our ancestors’ mistakes and bring the geth back under quarian control.”

Damn.

Garrus lunged toward her, his vision pounding in time with his heart. Rage demanded that he throw her down, stop her madness, but his strength sagged before he reached her, his thigh crashing into a table before he caught himself. “Those components are salvaged from Sovereign? And they’re not shielded?” Well, that explained some of her crazy.
Another dismissive flick of her hand. “Of course, they’re shielded. I’m not a beginner at dealing with dangerous technology, General.” She reached up, running a hand over her headcloth, almost as if speaking with him amounted to such a labour that she needed to mop away the sweat. “At first, I thought the aliens and their control nodes would prove to be the last piece to my puzzle, but no. The last piece is contained inside that unit.” An elegant roll of her wrist swept her hand toward Legion.

She strode past Garrus. “Would you like to assist?” Stopping next to Legion, she bent over to stare into what remained of the geth’s optic. “Want to know something remarkable, General?”

He raised Ingrid, feeling finally returning to his hands. “No. I’m getting out of here, and I’m taking you with me.”

She didn’t react as he stepped up behind her. “That gun won’t do you any good, General.” A quick jut of her chin led his stare up to a turret mounted near the ceiling. He turned a slow circle to discover six more tracking his every movement. Another graceful roll of her hand dismissed them and his threat of violence. Perhaps it proved too uncivilized to acknowledge. “As I said, not a beginner dealing with dangerous technology.”

“These new geth have a sense of platform self-preservation,” Xen continued without hesitation. “Previously, they merely uploaded themselves to their server via high gain transmission and sacrificed the platform.” She picked up a cutting laser. “But not these. I jammed their transmissions, of course, but they didn’t even try.” Fingers poked and measured, obviously looking for the best place to start cutting. Her tone became absent as she continued, her attention focused on her work. “Convenient for my purpose.”

Garrus stepped forward, Ingrid’s barrel sagging then recovering as he braced against a table. “Put the laser down, or I’ll put a bullet through your skull.” He tightened his talon on the trigger.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, my work here is far too important.” The quarian spun, torch in one hand, a pistol in the other. “I told you that gun won’t do you any good, General.” Xen’s arms and head jerked forward as the harsh cough of a shotgun roared from just behind Garrus. A nearly indistinguishable fraction of a second later, Garrus’s shot spun her a half turn before she fell.

“Check her,” Nihlus said, his voice barely more than a gasp. “There has to be a transmitter here somewhere.”

Garrus stared at Nihlus for a couple of seconds. “Thanks.” Bending over the quarian, he scanned her for life signs. “She’s alive. Suit has sealed.” He dosed her with medigel. Looking up at the Spectre, he shook his head. “You look half dead.”

Nihlus sorted through Xen’s desk, emerging victorious. “Who could die … with all that … ranting?” He gasped, his breathing weak and choked with fluid. He tossed Garrus the transmitter and sank into the desk chair.

13 Days ASR

“Well, if it isn’t General Vakarian,” a familiar voice called, beckoning him from a gloriously restful oblivion. “Welcome back.”

Garrus opened his eyes, the familiar surroundings of the Normandy’s medbay drifting into focus as
the fog rolled out. Although he couldn’t boast racking up the frequent stay points that Shepard and Nihlus collected, he’d spent enough time in the small, dim medical suite to identify it immediately. Slowly, the memory of being extracted off Haestrom returned, filling in the blanks between Nihlus tossing him the transmitter and waking up.

“How are you feeling?” Dr. Chakwas stepped into his line of sight, leaning over him a little. The bright orange of her omnitool blinded him, sending him into hiding behind eyelids pressed tight.

After considering her question for a few seconds, he nodded and peeked out through one eye. “No pain. How long have I been out?”

A nebulous shadow passed over her face, a subtle transition of muscle and tension, but it registered like someone slamming blinds down over a window. “Just under six hours. You’ve been through quite a lot.” Her gaze slid from his face to the omnitool as she began entering information, the instrument holding just a fraction too much of her attention.

“How’s Nihlus?” He tried to lift his head to look at the bed next to his. Nothing moved. He couldn’t sit up. “Doctor?” Try as he might to keep his escalating panic locked down, it burrowed out through his second larynx.

“General.” Chakwas pressed a warm, gentle hand against his shoulder. “You’ve sustained serious injuries, but you’re going to be fine. Your physical condition is precarious and requires you to remain immobile. I’ve placed you in a restraint field so that you don’t exacerbate your injuries before I complete your treatment.” She cast a quick glance over her shoulder at Nihlus. “Spectre Kryik is also in critical but stable condition. I intend to keep him in an induced coma for another 48-72 hours, after which time, he should realize a complete recovery.”

Garrus scowled, his mandibles snapping hard at the thick mire of medical jargon. “What happened to us?” He tried to lift his head again, an aggravated grumble meeting his immobility. “How did we get hurt? Where are the other members of the team I took to the shipyard?”

The door opened. “One answer at a time, son,” a deep, familiar voice called from the threshold. Anderson stood just inside, silhouetted against the light from the mess. His voice held tight to its usual, unflappable professionalism, but the rigidity along the captain’s jaw and the tendons standing out in his neck told Garrus that the human was doing just that: holding on tight.

Garrus opened his mouth, but one of Anderson’s hands leapt up, palm braced to intercept the deluge of questions.

“Your teams are both aboard the Normandy. They’re safe and recovering,” the captain said, taking a couple of steps toward the bed. “Whoever took you off the station wasn’t interested in them, just you and Nihlus.”

“Interested in us?” Forcing himself to relax into the rock-hard mattress a little, Garrus let out a long breath. What did these mystery people want with him and Nihlus? Was it tied to Archangel? The council? As far as the council knew, Nihlus had infiltrated Archangel on their behalf. But if not them … it had to be someone working for the Reapers. But who?

Anderson cleared his throat, derailing Garrus’s train of thought. The general took another long breath, that one sending a wraith of pain shivering through his chest. He needed to find out what happened before he started trying to puzzle it all through. As a starting point, the fact that the rest of the team remained uninjured was very good news. He tried to lift his head to get a better look at Anderson, then let out a frustrated grunt and turned a glare at the doctor. “I’d like to be able to move.”
She shrugged and turned all in one motion, walking over to her desk. “I’d like to be able to take a week off.” Her joke falling flat, she sighed. “Please, just give us time to explain.” Returning a moment later with her chair, she rolled it over to Anderson.

Garrus tracked the chair to the Normandy’s captain. “I don’t remember anything past the station losing power until I woke up in some sort of casarus under Haestrom.” He looked to Anderson. “What the hell happened? Was it Daro’Xen?” Browplates sinking over his eyes, heavy and skeptical, he shook his head—a slight tremor side to side. “No, she seemed to be there alone. She couldn’t have moved us.”

Anderson pushed the chair over next to Garrus’s shoulder. “It wasn’t Xen. We found no trace of any biological matter belonging to either you or Nihlus in her lab.” He lowered himself onto the seat with a slight ‘old-man’ groan. Garrus’s father had started making nearly that same sound when he was promoted to Commander at C-Sec.

“Biological matter?” A viscous soup of fear, rage, and denial rolled up his throat.

“Have patience with us, General. This is going to take a bit to explain,” Anderson said. Leaning forward, he braced his elbows on his knees and steepled his hands, fingertips pressed together. The captain let out a harsh huff of a sigh. “First things first.” He stared at Garrus over the temple of those fingers. “You and Nihlus were missing for ten days.”

Garrus twitched under the restraints again as his body insisted he sit up and take action … do something other than lie there, trapped like an insect in concrete. “Ten days?” He turned a predatory stare on the doctor as her hand pressed against his shoulder again. A bitter chuff rumbled from his throat. “Can’t you release my head, at least?”

Her studied expression of professionalism drooped for a moment, sagging like melted wax before snapping back into place. “Yes, I can, but General … Garrus … I need to explain your injuries first.” She leaned a hip against his bed and folded her hands in front of her.

Anderson spoke instead of Chakwas, forcing Garrus’s attention away from his attempt to stare the doctor into submission. “From what we can gather from your hard suits and medical scans, the station registered a massive power surge routed through the orbs you found on the bridge. All your team members lost consciousness at the same moment. You were removed from the space yard two hours after you blacked out.”

Anderson sat back, stretching his spine a little, shifting uncomfortably, but Garrus didn’t think it could be blamed on the chair. “You and Nihlus were moved to a cloaked vessel hiding within the system … most likely low orbit around Haestrom … and … .”

“And … ?” Garrus prompted when no one made any move to finish that sentence.

Dry, gentle fingers pressed down on his forearm. “You were both subjected to extensive medical testing and experimentation,” Dr. Chakwas said, her tone the carefully modulated one he’d heard her use with Shepard enough times to know it was meant to stave off the crazy.

“How extensive?” His heart stopped for a few seconds, then began to pound, but … . After an entire life of adrenaline, his heart thumping quick, hard, and steady against his keel, a sick sort of terror oozed out into his chest cavity. His heart beat, but against nothing. No answering echo followed each thump.

Chakwas glanced over at Anderson. Garrus caught the captain’s nod out of the corner of his eye while remaining intent on Chakwas, her face seeming the only fixed point in a growing maelstrom
of madness.

“The internal examination reached a level of such invasive brutality, it would not be excessive to call it vivisection,” she said, meeting his frantic stare with solid, calm compassion. “Extensive cybernetics were surgically implanted throughout your body.”

Garrus strained against her field, the wraiths of pain growing claws. “Why?” he demanded. “What were they for?”

“Everything from strength and motor skill enhancement to what appear to be control nodes, judging by the placement of the scarring.” Chakwas patted his arm, the gesture oddly soothing all things considered. “Then it appears you were placed down on Haestrom to fight.”

Could what they were telling him get any more bizarre? Spirits, what if it did? He closed his eyes. “Fight? What enemy?” A horrifying picture appeared in his head. Whoever it was, they took both he and Nihlus …

“We don’t know,” Anderson replied. He paused, then sucked in a quick breath as if reading Garrus’s mind. “Not Nihlus. Neither one of you show any evidence of attacking the other, and judging by the wounds, whatever or whomever they were … there were a lot of them.”

“So they took us apart, put us back together with cybernetics, then sent us into some sort of sadistic deathmatch?” He struggled again, the thread growing into a burn that spread through his chest. “Are the cybernetics still inside us?”

“No,” Dr. Chakwas replied. “They removed the implants, used metal plates to support where they’d cut through bone, and sealed up the areas where they removed pieces of your carapace. Before they left you on the planet, they administered massive amounts of medigel and analgesics.”

“Let me up,” he said, voice low, soft, and dangerous. Beneath the blankets, he forced himself into complete stillness.

Chakwas pressed her hand to her face, hiding half of it as she let out a long breath. “Garrus … there is extensive damage. Once I rebuild your ribcage and keel structure, I’ll be able to release you from the field, but until then, you must remain still.” She activated her omnitool and, with the press of a control, released his head.

“Rebuild … ?” Dear spirits, how bad was it? He lifted his head, the doctor jumping in to support him with a hand just below his fringe. Black ice crackled through his cells like frost creeping across grime-covered glass. One look at his silhouette under the blankets told him how extensive his injuries remained. “My keel.” Searching eyes focused up at the doctor.

She gave him a reassuring smile that didn’t touch the ice. “We’re on our way back to Omega. Between Mordin and I, we’ll get you back up on your feet, keel intact, within a few days.” When she tried to ease his head back onto the pillows, he resisted.

“Show me the rest,” he said, using his own, dead, expressionless control to buttress his courage.

“It appears you were retrieved after each fight, your wounds were healed, cybernetics were exchanged or enhanced, then they sent you down again,” the doctor said, her tone clipped. “I would have kept you in a coma like Nihlus until you were healed, but I need you awake for the next part of the procedure.” That hand patted his arm again. “It might be best if you wait, Garrus.”

“I want to see what they did to me, doctor.” A little of the rage that had begun to boil deep in his gut spilled into his voice. She winced, but nodded and pulled back the blanket.
Garrus stared through the shimmering sterile field, mouth and mandibles falling open. His chest was gone. Just gone. He let his head fall back onto the pillows. “Why am I awake?”

Anderson cleared his throat. “Nihlus’s broken hip appears to have taken him out of the running about halfway through their tests. They didn’t continue his enhancements, but with you … .” The man reached up, cracking his neck as he scrubbed the back of it with a rough hand. “Our best guess says they were trying to turn you into some sort of command and control. Your brain and nervous system took damage when they removed their enhancements.” He shook his head. “I have no idea how you managed to pull yourself and Nihlus out of that hellhole, son. Hell of a thing.”

Well, it’s like this, Anderson. Shepard showed up—she does that sometimes—and yelled at me until I got up and followed her out.

Chakwas pulled the blanket back over him, covering the hateful racing of his heart. She leaned over him a little. “The affected areas of your brain are difficult to access and delicate, and I need you awake while I repair the injuries.” She nodded to her side, drawing his attention to a monitor set up. “I’m not comfortable waiting until we arrive back at Archangel, so I’m going to have Mordin sit in and advise via comms.”

“Right.” Garrus closed his eyes, letting the rage flow free, burning the disbelief and horror to ash. Whoever had torn him and Nihlus apart and tortured them for nearly two weeks had to be connected to the Reapers. Learn the enemy’s weaknesses and turn those weaknesses against them: one of the oldest rules in warfare. And in taking him apart to learn his vulnerabilities, they’d given him a trail to follow. Mistake number one.

Brutalizing his brother, invoking the bond that demanded justice and retribution. Mistake number two.

He took a long, deep breath, trying not to imagine the way his lungs looked as they expanded under the sheet. “Do what you need to, doctor, just get me up off this bed so that I can find whoever did this to us and end them.”

* * * * *

He stood on the edge of a sun-baked cliff, Cipritine sprawling before him. The river sparkled under Trebia’s brilliant rays as it wended through the city, passed beneath the ancient walls, and flowed on toward the sea. He folded his arms and straightened his back, leaning all his weight on the backs of his feet.

Although he heard nothing, he felt Shepard walk up behind him. “It’s quite the view, isn’t it?” She stepped up next to his side and looked out, making no move toward him. “Of all the places you brought us, I think this is my favourite, Callor.”

He nodded, but didn’t speak. Unlike the rest of their time together, that time she’d come to talk, not to listen. Heart aching behind his keel, he knew. As much as his soul railed against it, as much as he wanted to turn to her, wrap his arms around her and never leave … the time had come.

“You’re ready,” she said, simply. Thick and nasal, her voice sounded as though she fought back tears, as unhappy about reality as he, despite having pushed him toward it. A throaty sigh preceded a single, sharp nod. “Good. They need you.” She laughed, but it came out bitter. “Me … well, I can wait. My needs aren’t going anywhere anytime soon.”
He turned to look down at her, his tiny, magical *Kahri*. “It’s about the work.” He pressed his talons over his heart. “This will always be yours.”

A tight lipped smile greeted that, but she remained fixed on the view. “Kick their ass, *Callor*. Kick them so hard that they never forget.” She glanced up at him. “I love you, but don’t rush to join me.” Turning, she lifted onto her toes, hands grasping his cowl to pull him down to her. “You never know what the future might bring.”

They kissed, passion and sorrow fueling the frantic joining of mouths and tongues, of bodies pressed so tight that Garrus thought his chest would cave in under the pressure. He breathed her in, doing his best to memorize the scent and sound and feel of her completely enough to last the rest of his life.

“I love you, *Kahri*,” he whispered as she pulled back, ripping loose everything soft and sentimental that remained within him. He nodded. Best she take it with her. His war had just changed to demand a much different sort of general. “I’ll win this thing. Don’t worry.”

She smiled through the pale brume that glistened in her eyes. “The galaxy couldn’t be in better hands.” Backing away, she nodded. “I’ll see you soon enough.”
Chapter Summary

Shepard gets to let out a little bit of the crazy.

13 Days ASR

Just over an hour passed before Liara and Miranda returned. Shepard heard them long before they reached her door. Their discussion centered around Liara’s access to the communications array. Apparently, the different departments were assigned broadcast windows for outgoing communications, and users needed to adhere to strict protocols most of which Liara would not be subjected to. As long as she made no mention of Shepard’s resurrection or their location, she was free to conduct her business.

“She’s here?” Shepard shook her head. Liara had signed a nondisclosure agreement with the devil in exchange for what? Why had Miranda brought the asari there in the first place? She’d been peripheral to Shepard’s life, a figure tucked away in a back lab space until Benezia died. Why not Anderson, if they wanted someone to help her make connections?

_Those connections are already intact, Janey. It’s the newer ones you need. Shouldn’t you be happy to see someone who knows about your life right before you died?_

She should be ecstatic to see Liara. Despite sticking to her hard line of no contact, Miranda had finally provided a link to Shepard’s life, a glimmer of hope that at the end of her tenure as Frankenstein’s monster, she’d be able to return to her life. So why then did Liara’s presence just stir up dread and guilt?

The door opened. Shepard didn’t need to look up to tell that Miranda entered first and alone. She waited for the door to close before she asked, “Why did you bring Liara here?” Remaining on her back, she stared straight up at the ceiling and waited. The operative’s clipped, efficient heel strokes circled around to the side of the bed and stopped.

“Dr. T’Soni has melded with your mind twice that we know of. We brought her here to aid in memory recovery and to ensure that we brought you back intact.” The chair next to the bed squeaked across the floor, then the leather let out a whispered exhale as Miranda sat down. “I admit, I thought you’d be pleased to see someone from just before your death.”

In a single movement, Shepard swung her legs off the bed and sat up. “There’s something …” She shook her head and braced the heels of her hands on the edge of the mattress, lining them up perfectly so the ridge cut along her lifeline. “I barely knew Liara, but my problem isn’t with her.”

Miranda shifted in the chair and crossed her legs at the knee, one arm draped elegantly over the top. How did she manage to make every movement seem like a dance? Next to the operative, Shepard felt like a newborn foal, all clumsy awkwardness and limbs that refused to submit to her authority.

“Then what’s your issue?” the operative asked.
Shoving herself up onto her feet, Shepard wobbled for a moment, then set up a halting pacing pattern, limping down the bed as far as she could, supporting herself hand over hand down the railing. “I don’t know. I just … I need to remember. Having bits and pieces appear here and there … it’s making me crazy.”

“Sit down,” Miranda said. “You’re mentally exhausted. Compounding it with physical exhaustion won’t improve anything.”

Shepard just paced to the other end of the bed. “I need to keep moving, to drive myself to heal so I can get the hell out of here. You don’t heal lying around …” she slowed, the words stuttering to a halt as they slid over her tongue, their taste familiar.

Large, strong hands looped under her arms, hauling her up out of a stretch and set her on her feet. “Are you sure you should even be out of bed yet?” a familiar voice asked, amusement threading through the rumble of treacle and smoke. Sweet shivers danced along her every nerve ending.

She pushed aside the reaction and twisted at the waist, stretching out her sides. She hurt like hell just about everywhere. “Yep. Don’t heal lying around a medbay.” She twisted the other way without looking at him. Look at him, dammit! “So, our prothean expert is on Therum?”

“… a medbay.” Stumbling to a halt, she clung to the railing, her knees shaking.

Miranda activated her omnitool. “Shepard, sit down.” She tapped the interface, then glanced up. “Or is standing there shaking helping in some way I can’t see?” Turning back to her work, she shook her head and pressed a control. “You’ll remember everything in time. As I’ve explained, those neurons just need to be replaced and then triggered. The data is all there.”

Shepard turned and sank onto the mattress. “I know I sound like a six year old getting homesick on her first sleepover, but I want to go the fuck home.” She braced herself again, and as she spoke, she felt like the words whispered out, slow and slurred, drifting from a distance. “I just want to go home before I miss anything else.”

The door opened, and Liara peeked through, an earnest blue face and an elongated shadow. “May I come in?” she asked. “Sorry. I heard what you were talking about and couldn’t help but think I might be some help.” She shrugged, an almost comical pop of her slender shoulders.

Shepard nodded her head toward Miranda’s chair. “Come in, sit down. Miranda was just leaving.”

The operative let out sharp breath and unfolded gracefully from the chair. “Very well, but Dr. T’Soni, please remember what we spoke about. We brought you here to assist with the reclamation of pertinent memory. Cognitive, leadership, and problem solving skill sets are paramount. Combat, operational, and technical skills are secondary. Personal memories are not a priority at this time. We need Captain Jane Shepard, hero of the Citadel, and soon.” She strode to the door. “The galaxy will not wait for you to sort out your personal life, Shepard.”

“She’s intense.” the asari said, once the door closed. She edged around the bed as if she expected Shepard to erupt off the mattress and attack her. “Are you feeling better?” She sat and balanced a large, covered mug on her knee.

Shepard nodded and focused on the asari’s big, limpid blue eyes. “Yeah, whatever.” A thousand questions burst in her head, tiny novas, none of which wore labels of cognitive processing or decision making.

She jumped up and paced to the port. Leaning against the ledge, she stared out at the black. “So,
you’re here to poke around in my head some more? Make sure there aren’t pieces missing everywhere?"

Liara held out the mug. “Here, I thought you might like this. It looks as though they don’t feed you here.”

“They try. Just haven’t had much of an appetite.” She turned to look over her shoulder, sniffing suspiciously even though she had no hope of being able to tell through a lid from that distance. “What is it?”

_Huh, maybe you can. It’s hot chocolate._

“Hot chocolate, extra sugar, extra creamer,” Liara said, stretching her arm out a little further, sort of poking the cup at Shepard. Her face brightened, glowing like a child’s on Mother’s Day, their gift of a hard-battled-for tray of burnt toast and half-raw eggs clutched in eager hands.

Shepard scowled and shook her head. “Thanks, but I don’t touch the stuff. Too sweet.” Glancing up, she saw Liara’s face fall. Damn. The expression lasted only a second, but it spoke volumes in that second. “That’s wrong, isn’t it? When we knew one another, I drank it this way?”

Liara’s lips pressed together for a moment, but then she shrugged. “Doesn’t matter.” A thin smile evolved out of the tight-lipped grimace, failing nearly as quickly as it formed. “Miranda filled me in on everything, and if all you’ve lost is your sweet tooth, I think we can consider ourselves incredibly blessed.”

Shepard hobbled back to the bed and sat, reaching out to take the mug. Closing both hands around it, she savoured the heat as it warmed and soothed the ache in her palms. “Anyway, thanks for thinking of it.”

Shepard turned to face the black waters of the sea as she raised her hand to her ear. A storm broiled just off the coast. She hoped it didn’t hit land until nothing remained of Saren’s base other than ash and smoke. _“Brother Sparky, move the shuttle into the camp, and then I need to see you and Ash.”_

“Yes, ma’am.” A moment later, the shuttle lifted out of the water and soared over her head.

Liara shrank back, her eyes glistening almost the exact shade of the water on Virmire.

_Shepard looked back out at the sea, watching thunderheads roll over the waves. The water under her feet shimmered in the patchy sunlight, the minerals turning it a vibrant blue._
“Virmire’s a beautiful place,” she said, looking back to the salarian camp. “Shame we won’t have time to enjoy it.”

Liara’s voice snagged Shepard, dragging her out of the memory. “I think you’re one of the most beautiful sights I’ve ever seen, Shepard. And … “ As Shepard stared at her, lost and trying to catch up, she looked down, then glanced toward the door and back before continuing, “… I know there are others who will feel the same way.” A watery smile accompanied the first of Liara’s tears as they broke loose and rolled down her face. “You’ve really been missed. Anderson … .”

Shepard grinned. “How is he? Is he all right? Miranda won’t even let me call him.”

“He’s fine.” Liara shrugged. “Still commanding the Normandy. Still fighting the good fight.” Her hands wrung a little in her lap. “He took your death hard.” A soft shrug rippled across her shoulders as she met Shepard’s eyes. “It’s best he doesn’t know before he can see you. It would be too cruel otherwise, leaving him doubting … wondering if you were some sort of trick.”

She hadn’t thought of that, and the asari was right. If she contacted Anderson, half of him would need to see her, the other half would try to convince him that she was some sort of Reaper trick.

Shepard squirmed a little as a long, awkward silence stretched between them. She hadn’t known Liara well enough to make small talk or even knowledgeable inquiries about her life. Well, most of it.

“How are things going? You and Aethyta getting along? Did Shiala make it to Thessia?” she asked, casting a quick, sideways glance at the cameras. Who knew how much Miranda would allow Liara to say.

“It’s been overwhelming,” Liara replied, “but with Aethyta and Shiala’s help, I’ve really been able to provide Archangel with solid intel and resources.”

The intercom crackled.

“Subtle, Miranda,” Shepard called without turning toward the camera again. “Archangel?”

“It’s a growing force—a fleet and soldiers—created to fight the Rea—”

“Dr. T’Soni!” Miranda’s voice barked from the speaker with enough volume to echo back. “Do not make me regret bringing you here.”

“My apologies,” Liara replied, her spine stiffening. “I assumed that an organization widely known throughout the galaxy might be safe to mention.” Something in the glare the asari shot at the camera said she was lying. She’d been trying to slip Shepard information, the captain felt sure of it.

“They don’t let me watch the news,” Shepard told her, “I need to be kept ignorant and mindless.” She shrugged and lifted her hands to indicate the room. “In fact, this is my first day outside of the maximum security wing.” Raising her voice to include Miranda, she continued, “So we’ll discuss boring shit, like the weather … oh wait, that’s probably classified as well. Who knows what could happen if I discover it’s raining in Calgary or partially cloudy over Armali.”

The bitter helplessness of being caged shoved Shepard up off the bed. She winced, her mug dropping from numb fingers, as all the splits and canyons in her skin stretched and tore, but she just fed the screams into the fire. Grinding her teeth, she hobbled down the bed to lean heavily against the desk standing at the foot. After sucking a couple long, seething breaths through a clenched jaw, she shook her head, the frustration and helplessness adding starch to the thick soup boiling her guts.
“Shepard?” Liara called, her voice soft. “Are you all right?”

“I’m losing my fucking mind, Liara. After about the time I became an N5, my entire life dissolves into these little snips of memory, moments with no context … nothing to tie them together. And I’m trapped in this corpse like a caged tiger in some backwater batarian menagerie.”

She spun, clearing the desk with a single sweep of her arm, then slammed her fists down into the top, leaning against it. “You ever see what happens to those tigers? They pace for the first couple of years, endless circles around their cages. Then they stop caring and just lie around. The keepers have to force them to eat.” She let her head hang from her shoulders, but looked up to stare into the camera. “Eventually, they just lose their minds and start plucking all their own fur out, chewing on their legs and tails.”

Liara appeared at Shepard’s elbow, startling her.

Shepard spun, coming face to face with eyes so black they looked like sinkholes, disappearing into a bottomless emptiness. “Liara? Wha … ?”

“I’ll help,” the asari said. Shepard felt a sensation behind her eyes … it felt … not unlike fingers flipping through a cardfile. Liara smiled and nodded. “I agree with Miranda that we have to be cautious, but I’m here to help. We’ll get it all pieced back together.”

“Shepard, you need to calm down,” Miranda said over the intercom, breaking the connection. “Sit down and relax.”

Shepard glanced back up at the camera. The image of the operative sitting behind her monitors, tap tapping on her omnitool, twisted Shepard’s mouth into a sardonic grimace. Still, she let out a long sigh and straightened.

“Thanks Liara.” She patted the young woman’s arm and hobbled back to her bed. She sat, letting the silence settle, heavy and thick before she reached down for her discarded hot chocolate and gulped down a couple of mouthfuls.

*Keep it locked up, Janey. You’ve let Liara shake you. They won’t let you out of here unless they believe that you’re firing on all cylinders.*

Right. Locked up. Sending a sly smile and a wink Liara’s direction, Shepard changed the subject. “This organization must have offered you a small moon for you to leave your private island on Thessia.”

“Actually, I was baited into a trap,” Liara said, a nervous chuckle scarcely forming before it died. “An old contact said he’d obtained the location of an undiscovered Prothean ruin. When I arrived at the meeting, Miranda and a small squad of goons put guns to my head and gave me a choice. I could either come with them and be well rewarded for my cooperation or I could go about my business and forget I’d ever seen them.” She chuckled again, but Shepard heard a real tremor of fear running beneath that one.

Shepard’s left eyebrow lifted toward her hairline. The whole intrepid adventurer, taking risky, secret missions at gunpoint really didn’t seem like the young woman’s speed. “And you chose to come?”

Liara shrugged, blushing a little across her nose and cheeks. “They promised me that I’d see something I very much wanted to see, and that my work would be vital to the war effort against the Reapers.” She reached out to grip Shepard’s hands. “I guess they were right.” A wicked grin grew
under the innocence. “But, I do have half a floor a few levels up. You would not believe the tech … it’s amazing. I don’t know who Miranda works for, but they’re insanely well funded.”

Liara gave Shepard’s hands a squeeze then released her and stood, pacing to the large port. “But if I’d known that the secret was that they’d brought you back, I would’ve come if they offered me a closet with a terminal.” She stared out. “I can’t believe it. Even after seeing the logs and data … I just … How?”

Shepard shrugged, her head lowering to hang heavy and limp. “I don’t know. I was dead for most of it.” Exhaustion pressed a massive hand on the back of her neck. She took another drink, appreciating the thick, rich hit of sugar that time.

And there it is, Janey. Poor man’s drug of choice. Or maybe it’s the safe drug of choice?

She raised her head just far enough to look at the camera. “I’m tired. Can you run the regen field while I take a nap?” Not waiting for a reply she knew wouldn’t come until Miranda appeared in her room, Shepard gave Liara a weary smile. “Would you join me for dinner in the cafeteria when I wake up? Hopefully by then I’m feeling up to walking down and back.”

“Of course, Shepard. We can eat in between tripping over all the things I’m not allowed to talk about.” Liara walked over and held out her hand. “I can take the hot chocolate.”

Shepard looked down at the mug. “Actually, leave it. It’s growing on me.” She reached out, snagging Liara’s fingers in a light grip. “I am glad to see you, Liara, even if it doesn’t seem like it.”

The asari nodded and smiled. “I’ll be expecting your call.” She turned and strode to the door.

Shepard shook her head and slid off the side of the bed. The asari always glided as though on the main runway during a fashion show, even Liara, and she’d spent all her time in holes in the ground digging up bones and fifty thousand year old garbage.

Shepard grinned, remembering her mother’s lack of patience with the tomboy who’d sprung from her womb walking like a linebacker, talking like a sailor, and sporting a stubborn streak a half-klick wide.

I swear to the sweet baby Jesus sitting by His holy Father’s side in the heavens above, Jane Gwendolyn Shepard, you are going to be the death of me. How did you get those shiners? Have you been fighting again?

When the door closed behind Liara, Shepard stood long enough to pull back her blankets, then lay down on her side, back to the wall. Truth be told, even though exhausted, she wanted time alone to pry at the weak spots appearing in that starched white sheet that hid her life. Remembering even a little of Virmire felt like a massive victory, and maybe, just maybe, Liara had softened things up a bit.

“I just have to keep hammering at the wall until I break it down,” she grumbled to herself and closed her eyes.

“Don’t worry,” a deep, flanged voice said from behind her, “talking to yourself becomes standard as a guest of this organization.”

A shriek ripped from Shepard’s throat as she leaped almost straight up off the mattress, heart hammering in her chest. Rolling over, she slid out of bed, barely managing to land on her feet.

Fully expecting to find someone crouched next to the bed, she staggered into a wobbly fighting
stance. No one. Rather than feeling reassured by facing a blank wall, ice cold talons grabbed hold of her brain and twisted. Dizzy, she fell forward, catching herself on the mattress. She shoved herself back up onto her feet. “Hello?” Surely she’d actually heard the voice: deep, male, and flanged but also coarse and cracked as if each word cost him a premium of pain.

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m real.” An almost metallic chuckle followed. “At least I think I’m still real. Enough parts and pieces remaining.” A sound halfway between a sigh and a keen drifted up over her mattress, sorrowful resignation calming her fear. “The air vent,” the voice said. “I’m in the cell next to yours.”

Shepard lay down on her front and wriggled closer to the vent. Ducking down, she peered through the slats. On the other side, a pair of dull, almost milky blue eyes watched her from under a low-slung hood. Shadows clung too close and thick to make out any of his features other than his eyes. Those eyes … they looked a thousand years old. She scowled. “You can see in here.”

She glanced back over her shoulder. “Oh God, you can see in here. Please tell me you weren’t watching me sleep earlier.” Scrambling backwards, she grabbed her blankets and pulled them up in front of her, feeling naked despite the thick shirt and trousers. “Thank god I haven’t changed clothes outside the bathroom.”

“I did consider it good form to introduce myself at the earliest possible chance,” he said. “As for watching you sleep … no. You snore with enough volume that I couldn’t concentrate on my reading.” He let out a very familiar sort of wry chuff. “I piled my pillows and blankets over the vent in a vain attempt to muffle the roar.” A long sigh drifted through, the vent giving it a metallic, baffled sound. “I have no desire to peer at you through here like some sort of lecherous old deviant. I’ve … I’ve just been alone in here for a long time. I wasn’t sure I could still use my voice for anything other than screaming.”

Shepard lay face down on the mattress again and scooted a little closer so that she could just see those dull, beaten down looking eyes. “How long have you been here?” she asked, her voice scratching through still-paralyzed airways.

The pale stare turned away. “I’m not sure any more. There’s no night and day here other than their schedule. Drugs … food arrives … more drugs … they drag me off to their labs, when I return the room is clean … more drugs … food arrives … repeat.” He looked back. “More than a year anyway.”

She scowled, all her earlier fear turning into outrage and sorrow. “They’ve held you here for more than a year, experimenting on you the whole time? Fuck.” A heavy, throbbing headache burrowed in behind her eyes. What the hell? Who were these monsters? Horror and disbelief rampaged through her head, tangling into a dizzy, nauseating maelstrom. “I … sweet baby Jesus … are you in pain?” she asked, giving voice to the only question that managed to untangle itself from the mess.

“She tried to die a few times,” he continued, “but you know first hand how well that goes.”

Shepard scooted all the way forward and reached out, pressing her hand to the grate. “You probably already know this, but I’m Jane … Jane Shepard. What’s your name?”
He stared at her hand for a second, then looked back to her eyes. Talons swept down his face, moving the hood enough to reveal terrible rents in the side of his face as if chunks of it had been carved away. “I don’t know.” When his hand dropped, the hood rippled in slight wave that she translated as a shrug. “I know they picked up my body off the Citadel.” His eyes narrowed. “I remember fighting, krogan everywhere. Then I woke up on their ship. They brought me here, and this is the first anyone has actually spoken to me since then.”

“You fought on the Citadel? That was nearly two years ago.” She pulled her hand back, balled it into a fist and rested her chin on it. “Damn.” Shaking her head, she looked up at the camera. “I don’t know who the hell these people are or what organization they work for, but I don’t understand how they can get away with this. Someone needs to plant a few bombs and blow this entire place into molecules if this is the sort of shit they do here.”

The hood rippled again then he looked away. “They do love their experiments. I’ve had so much of me taken out, cut away, replaced by tech that gets replaced by more tech.” A bitter grunt splintered in his throat. “How much of someone do you think can be replaced by machine before you just stop being a person? Maybe I have become property.”

“Every last inch except your soul,” she said, practically growling at the resignation and defeat in his voice. “You never let them take that.”

The thin strips of light flickered off a twitched mandible. “I can see why they find you so frustrating. You’ve got a lot of fight in you.” That chuckle again. “I heard you call your project head by the name Frankenstein and looked it up. It suits her … all of mine as well.”

Wait, he’d looked something up? “You can access the extranet?” Hope bloomed bright and hot in her chest. Had they bunked her next to a means of escape?

“No.” Hope crashed and burned. “They gave me a library to keep me occupied. Two years, you said?” He turned away, paused and then whispered. “My drugs have arrived. They like to keep me … what is that human phrase I read? … stoned out of my gourd while I’m not pit fighting.” He chuckled again, the sound as torn up and raw as his face. Damn, he teetered so close to the precipice. It wouldn’t even take a push to send him sliding into the void.

Shepard’s door opened. Not bothering to cover the fact she’d been talking to the prisoner next door, she glanced back at Miranda. “You people are fucking diabolical.” She turned around, sitting cross-legged in the middle of her bed. “How can you let shit like that … “ She hooked her thumb toward the vent. “… go on? You make me sick.”

The operative activated her omnitool. “I see you’ve met Specimen Alpha.”

The fury exploded behind Shepard’s eyes, short-circuiting her brain so that when she opened her mouth, only stuttering came out for a good ten seconds. “Oh my fucking sweet bloody baby Jesus, you did not just call that torin a specimen.”

Miranda sighed as she tapped the haptic interface, starting the regen field. “According to Alliance law, deceased specimens may be reanimated and implanted—”

Shepard leapt up, slamming into Miranda with enough force to throw the woman back. The operative tripped over the chair, sitting down hard.

“Get out!” Grabbing two handfuls of leather, Shepard propelled Miranda to the door, her anger providing a strength and surefootedness that surprised her … and apparently Miranda as well because the woman just stumbled along without resisting. “Get the fuck out of my room.
Reanimated specimens?” She opened the door and threw Miranda into the hallway. “Is that what I am? A fucking reanimated specimen?”

“Shepard!” Miranda pinwheeled her arms as she half-slid, half-ran a couple of metres. Making a speedy recovery, she let out a huff of breath and smoothed down her catsuit. “That’s not what I meant.” She held out her hands, a placating gesture, and took a halting step forward. “I don’t know anything about Specimen Alpha other than his designation and that he’s quartered next door. I can’t comment on another department’s—”

“Experiments? Lab rats? Torture victims?” She stepped back and began to close the door. “Must be nice to be able to compartmentalize like that. Makes it really easy on the conscience.”

“Shepard . . .” Miranda tapped the display on her omnitool. “Shepard, I’ll look into it, all right? If Speci . . . if he is being mistreated, I will take it to my employer. For now, get some sleep.” She keyed in a command, then flicked it off.

Shepard just shut the door, stormed back to her bed and threw herself down on the mattress. Specimen Alpha leaned propped up against the vent, his eyes half-closed, a low, almost sobbing moan trembling under his every breath.

“If I needed a reason to bust out of this place, big fella … you just gave it to me.” She pressed her fingers to the vent, and blinked back her tears. He didn’t need them. He needed her to be tough, to get herself back to one hundred percent, and to get them the hell out of there.
Chapter Summary

Why can't the galaxy ever give a general a chance to heal before it goes to hell in a handcart?

17 Days ASR

“Have a good morning, General,” Marcie called as Garrus pushed up from the table.

He cast a baleful glare her way. A good morning? Right. After being ambushed by an overzealous house matron, Dr. Chakwas, and enough food to feed three growing juveniles, he doubted very much the agony in his barely healed and over-distended stomach would fade before mid-afternoon. He wrapped an arm around his middle to provide support and traction, then limped toward the elevator.

Aid my healing. Right. How does eating until I feel like my entire digestive tract is going to explode aid my healing?

Garrus pushed his way against the early morning crowd, trying to clear a path to the stairs. Not an easy task through the starving throng. He stopped at the end of the counter and looked over the common room. A faint smile greeted the groan of dismay from the crowd as he blocked the chow line. Never, in Archangel’s two cycles had he seen so many people stuffed into the small space.

“Where did all these recruits come from?” he asked out loud. “I thought we rejected cloning as a means of recruiting.”

Martin appeared at his elbow, a huge grin on his face. “Well, some of them are thanks to Zaeed. He took out the late Donovan Hock’s second in command last week, and … um … “ He cleared his throat. “… encouraged the entire organization to join up.”

“Excuse me, sir?” a human woman called from Garrus’s left. “My first class starts in twenty minutes.” She shrugged and grinned. “Unless you’re willing to write us all late passes?”

“As you were, cadet.” He gave her a quick wink, appreciating her casual pluck, and stepped out of the way. “That’s far more paperwork than I intend to do today.” Setting out for the stairs, he shook his head. “Hock’s people can’t account for this. We’re going to have to open building three and hire more instructors.”

“The rest are Talons.” He met Garrus’s incredulous stare with a nod. “Apparently they experienced a change in leadership, and she sent them all here.”

Garrus set out for the elevator, moving a little faster and more desperately every second. The press of bodies all pushing in different directions felt a little too out of control. So many bodies. Too many to easily see an incoming threat. A fist hammered at the inside of his keel while talons latched onto his head, a crushing grip that sank through plate and bone. Office. He needed to get to his office and quiet. He had a massive list of things he needed to deal with before shipping out for the Citadel and Tuchanka.
As he pushed through to the bottom of the stairs, his elbow clipped a large human recruit, sending the man stumbling. He turned to steady the cadet, taking note that the man had yet to exchange his merc armour for the Archangel uniform. It belonged to a small organization Archangel wiped out a month earlier. Most of the merc’s co-workers chose to die rather than surrender.

“Sorry—” Garrus said and reached out to help him regain his footing.

“Watch where you’re fucking going, bloody bird.” The man threw off Garrus’s hand, shoving him away. “Fucking base is full of you bastards … think you bloody own the place.”

A streak of movement and fury tore past Garrus’s elbow. Martin grabbed the merc by the throat and slammed him against the wall, one frame-gauntleted hand crushing the armour at the man’s throat. Garrus grabbed the pauldron of the kid’s armour.

Glaring up with enough rage to drain all the blood from his captive’s face, practically growling, Martin said, “That bird does own the place.” He let the merc slide down the wall enough to make direct eye contact. “When this organization wiped out the rest of your useless merc band, he made you an offer, gave you a place to work and call home, and this is how you thank him? By demeaning everyone, especially the humans, with your racial shit?”

Grey and trembling, the man patted Martin’s arm, an ineffectual, placating gesture. “N … no, s … sir. My apologies, General V … Vakarian, sir. I’m sorry. I spoke without thinking.”

“General!” the rough brogue of the cavalry shouted over the ambient racket. Garrus threw a glance over his shoulder at Butler—the wiry man shoving his way through the crowd with much less finesse, but also much less offence than Garrus had managed—before focusing back on Martin. He gripped the kid’s shoulder, easing him back. “Put him down. I can take it from here.”

The general stared into the merc’s gasping face, meeting and holding his watery, bloodshot stare for a moment before he turned to Butler. “Instructor Butler,” he called, making sure his voice would project all the way to the kitchen. “It seems that we have recruited a cadet who does not appreciate the racial diversity of this organization. I’m sure you’ll discover several inventive ways to educate him in the benefits of cooperation and respect.”

Gabe clamped down on the armour at the merc’s neck and dragged him off a couple of meters before calling back. “Hierarch Vakarian was looking for you, and Sidonis is on hold on the QEC.” He shrugged when Garrus raised a brow plate in query. “Must be important, but he wouldn’t say why.”

“Tell my pari I’m headed for my office. I’ve got a couple weeks of catching up to get done in six hours.” He spun on his talons and strode for the elevator, his path clearing as if by some magical means. Throwing recruits around the place: the new magic. His mandibles gave a hard, ironic flick. Why hadn’t he thought to use it sooner? “He can catch up with me there.”

“Will do, General.”

“Your kit packed?” Garrus asked, stepping into the elevator just ahead of Martin. As the doors closed, he hit the control.

“Already on my bunk aboard the Passch,” Martin confirmed, moving up to block the door. The kid had appointed himself Garrus’s bodyguard the moment the general emerged from medbay.

“I’ve scheduled the department head briefing in the main QEC for 0930. The leader of the Talons
asked to meet with you as soon as you were back to work. Do you want me to try to get her in before we leave?”

Garrus frowned and leaned back against the wall. He didn’t know how to feel about their sudden wealth of recruits. A major merc operation like the Talons asking to be absorbed into Archangel … it sent up flares. “Yeah, give us at least a half hour block of time. I want to make sure we aren’t bringing the enemy into the fold en masse before I leave.”

Garrus’s scowl darkened. “How long have the Talons been here? Are they integrating? Behaving themselves?”

Martin nodded and twisted to look back, his eyebrows climbing. “Yeah, actually. Their instructors and roommates—because it’s crowded as fuck in the dorms—report that they’re eager to learn and friendly.” He shrugged, then turned back to the door as the elevator chimed their arrival. “Apparently their boss is very into the whole protector of the weak and helpless thing.”

“A gang leader?” Garrus scowled. “On Omega?”

The doors opened, leaving Martin only enough time to shrug before he pushed out first, braced as if he expected to take fire. Garrus just grimaced and shook his head. As much as he appreciated the young man’s worry, having a constant bodyguard wore thin.

“Garrus, you’re going to mother-hen me to death.”

He nodded at the frustration laced through Shepard’s voice, comprehension dawning.

A cluster of engineering staff blocked most of the corridor just outside the main lab. Members of just about every department stood around wearing expressions of almost morbid curiosity as they conferred in low tones about the work going on within. Garrus stepped around them, pausing to watch the geth who bustled around Legion’s platform. Most of the geth salvaged from Daro’Xen’s nightmare had chosen to upload back to Rannoch, but Legion insisted on its platform being repaired as close to original specs as possible. Although slow, delicate work, the geth and Archangel engineers had made solid headway. The geth had expressed confusion about Legion’s choice, but Garrus couldn’t help thinking that the programs identifying with their platform was a good thing. Perhaps a first step toward a visceral comprehension of the mortality faced by the rest of the galaxy.

“All right people,” Garrus called over the murmured conversation, “if you can help put Legion back together, walk through the door and volunteer. Everyone else, get back to your own projects. The Reapers aren’t standing around gossiping.” He waited until the crowd dispersed then continued down the corridor to his office.

“They could be,” Martin said, a wide grin answering Garrus’s glare as the kid ran ahead to get the door.

“Answer that damned QEC,” Vortash said, his surly snarl greeting the general even before he made it over the threshold. “It pings every five seconds. I don’t want to kill whoever it is, but I will.” The batarian held out a handful of datapads. “Operations sent these down. They need to be approved before you leave. The aeronautics division has asked for a meeting to discuss the design changes needed to offset the security leaks and stolen vehicles.”

He held out a second stack of datapads. “Everything needed to get building three operational so we can peel some of these recruits out of our ass cracks. Fifteen hundred new bodies … we’re going to collapse under the weight without the new building.”
“And a fine good morning to you.” Garrus scowled at the stack. “Didn’t I create Operations to avoid doing most of these tasks?” He nodded for Martin to grab the datapads, then brushed past. “When my pari arrives, send him in.”

“The guards downstairs called again,” the batarian bellowed through the closing door. “She’s insisting on talking to you. And the admiralty board called wanting to discuss her storage.”

Garrus whirled around, one hand slapping against the door to stop it from shutting. “Her what?”

Vortash shrugged, looking back to his computer. “Their word, not mine.”

“Storage,” Martin grumbled. “Only one place to store that lunatic; in the center of a star.”

Garrus nodded his agreement as he turned toward his desk. The admiralty board would have to figure out what to do with their own monster. He didn’t have to facilities or personnel to maintain a long term prisoner. He froze halfway around, his eyes locking onto his galaxy map. During the weeks he’d been missing or convalescing, four red dots had multiplied to seven.

“Is this right?” he shouted over his shoulder.

The door opened, Vortash sticking his head through. “Is what right?” When Garrus stabbed a talon toward the map, the batarian nodded. “Yeah, afraid it is. And yes, still all human colonies.” He nodded toward the door to Garrus’s QEC comm room as a sharp chime rang out. “Might be why that fucking thing keeps pinging.”

“Right.” He stared at the map for another couple of seconds, then dragged himself away. The map didn’t have any answers, just more questions. “Just drop the datapads on the desk, Martin. Then go drag Nihlus out of bed, get him to Mordin, and then fed. I need him at the department briefing.”

“I’ll do my best, but when I went in earlier, he just threw dirty laundry at me until I left.” The kid set down his burden. “I’m not sure Nihlus is going to bounce back from this one, General.”

“Giving up on him ensures that he doesn’t, so that’s the last I want to hear of that.” Garrus entered his security code to his QEC, tossing his words over his shoulder far more casually than he felt. As much as he agreed that being turned into a lab animal may have broken Nihlus, he needed to deny it. He had no other choice ... for his own sake. “Do whatever you have to, but get him up and to that meeting.”

Without waiting to hear any more, he stepped through the door, meeting Martin’s stare with one that clearly said, ‘Just get it done’, as it closed behind him. He locked it then turned and stepped up to the console. Three calls awaited his arrival.

“Garrus, finally. Thank the spirits,” Sidonis snapped the moment his hologram appeared. “Our Enoch shipyard has been destroyed and two more frigates have disappeared.” He lunged toward the console. “In addition, there have been reports of movement in Satent and Nirada, too damned close to our weapon testing grounds. We can’t afford to lose the Zaherin facility.”

Garrus waited for the torin to stutter to a stop before trying to get a word in. “Any clues as to who or how?” he asked. No doubt the same people responsible for Haestrom. So, definitely not Daro’Xen and definitely not a random strike by pirates.

“No clues except those orbs seeded throughout the building. We didn’t take any chances and just blew the crap out of them.” Sidonis shuddered, very obviously shaken to the core. “If I never have to face down another one of those things, it’ll be too damned soon.” His subvocals broadcast the truth behind that statement, but then calm passed over his features as he policed up his emotions.
“Someone is trying to tear Archangel apart, General, and whoever they are, they’re as good as invisible. If we don’t provide our divisions with better security, they’re going to succeed.”

“Understood, Sidonis. Contact each facility, full security status reports. I want to know if any of them feel threatened. I want their estimates on what it will take both personnel and ship-wise to make their station secure.” He paused, letting his brain run the variables for a moment. “And I want your recommendation as to which bases are the weakest. We can’t wait for these bastards to come after us, we have to take the fight to them.” He reached for the interface. “Have all that ready for 0930.”

Sidonis saluted. “Yes, sir. Sidonis out.”

Leaving the waiting calls on hold, Garrus reached up to his radio and opened a channel to the Biolab. “Mordin? What’s the word on those orbs taken off the Haestrom shipyard?”

“General,” the salarian replied. “Believe objects to be probes allowing for remote observation and control of indoctrinated subjects. Hypothesise that orbs relay indoctrination signal from host, likely Reapers. Require further testing to confirm hypothesis. Risky. Participants subject to indoctrination, brain damage, possible violent or self-destructive behaviour.”

If the orbs just relayed the indoctrination signal, they might be able to trace an origin. “What do you need to get us some real answers on this?” he demanded. “We can guess at what they are all we want, but these damned things keep showing up in our facilities, and our people keep disappearing. I think some risks are warranted here.”

“Best chance for answers to isolate indoctrinated subjects with orb, monitor for energy fluctuations, transmissions.”

Garrus turned his stare to the floor. “We have a limited pool of people who have already been exposed to the orbs. Call them in and see if they’ll volunteer. I won’t force anyone to endure that against their will. Full security and containment precautions.”

“Understood, General. Will transmit protocols to Passchendaele for approval when prepared.”

“Send them to Dr. Chakwas as well.” Garrus paced the few metres to the door and then back to the console. “Any theories as to why Martin isn’t affected by the orbs?” The kid had strolled onto the base, disabled or shielded the orbs and rescued the squad without showing any symptoms.

“Likely due to indoctrination signal being relayed using light frequencies. Mr. Weaver’s prosthetics intercept and translate all incoming wavelengths.” Mordin paused, and Garrus could just about hear the gears spinning up. “Yes. Yes. Need to devise means of analyzing filtering system. Prosthetics may eliminate indoctrination signal as junk data. Could lead to optical defense measures.” The scientist’s voice increased in both volume and pitch, his words coming faster and faster until Garrus could barely understand him. Then he went silent. “Mr. Weaver accompanying you to Citadel? Tuchanka?”

“He is.” Garrus grinned at the silence that followed. “I’ll have him report to you after the department briefing.” He reached up to close the channel. “You’ll be attending, I trust?”

“I will. Solus out.”

Garrus checked the identity of his next call, letting out a relieved sigh as he hit the control and Tali appeared before him.

“Garrus, thank the ancestors,” the young quarian said. She stared at him for a few seconds before
her shoulders dropped. “You’re all right?”

He nodded. “As all right as can be expected.” He jutted his chin toward her image. “How about you? Things settling down on Rannoch?”

“Yes. The geth have returned to the village and to our suits.” She giggled. “It was really amazing, actually … seeing everyone reunite. They missed each other. It’s a good sign for the future. I wished you’d been here.”

He nodded and forced a smile. “Yeah, me too.”

For the next few minutes, she brought him up to date on the quarian return to their home world. Apparently, the migrant fleet had returned to the system as well and, despite a rigid defensive posture, was sending survey and biological/environmental expeditions to the surface. Garrus signed off, shaking his head. Maybe, in all her insanity, Daro’Xen had actually accelerated the repatriation of her people rather than halting it.

He connected the last call, wincing a little as Melanis appeared on the pad. He didn’t give the asari time to speak. “I see we’ve lost another three colonies since I left for Rannoch.”

The asari looked down, as if the disappearing humans were somehow her fault. “They’re getting bolder. Arvuna and New Canton we had good lead times, and still nothing but a ghost town awaited when we arrived. We’re spread out too much to do anything even if we did catch them at it, General. The numbers or tech they have to possess to remove millions of people in a few hours … how are a couple of frigates and a platoon of soldiers supposed to stop them?”

He stiffened. “You’re not. That’s not why we’re out there, Melanis. We’re trying to discover what is happening to the humans. I’ve always known we’re going to need a fleet to bring them down. Spirits, ships large enough to take all those humans ….” He let out a breath and relaxed into parade rest. “You can return to base. I’ll be sending Nihlus back out this afternoon, and I need you here. We just had nearly fifteen hundred recruits land in our laps. I need them trained and equipped and out guarding Archangel holdings.” He stepped up to the console. “Department briefing in about forty minutes. Be on your way back.”

He heard the door open behind him. Damn, Martin was getting too good at bypassing.

She saluted. “Yes, sir.” She winked and lifted a hand. “Hey kid.”

“Hey, Melanis.” Martin hung back by the door until Garrus hung up the call. “The Talon leader is in your office.”

Garrus turned and let out a long breath as he sagged back against the console. His chest ached and the long incisions around his thighs burned. He swore he could feel every screw and rivet Dr. Chakwas had embedded into his bones to reinforce them while they healed. Maybe she’d been right and it was too soon. Not that the galaxy cared. It didn’t put a pin in going to hell until Garrus Vakarian felt up to fixing every single fucking thing.

“You look like hell, General.”

Nodding, Garrus pushed off the QEC. “You got Nihlus up?”

“Yes. I just needed to say that three more colonies had disappeared, and he dragged himself into the shower on his own.” Martin leaned back against the door. “Pretty sure Mordin replaced most of Nihlus’s blood with Oxhydran, but he’s sober and in the kitchen trying to keep food down.” Meeting Garrus’s gaze with an expression that spoke to the depth of his feelings for the Spectre as
well as the depth of his worry, he said, “He can’t take too many more hits, Garrus. What happened to the two of you … .” He looked away, his hands doing a little helpless flip at the ends of his arms as he swallowed hard. “It would do me in.”

Garrus stepped up and laid his hand on Martin’s shoulder. “You’ve been through hell too, kid, and you came out strong.” He took a deep breath. “All right, enough wallowing, let’s go meet this Talon leader and see what the deal is.” He palmed the door control. “Nice work hacking your way through. I’m going to have to start layering the encryption.”

Martin laughed and cocked his head, swaggering a little as he brushed past Garrus to enter the office first. “You can try, old man. I’m too fast for you.”

“Not sure if that’s comforting or not,” a smooth, feminine voice said. The subvocals ran deep, baritone, and amused.

Garrus stepped through the door then stopped so suddenly that his talons caught on the door track. Standing on the other side of the desk, a female turian stared at him, her mandibles drifting out a bit before giving an amused flutter.

“General Vakarian?” she asked, her brow plates lifting a little when he just gawked at her.

He shook himself, and stepped forward, his head ducking a little by way of apology. “I’m sorry, when they told me the leader of the Talons wanted to meet with me, I didn’t think it was going to be a Kandros.” He forced himself to stop staring into her remarkable light gold-green eyes, and stabbed an awkward hand at the closest chair. “Sit, please.” He took a couple of steps toward the desk. “It’s Nyreen, correct? You were two cycles behind me at the academy.”

Martin stepped up and offered his hand. “My name’s Martin Weaver, and I’m pleased to meet you.” He shot a glare at Garrus that carried a promise that a great deal of teasing awaited him once Nyreen Kandros moved out of earshot. The *tarin* took the kid’s hand and shook twice before releasing him.

“Yes,” Garrus said, “Mr. Weaver is my left hand.” He stepped behind his desk, but didn’t sit.

“Martin Weaver, former resident of the Mission Rehabilitation Facility on the Citadel. Injured assisting then Lt. Jane Shepard in the defense of Illyria during the Skyllian Blitz.” She gave him a perfunctory nod before turning her attention back to Garrus. She met his stare for a moment, before tilting her head in a slightly dismissive nod.

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“And the reason for such a thorough investigation?” Garrus settled into his chair.

Again that tiny shrug. “Should be obvious, I’d think.” A light sigh rumbled from her throat, heavy on sorrow and resignation. “The people of this station have endured a great deal over the cycles. A new, extremely well-funded merc organization moves in, I want to know who I’m dealing with. In short, I wanted to be sure you weren’t something else these people would need to endure.”

“The Talons have forced this station to endure their presence and criminal activity for decades,” Garrus countered, leaning back and trying to hide the flinch as his spine let out a screech. “What changed?”

“I am not so powerful, well-connected, or wealthy that I can simply walk in somewhere and take over,” the *tarin* said, her voice soft but haughty and defensive. She shifted a little, leaning forward
with her elbows on the arms of her seat. Those remarkable eyes never moved from his, holding him with the passion, almost fervour in her stare. “I needed to work my way up. I had ... “ She cleared her throat. “... previous entanglements that proved a hurdle to my acceptance within the Talons.”

“Like sleeping with Aria?” Martin blurted. Eyebrows raised, an expression of completely guileless curiosity on his face, the kid looked back and forth between them. A pleasant smile met the Talon leader’s stiffened spine. “Your people are a chatty bunch.”

Garrus bit down on a grin. Score one for the kid.

“Yes … as I was saying, I needed to earn trust, work my way up through the organization until I reached a position where I exerted enough influence to compel change.” She let out a long breath that rumbled like a thunderstorm through her second larynx, layering it with begrudging respect. “Then a few months back, Archangel rewarded my patience and preparation when it eliminated my predecessor. Since then, I have watched your organization, weighed the tides flowing through Omega, and here we are.” A more dramatic, full body shrug followed her words, elegant mandibles easing out and down then pulling tight again.

“Since Archangel started applying pressure, the Suns and Blood Pack are moving deeper and deeper into the Talons’ territory,” Martin said, keeping the gang leader on the ropes. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees and stared into Kandros’s face. “Things are going to get ugly on this station in the next year. There’s a gang war coming that isn’t going to end well for any of the gangs.” Raising his eyebrows, he tilted his chin up, challenging her. “You know it, I know it, and the general knows it, because it’s going to be him finishing up the purge.”

“My less than subtle assistant is asking if you’re just here to hide away, soak up our training, learn our tech, and then run back out there to fill the void when I’ve scoured every last gang member from this rock?” Garrus rested his forearms on the desktop and watched her, searching for any signs of deception, not surprised to come up empty.

The Kandros family was military as far back as turians kept records. Rigid but honourable, members of the family including Nyreen’s father, grandfather, and aunt had earned some of Palaven’s highest honours for service. He’d admired Nyreen’s natural talent for war back in the academy, but didn’t know her other than to nod in passing. Her brother had been in Garrus’s year and excelled in a way that drew him a great deal of praise and a great deal of envy. In every way, he’d eclipsed his younger sister.

Nyreen chuffed, a harsh cough of derision. “I’m not here to hide myself away until the bigger predators have cleared out the scavengers. I have no taste for carion, General. Archangel appears to be living up to its ideals … my ideals for Omega. Rather than sacrifice my people to the scavengers when their war begins, I would see them turned into something better.” She straightened in her chair, arching her neck, proud but not arrogant. “Have I come to the wrong place?”

Garrus shook his head, a crooked smile making one mandible flutter. He studied her for another few seconds, all his alarms staying silent, his gut calm and sure. “No. No, you haven’t. Welcome to Archangel, Nyreen Kandros.”
Garrus watched the *tarin* sitting in front of him for a moment. Thanks to their sudden wealth of bodies, Archangel needed instructors. A hierarchy-trained biotic who possessed both leadership skills and a working knowledge of the gangs on Omega would prove extremely useful.

“You brought us most of these bodies,” he said at last. “Would you be willing to help us get them organized, billeted, and trained?”

Kandros’s brow plates raised, but she straightened in her chair a little—the reaction he’d been looking for. “That’s a lot of trust for someone you just met and still suspect might be an infiltrator,” she replied. Her head cocked and her eyes narrowed as if either sizing him up or deciding how big an idiot he was.

“True, it’s a lot of trust, but it’s not that great a risk, and if you’re even half the soldier you were back when we were teenagers, the reward will far offset it. My best people will be here, helping you settle into your new position.” He chuckled to ease back the threat implied by his words before he said, “If you or any of the people who came with you pose a danger to the organization or other recruits, you’ll be removed.”

“Removed?” She bristled, apparently not set at ease. As she tensed, the air began to snap with biotic energy. “How final a removal are we talking?”

Garrus managed to stifle his smile, but one brow plate escaped his control. He stood. “We’re an army created to defend the galaxy against a coming storm, we’re not mercs and we’re not murderers. We tend to let people go using paperwork rather than bullets.”

“Body disposal is a bitch,” Martin added, earning himself a glare even as Garrus’s smile escaped, his mandibles flicking once.

To his surprise, the kid’s easy grin settled the *tarin* back into her chair, and the charge faded from the atmosphere. Defensive but reasonable … that he could work with.

Garrus leaned back against the edge of his desk. “None of you are in any danger unless you shoot first.” His chrono chimed a fifteen minute warning for the briefing. “I need to tie up some loose ends before I head down, but I’d like you to sit in on our department briefing in a few minutes. I have just over sixty frigates gathering dust in my dry dock. They need crews and ground assault teams. A lot of your people are External Forces and Alliance veterans. I want a list of your most experienced, most able to train in the fly, most trusted.”

She nodded and pushed out of her chair. “I’ll do that now, General.”

“Excellent.” He stepped past her to open the door. “Vortash, please show Instructor Kandros to the briefing room and supply her with a datapad.”

The batarian grumbled, but stood and started gathering materials off his desk.
Garrus held out his arm, ushering Nyreen from his office. “You’re dismissed, Instructor.”

“Sir, yes, sir.” She stood, gave him a rigid turian salute, then strode past him.

Garrus lingered in the doorway for a few seconds, watching after his newest instructor as Vortash led her out into the corridor. He got a good, solid feeling from her despite what she must have been through after being sent to the cabals. Not to mention whatever had transpired there to bring her out to Omega, living like an outlaw.

Martin walked up behind the general, leaning to look around him, and whistled. “Man, her eyes are . . .”

“Beautiful,” Garrus finished, then realized he’d said that out loud and cleared his throat, returning to his chair.

“I was going to say different,” the kid said, a wide grin splitting his face, “but sure, beautiful works too.”

Garrus rolled his eyes and picked up the first datapad. “Don’t grin at me like you think you’ve discovered something.” He cleared his throat, shifted in his chair a little and redirected the conversation. “Eyes like Nyreen’s run in families, a rare genetic branch as old as the turian people. There are all sorts of ideas and tales about them . . . that they are people destined for great things, or destined for great sacrifice. Nyreen’s family definitely lived up to the whole destined for great things promise. She was set to follow in some very big footsteps when her biotic talents manifested, and she was sent to the cabals.”

Martin scowled. “Cabals?”

“Biotic units.” Garrus quickly scrawled his approval across the bottom of the datapads, hoping that he wasn’t authorizing Vortash’s new aircar and mansion on Khar’shan. “We’re a rigid, traditional people. That comes with a lot of good, but it also comes with a lot of distrust and backwards ways of doing things. My people are suspicious of biotics.” He slammed a palm up in the face of Martin’s comment. “I know, it doesn’t make any sense. It’s just the way it is . . . for now.” Hitting the bottom of that stack, he moved onto the second. “So biotics are kept separate, trained with brutal discipline. Some don’t even survive it. Nyreen did, of course, but then went UA.”

“Huh, brutal.” Martin perched on the arm of the chair Nyreen had vacated. “So, about her beautiful eyes . . .” He grinned. “You were tripping over yourself there at the beginning. You have a thing for her once? She is beautiful.”

“No, I did not. She came from an impressive family . . . was everything I wasn’t. I admired her skill, nothing more.” Garrus gestured to the datapads. “Put these on Vortash’s desk.” He stood, picking up what he needed for the meeting. “You know that I’m bonded, even though I never got a chance to place my coillas around her wrists. This is the last I want to hear about it.”

Martin sighed and picked up the stacks of requisitions, following when Garrus strode out of the room. “You know she’d never want you to—”

Garrus spun around, cutting him off with a razor-edged glare. “This is the last I want to hear about it,” he repeated, pausing between words to let them hit home.

“Yes, sir.” Martin ducked past to open the outer door and muttered, “You’re hearing the last of a lot of things today.”

Garrus chose to let the grumbling go unanswered and pushed on to the elevator and the
The rest of the team awaited him, most busy tapping away at omnitools or datapads. Garrus made his way over to one of the QEC pads where Nihlus was speaking to Anderson.

“General,” the Normandy’s captain greeted him, an easy smile belying the depth of the crap piling up around them. “You’re looking better.”

“Recovering according to plan, Captain, unless Dr. Chakwas has her way. I think she’s actually accepted a contract from one of the gangs.” He grinned, then glanced over at Nihlus. The Spectre didn’t look all that steady on his feet, but resolute. “You’re going to head back out on the Normandy?”

“Yes. I want two frigates as escort if possible.” The Spectre turned to look over his shoulder at Nyreen. “We’re trusting the Talons?”

“Yes, we’re trusting the Talons, and you can have three frigates if you take Chakwas with you.”

“I heard that, General,” the doctor called from the doorway. She shook her head and strode across the room to take the seat next to Mordin. “I should have listened to my father and become a pediatrician.”

“Patients much the same,” Mordin chimed in.

Garrus grinned at the salarian and shook his head. “You really miss that vorcha infested dunghole you called a clinic, don’t you?”

Mordin let out a long, over-emotive sigh. “Clumsy, veiled threats only prove allegations of childish behaviour.”

Garrus chuckled and turned to the rest of the group as Sidonis and Melanis appeared on their QEC pads. “All right, settle, and let’s get this done. First of all, I’m sure you’re all familiar with Nyreen Kandros. I’ve asked her to join us as an instructor, and help us get her people settled.” He pointed a talon at Butler. “I’ll leave it to you and Vortash to help her settle in.” When Gabe nodded, Garrus let his hand fall back to his side. “Even looking past our current state of emergency, I can see us needing to deal with more and more recruits as this issue with the human colonies comes to light, so let’s start preparing for that. If you have promising senior cadets to second you, start working to bring along our next rank of instructors.”

“What word about the colonies? Bloody Alliance and council are lying their asses off,” Zaeed grumbled, casting a snarling nod toward Anderson. “Nobody’s going to know any fucking thing. People out there have lost whole families, and what do those bastards tell them? Pirates. Slavers. Fucking Santa Claus needing new bleedin’ elves to make his toys.”

Garrus nodded, and stepped toward the merc, easing him back with a placating gesture. “We’ll get the word out. I’m going to assign extra bodyguards to Miss Wong and have her head out to the site of the next attack when it happens. If we get enough people asking about all those missing families, we can apply pressure on the council and the Alliance from behind the scenes.”

Anderson nodded and stepped forward to lean against his console. “They’re scrambling. They don’t bring any of it too close to me, because I’m too tightly tied to Archangel, but Hackett says they’re on the verge of panic back on Arcturus. Someone out there has plans for humanity, and the Alliance knows it. Hackett keeps asking them open-ended questions about the Reapers, but they aren’t desperate enough to acknowledge that we’re being harvested. Yet.”
When the captain stepped back, Garrus raised a hand to forestall any replies. “Okay, we’ve jumped ahead of my agenda here, so let’s table this for a few minutes. We’ll come back to what’s going on with the human colonies after we address attacks taking place a lot closer to home.” He turned to Sidonis. “What happened at Enoch?” Moving off to the side, he opened the floor. As Sidonis told the others about the destruction of the facility, Garrus watched Nyreen out of the corner of his eye.

She continued to key information into her datapad, but he didn’t doubt for a second that her attention remained on the report. The slow sweep of her mandibles gave away the wheels turning in her head. He could see her drawing threads together and knotting them into a web. He should recognize it, he’d watched Shepard do it often enough.

“We don’t have the ships or the bodies to sufficiently cover all our holdings,” Grundan Krul said, his deep, broken voice like listening to boulders slide down a mountain. He shook his head, cheek folds and jowls rippling like living things held captive on his face. “Even with these new people and the ships in dry dock, we’ll spread ourselves just thin enough to lose even more assets in their attacks.”

“We won’t be trying to cover them all,” Garrus assured him. He shrugged when bodies stiffened and mouths opened around the room. “Krul is right. Between trying to cast a wide enough net to respond to the colony attacks and defending all our bases, mines, and manufacturing … we’d just lose more in the attacks. We have to use our heads.”

“They’re drawing you out and spreading you thin.” Nyreen’s voice cut through the swell of protest that followed Garrus’s words. She cleared her throat. “And you’re too close to see that you aren’t fighting two enemies: the ones taking the human colonies and the ones attacking Archangel. You’re fighting the same enemy on two fronts.” She met his eyes for a moment, then looked back down at her datapad. “And they’ve got your back chasing your front just like they want.”

Her softly spoken words drew every eye to her.

Garrus walked over to his chair and sat on the edge before nodding at her. “Elaborate.”

She shrugged as if the problem were plain. “It’s a distraction. I’ll grant that it is a damned good one, because even as they pull your ships and your focus away from the colonies, they’re weakening your infrastructure, but it is still just a distraction. You’ve got them scared. They can’t take you on if you bring your power to bear against them.”

“So they distract us away from the colonies and whittle us down a little at a time,” Nihlus said. He chuffed, but his eyes stayed riveted on the tarin for nearly a minute before he looked over at Garrus. “I’m going to tell myself that we would have seen this if we hadn’t been abducted and dissected.”

“Dissections performed on the dead,” Mordin offered helpfully.

Garrus raised a brow plate at Nihlus then shook his head. Kandros had it dead on. The surety of that settled in his gut. He stood and paced across to circle behind Mordin’s chair, patting the scientist’s shoulder as he passed. Hunching against the growing pain in his chest, he paced a slow circle around the perimeter of the room. “Not just distraction, though,” he said, talking mostly to himself as he sorted through the implications. “If it was just about pulling our attention away from the colony attacks, they wouldn’t take our ships, they’d just destroy them.”

“Yes,” Nyreen said, “the stolen ships are our biggest clue as to their intentions.”

“No one has ships as advanced as our fleet,” Sidonis argued. “They could be reverse engineering
them."

“No.” Garrus beat Nyreen to the punch. He stopped and rested his hands on the back of his chair as he looked over his gathered people. “There are far easier ways to do that. Cerberus proved that. So why are they stealing the ships?”

“Infiltration,” Mierin spoke up for the first time. The salarian munitions expert nodded and then shrugged. “Camouflage. Use our own tech against us. Stealth frigates not only get them close, but can locate all other Archangel vessels, running silent or otherwise.”

“Exactly,” Nyreen replied, “so they’re planning on going after a high value target, one they think will be heavily defended.” The ex-Talon leader shrugged and looked from Garrus to Nihlus and back. “They plan for it to be a crippling blow, maybe even fatal. What target would hurt the most to lose?”

“The Zaherin facility,” Sidonis replied. He paced the two strides across his pad in an endless cycle. “If we lose our weapon testing capability against the Reapers, it’ll set us back cycles. It’s also the easiest to infiltrate.”

“Sidonis is right.” Krul shoved his bulk up in his chair, bracing one hand against the arm as if he intended to leap up. “Mines, factories, even shipyards, can be replaced. We lose the remains of that Reaper, we’re well fucked.” He curled his lip to bare his teeth and shook his head. “But, if we fill Zaherin with our ships, the enemy will just go to ground.”

“Or go around,” Mordin added, sitting perfectly still for the first time since Garrus had met him. “Choose other target.”

Garrus continued watching his newest team member as his veterans broke into debate about how best to approach defending their weapon testing site. He could see that she didn’t agree about the target, but also that she held her peace for a reason. Why? What would an outsider see that they might miss? He swallowed hard as his gut answered with a sick twist as it turned to ice.

What would he miss?

Betrayal from within.

Letting out a long, slow breath, Garrus looked over his people, all of whom had been with him from the start. Chakwas, Mordin, Anderson, and Nihlus he trusted beyond reproach. They weren’t just his people, they were hers.

The others, Butler, Sidonis … all of them … in the early days they’d all had each other’s backs, raiding the gangs, thinning the herd of greedy, bloodthirsty, and stupid. The only people in the room who hadn’t saved his life at least a dozen times were the heads of operations and facilities. Not to underestimate the power of a well balanced budget or clean buildings and well maintained vehicles, but he just couldn’t see how those two could access the information they’d need.

He shoved that concern aside for the time being. He’d speak to Nihlus and Kandros before he left for the Citadel, see who they suspected, if anyone. In the meantime, they needed a plan to put themselves in the best position to deal with whatever attack came. They needed to draw the enemy in. Of course, that would be impossible if what he thought he read on Nyreen’s face proved to be fact.

Making a decision, he stood and waved everybody back to silence. “Okay, here’s the plan. We’re going to give them what they want and place as many ships as we can out there in groups of ten to
defend our highest value targets: two Stingers, two cruisers, six frigates. That should be enough to take out even the dreadnought providing you tear down their Stinger’s shields and disable it first. One frigate goes in cloaked and sits in orbit of the facility. Maintain constant contact. If they call for help or their comms go down, you go in.”

He looked over at Nyreen. “In order to do this, we’re going to need take the list of recruits that Instructor Kandros has given us, and team them up with our most experienced officers and crews.” A dangerous scowl greeted the outburst of complaints that exploded around him. “Enough! Yes, it’s a huge reorganization, but that’s why I put credits in your accounts every week, so just get it done. We need our ships out of dry dock, and I don’t want new people placed with inexperienced commanding officers.”

Turning to Nihlus and Anderson, he said. “You’re going to keep your ships in place and set up a schedule of constant check ins with the colonies. I don’t care if they squawk about it being a pain in the ass. You ping them every half hour. If they don’t ping back, assume that they’ve come under attack and investigate. Do not engage the enemy.”

“Excuse me, General,” the head of Operations, Naran, called. “Opening the third building, getting all those ships operational and supplied, outfitting and paying so many more people is going to bankrupt the budget.”

“I understand.” He returned to his chair and sat, feeling as though his every body part had been assembled wrong, all poorly angled and grinding against each other. “I leave for the Citadel to meet with Barla Von in a couple of hours. I’ll ensure you get the necessary increase. Forward your numbers to his office.”

Looking around the room, he met every set of eyes gathered there. “Anything further on these matters?”

An hour later, Martin was the last to leave the conference room, escorting Nyreen out with a promise to show her around if she would tell him stories of when Garrus was young. The tarin paused at the door, looked back, her mandibles flicking once as she replied, “Honestly, I can’t recall noticing him. A great many cadets attended our academy, and he was two cycles ahead of me.”

Nice. Low blow … point to Kandros. Garrus met her gaze and tilted his head in a slight, sardonic bow, then turned to gather his materials.

He’d just registered that his father had yet to catch up with him when the door opened and Herros stepped through. He started to tease his father about taking so long to find him over an urgent matter, but then he met his father’s stare and his jaw snapped shut. Dread—cold, raw dread bordering on terror—stared back at him.

Garrus stepped forward, one rigid stride. “What’s happened?”

Herros took a couple of gasping breaths as if he’d run the length of Omega, then nodded toward Garrus’s seat. “We don’t have long. I received word last night from the hierarchy about a … “ He shook his head and braced his hands on his hips as he searched for the word. “... defensive measure taken by our government at the end of the krogan rebellions.”

Garrus stumbled backward until the edge of his chair impacted the back of his knees and he folded down onto the leather. Defensive measure? Krogan rebellions? Did everything need to go to shit on the same day? Hig guts turned to gellid sludge, and he dragged the words from his mouth kicking and screaming as he asked, “Defensive measure?”
“Yes.” Herros paced a few strides then turned back. “Massive bombs buried near heavy population centers on Tuchanka.”

Garrus pushed aside all his other reactions and leaped up. Only one thing mattered. “Does Wrex know?”

Herros pressed a hand against his son’s shoulder as if trying to guide him away from the ugliness of the truth as it asked him to be patient. “The hierarchy notified me last night because someone has dug up the bomb next to the Urdnot clan holding.”

“Who dug it up?” Garrus demanded, fury sparking to drive back the cold, brittle dread. One possibility ignited, flaring with a sudden rage. “Is it us? Did the turian military do it in response to Wrex’s building projects?” He strode toward the QEC console. He needed answers, and he needed to talk to Wrex.

Herros followed, stepping around him to block his path. “The hierarchy is denying any involvement, and I believe it. With everything else that’s going on … .”

Garrus nodded, the gesture constituting a lie so great he had to fight back nausea. Nothing had ever felt so wrong … he had never felt so wrong. What the hell was going on?

You know what’s going on, Callor. They’re ready, and they’re starting to make their move. That means eliminating Archangel. You’re the only threat to them in the entire galaxy. They’re going to try to rip you limb for limb. Are you prepared for that?

He shoved Shepard’s voice aside and forced himself to police up his fear and denial, saying, “Someone is trying to tear it all apart. The Reapers … it has to be. They have agents.”

“Yes, but that’s academic at this point, Garrus. Wrex knows about the bomb, and he’s furious. Understandably, granted, but if he goes out there … if he attacks, they’ll detonate it, and that will be the end of Urdnot, and very likely the start of another war against the krogan.”

Garrus started to answer, but the QEC chimed, cutting him off. He spun to stare at it for a second. “Wrex?” Sidestepping around his father, he reached out to answer it, scowling when his pari grabbed hold of his wrist, the ice creeping back in. What was his father hiding from him?

Herros nodded, just holding Garrus’s wrist, not trying to pull him away. “Yes. That’s why I ran.” He stepped between Garrus and the console once again, his mandibles low and spread, his eyes and subvocals earnest. “You must calm him down. If you … we … can’t convince him to see reason, he’s going to get all his people … all the clans gathering around his banner … killed.”

Nodding, Garrus twisted his wrist free and stepped up to activate the QEC. Spirits, he’d give anything for Shepard to be there. She could wrap Wrex around her finger with a single grin.

The krogan clan leader appeared on the pad, the very embodiment of rage. He lunged forward with such force and deadly intent that Garrus flinched away from the hologram. The general’s rage and indignation at what his people had kept hidden on Tuchanka for centuries evaporated, cooling into a helpless despair. He’d never stop Wrex from charging off.

“Vakarian!” the krogan roared, “did you know about this?”

“No.” Hands lifting like shields between them, Garrus took a half step forward. “You know I’d never keep something like this from you. I’d have been there to help you get rid of them.” Closing his eyes, he shook his head, clearing away as much of the fear and frustration as he could. “We need to get your people out of there, just in case they set it off.”
“If it’s not the turians, it’s the salarians, or the council.” Wrex reached behind his back pulling his shotgun. “It will never end, Vakarian. Not for the krogan. It’s come down to kill or be killed, and I won’t let my people die out, even if I have to tear down the whole bloody galaxy to save them.”

Herros pushed in. “Wrex, you know peace is still the way forward. Let’s get your people to safety, and then we can move in and take custody of the bomb. I have three platoons of special forces awaiting my orders . . . .”

Wrex roared and slammed the butt of his shotgun down on the console. “I’m not letting turians anywhere near that bomb. I’ve gathered a platoon of warriors all two seconds from going into a blood-rage. We’ll kill everyone between us and the bomb, and I swear that if we see a single turian, that bomb will go off on Palaven. You won’t know where, you won’t know when, but it’ll leave you screaming for all your dead children.”

Garrus’s heart stopped, collapsing into a singularity. “This is exactly what the Reapers want, Wrex. Of course you’ll find turians, and salarians … humans … probably even asari. They want you to take those bombs, detonate them on the homeworlds … fuck, they want you to threaten another krogan rebellion. Turn everyone against each other.” He flung himself forward, leaning against the console. “You can see that. Tell me you can see that, Wrex.”

“All I see is that the genophage wasn’t enough. You had to make sure that the krogan people never recovered … that if your plague didn’t kill us off, we’d all die in fire. I won’t let you do it.”

“Wrex! No! You go out there, you’ll get yourself and your entire clan killed. They’ll detonate that bomb. With you dead … all those krogan dead … there will be nothing to stop the rest from going out and starting another rebellion.” Garrus grasped his hands and held them out, past threatening or reason … left resorting to pleading. “Please don’t do this. You’ll get all your people killed.”

“Then we take as many of the rest of you with us as we can,” Wrex replied, his voice cold and flat. He glared at them for a second, then the QEC went dark.


“We need to get there, and now,” Herros said, chuffing a little as he stated the obvious. He pressed up behind Garrus. “You know we can’t allow Wrex to bring his entire people crashing down on the galaxy and themselves.”

Garrus spun toward his father. “I can’t go. There’s nothing I can do to stop him.” He threw up his hands, a small explosion of helplessness detonating behind his keel. For a second it felt as though it would blow straight off. “I have an entire base full of new recruits who all need supplies, quarters, and then to be assigned to ships and sent out to guard facilities we can’t afford to lose. Human colonies are vanishing at a rate that shouldn’t even be possible … and Wrex chooses now to lose his mind.” He stabbed the air, punctuating his words with frustration. “What the hell?”

Pacing to the door and back, he tried to think of some way to be everywhere at once, but he couldn’t, and as much as losing Urdnot would hurt the war effort, losing Archangel would end the war effort. Maybe if he could get out of the Citadel right after meeting with the financiers, he could still make it to Tuchanka in time to stop Wrex from doing something stupid. Damn it.

He stopped, punching the console again then leaning into his fists. As much as he wanted to, he couldn’t put a few thousand krogan ahead of the whole galaxy. “There’s nothing I can do. I need to go to the Citadel first.”

Herros stepped around Garrus. Laying a hands on his son’s shoulders, he said, “I’ll go to Tuchanka.
General Victus is leading a combined forces exercise in the DMZ. “He shrugged. “Dranek, I believe. I’ll meet him at the Aralakh relay, and we’ll get Urdnot evacuated with or without Wrex. Can you contact the shamen of both the male and female clans?”

Garrus’s frustration transformed into thoughtfulness. Yes, the shamen would probably prove more amenable to evacuation, particularly the females, but … . He shook his head. “I don’t want you between Wrex and that bomb.” He reached up, closing his talons around his father’s forearms as if determined to hold him there.

Even though you know it’s the best chance Urdnot has of survival? You’re prepared to sacrifice the krogan for the galaxy … what are you prepared to sacrifice for the krogan?

“Trust me, I won’t be anywhere close to that bomb if I can help it.” Herros smiled, a gentle flutter of mandibles, then released him and took a couple of steps toward the door. “I’ll have Victus send in a covert team to delay the digging and try to take custody of the thing before it can be detonated.” He nodded, one sharp, decisive jerk of his head that declared the topic closed. “You get Nihlus and the others the resources they need to protect Archangel.” He palmed the door and stepped through, but then turned back. “Please make sure your mari and Sol get on a ship home before you leave.”

“Yes, sir.” Garrus nodded and strode across the room, hesitating only a second before he embraced his father, gripping the elder torin’s shoulders. “I’ll get them on their way, and then I’ll be right behind you.” Pulling back, he stared into his father’s eyes. “Be careful, Pari.” He stepped back and opened his omnitool. “I’ll assign the carriers Trimeri and Istal’an to your command. Their crews are in place, but their fighters aren’t aboard, so we’ll load them with all the shuttles we’ve got.” He sent orders to the captains and department heads before turning his attention back to his father. “You should be set to go in a couple of hours.”

“Thank you. I’ll get them back to you in one piece.” Herros turned and strode to the outer door, calling back over his shoulder, “I’ll contact you as soon as I’ve got eyes on.”

Garrus watched after his father for a few seconds, the hierarch striding down the corridor. The set to his spine, the strength through his shoulders … his every step screamed veteran leader in command. If anyone could save Wrex’s people from their leader’s damned short-sightedness, Herros Vakarian would.

“General?” Martin’s voice came through his radio.

His hand lifted to his implant even as he turned back toward his desk. “Go ahead.” Time to get moving. He still needed to make an appearance in the sublevels.

“Zaeed and I are headed over to the docks with the senior flight cadets to oversee loading those shuttles. We’ll have the carriers ready to depart at 1500 station standard. Butler, Kandros, Meirin, and Krul have the engineering and the special recruit units ”

“Very good. When you’re finished there, head over to the Passch. We’ll escort the carriers to the relay. Actually … .” He grinned as an image formed in his mind. “Why not make a show of it? Contact Nihlus and have the Normandy delay its departure. We’ll all move out at once, make sure it’s recorded … give the galaxy a glimpse of what it faces if it crosses Archangel or its allies. Vakarian out.” He gathered up his datapads, tossed another long glare at the QEC, and then set out.

Five minutes later, he slumped against the elevator wall as he rode it down the first floor.

“General Vakarian?” a call came through on his radio.
He let out a long breath and lifted his hand to open the channel. “Yes?”

“The prisoner wishes to speak with you, sir. She’s being quite strident about it.”

Garrus smirked as he heard Daro’Xen’s voice in the background. Strident indeed. He swallowed and stretched his neck, making sure no smile would bleed into his voice. “I have more pressing concerns at the moment. Our guest will have to wait.”

Mumbled conversation went on long enough that he considered closing the channel as his elevator arrived on the main floor. He heard Daro’Xen again, loud enough that he made out her words even before the guard returned.

“She wishes me to pass along a message, General.” He paused, no doubt waiting for Garrus to ask what it was. After a moment, he forged ahead. “She said to tell you that they’re coming for you, sir. She says that you’re already dead.”
Chapter Summary

As she gains strength, Shepard begins to make plans.

**Feodusi:** The Prothean government’s scientific branch.

**18 Days ASR**

“She had your favourites back in stock.” Shepard flopped across her bed and shoved the sweets through the vent. When the _torin_ on the other side pulled them through, she wriggled closer until she could see him. “Sorry it took so long. Every time I manage to hack into the security cameras, they upgrade. Took me three tries today.”

She scowled into the vent cover. “Stealing these made me wonder though … . If you’re the only turian here, why is there an entire dextro section of the kitchen?” The question pretty much answered itself, and she let out a long sigh that made light of the sick twist in her guts. There was no way in hell she’d leave anyone behind for the monsters to torture, but at the same time, breaking them all out meant massive intel gathering and planning. It also meant taking down the security in the entire place when she ran for it, which complicated things considerably. She and Al could slip away through ducts with a great deal less planning and fuss … and weaponry … than she needed for a full scale jailbreak.

“And you’re sure these are the dextro ones this time?” the gruff voice asked.

A wide grin spread across her face when she heard the wrapper rustling even before she answered. “I always get the dextro ones. Your little … issue the other day had nothing to do with me.” She waved a hand in front of her face. “And the next time that happens, move your bed to the other side of the room. Seriously.” Sitting up, she turned to hang her legs off the side of her bed. “My big score today was a half dozen peanut butter cookies, thank you very much kitchen staff.”

She placed the napkin of ill-gotten sweets on the bed next to her, unwrapping it with exaggerated ceremony. Lifting one off the top, she saluted the camera with it then took a huge bite. After making a show out of chewing, she set the other half down and dove back into the basket on the front of her walker. She didn’t really need to use it any more. The cane Miranda had given her made it easier to move around, but a low, suspicious voice in the back of her head told her to play down her mobility. Sometimes it paid to look a little weak, just like it paid to look crazy and out of control.

“You know they gave you that omnitool so you would practice your skills?” She heard him shift on his bed, a soft grunt of pain accompanying it. “And every time you hack the security, they just take it up a notch to challenge you.”

An earnest nod tossed her curls around her face. “I know, and I’m happy to be their little maze rat as long as I can keep a step or fourteen ahead of them.” She laid back across the bed and found him watching her. She gave him an upside down smile. “Come on, you know you loved listening to Miranda squeal when I broadcast that track of her singing in the shower.”
His head dipped a little, but she caught the mandible flick that gave him away. She watched him for a moment, noticing the way he leaned into the wall more heavily than usual, the way his mandibles hung loose. His eyes, normally nearly blind from damage taken his implants were removed, seemed even more dull. She reached over her head and wriggled her fingertips through the grate.

“Hey, hang in there, Al. We’re getting out of here.”

Bare talon tips brushed over her fingers. “You’re getting out of here, Shepard.” He turned away and rolled over to lie with his back to her. “I’m here until there’s so little left of me that they finally let me die and carve me up to stick in specimen jars.”

Shepard slapped the grate, his words sparking both anger and the salty burn of tears in the corner of her eyes. “Hey! Stop talking like that. They’re going to have a choice to make, and if they want Captain Shepard out there, they’re going to have to release you as well.” She sighed and flipped over to watch him—just a dim mound of grey in the even darker room. He kept the lights turned off, claiming to be sensitive to the brightness. She suspected that his aversion had more to do with being sensitive to having to see what they’d done to him.

His past couple of days had been spent fighting—a lot of hand to hand—and it showed. The days between, while they left their tech inside him, were good days. An overclocked metabolism and underclocked pain response combined with overstimulated hormones and adrenaline had made him aggressive, cocky, almost wild. Strong and manic, he paced his room like a caged lion, working out constantly even when they tried to sedate him, and wolfing down as much food as he could get his talons on. Before her hair dried from her last shower, he barked at her to shower again, particularly after she came back from physio, claiming that her scent drove him insane. His humour sharpened to a lusty, uncomfortable edge, and she swore if he could have gotten through the grate, things would have become … complicated.

That morning they’d stripped out all the implants, taken their pounds of flesh for testing, and then dumped him back on his bed, a husk so empty that she would have preferred needing to shower constantly and fend off his suggestive jests.

“Get some sleep,” she whispered. She wished, and not for the first time, that she could offer any sort of comfort, to Al and to all the others locked in their dark rooms, recovering from whatever horrors the organization had visited upon them.

As she sat up, she savoured the pull in her stomach muscles. Unlike Al, she gained strength every day. She could argue with and resent a hell of a lot about her revival, but she had to admit, Miranda’s nanites did good work.

Knuckles rapped against her door. Shepard pushed her walker off to the side, draping her nightgown over the basket to hide the contraband she’d scavenged from various computer terminals and power interfaces.

“Come in,” she called, picking up the other half of her stolen cookie. A wry smile tugged at one corner of her mouth. Half of what she got up to out there she hid away like a paranoid mad scientist, only to flaunt the other half as noisily and obnoxiously as she could.

Miranda appeared in the doorway, surprising Shepard. The operative never knocked. “Shepard?” she said, without entering. “May I speak to you out here?”

Another surprise. “Yeah, sure.” She shoved the rest of her cookie into her mouth, then slid off the bed. Opting for the cane combined with exaggerated hobbling and a dramatic lean, she made her
way to the door and out. Miranda crossed the corridor, then headed toward the small nursing station/atrium twenty metres along.

Shepard followed, willing to indulge the woman’s detective noir theatrics. Miranda might have found out something about what the organization was doing with Al. She might even have gone to her boss about the brutality of the torin’s treatment.

The operative walked over to a large bank of windows and leaned against the railing, staring out into the black. When Shepard arrived, Miranda cast a glance her way before turning back to the stars.

Not giving Shepard a chance to speak, she asked, “Dr. T’Soni has assisted you in recalling most of the beacon message and cipher?”

“Yes, and most of the parts of the messages that the rachni queen was able to help decipher.” She scowled and hobbled over to a couch a metre away, sitting on the edge. “It’s frustrating as hell though. It feels like I’m being shown half a movie. Like every time the camera cuts away to another character, the screen goes blank.” She laughed, but it tasted worse than toothpaste and orange juice. “I’d almost think you’d told her to keep the other half hidden from me.”

One of Miranda’s shoulders twitched. “But you’re remembering the Reapers?” she asked, soldiering on.

Cold dread skittered over her skin, an infestation of invisible rats gnawing and clawing as they burrowed into her flesh, eating their way through to consume her heart. “More and more. Not much that isn’t fifty thousand years old, but yeah.”

Miranda turned to face her. “I looked into Specimen Alpha’s—”

Shepard clenched her jaw so tight that her teeth squeaked together. “Let’s just call him Al, so we don’t forget we’re discussing a person, here,” she said, slicing through Miranda’s words with a keen-edged razor. “He’s not an animated corpse. He’s not some lab specimen. He’s a torin, and he’s in constant agony. Let’s never forget that, okay?”

“Torin,” Miranda repeated. “Curious that you use words from the closed dialect. Most people would just call him a man.” Closing on Shepard by a couple of steps, she squinted down as if studying another lab specimen. “Where does that come from? Most humans, even 99.9 percent of asari don’t know a single word of the closed dialect.”

Shepard shook her head, impatience with the arrogance behind Miranda’s comment overriding the question. “Who cares? Fact is, I know better and so should you. He’s not a man. That’s human anthropocentric bullshit.” She cocked her head, glancing around as if she could find the reason for the conversation hidden somewhere in the environment, then looked back to Miranda, raised her eyebrows and shrugged. “Well? You didn’t drag me out here to listen to a lecture about human-centrism. What about Al and the Reapers?”

Miranda glanced back out at the stars for a moment, then moved to sit on the edge of a planter, facing Shepard. “You stopped Sovereign from opening the Citadel to dark space, but they still have active agents in the galaxy who are working to find a way for the Reapers to return.” She shrugged. “That is the reason we brought you back. You are the only human to have fought one, to have successfully out thought, out maneuvered it and then killed it. Still, the war hasn’t even begun, and we need humanity’s champion out there fighting them.”

Shepard’s eyebrows headed for her hairline. Other than saying that they needed her to do
something, Miranda had never specifically said what. Although, Liara helping her pull forward memories of the beacon and cipher had given her a huge clue. “And?” Where the hell was Miranda going?

“Specim—” Miranda tilted her head, acquiescing to Shepard’s furious glare. “Fine … Al is important to our research. You remember that Reapers indoctrinate and convert people into workers and shock troops?”

Shepard recalled the monstrosities that the Reapers had created from the Prothean Empire’s different races, and nodded. “What does this have to do with Al?”

“The Reapers need to control all these units. We found implants within the skulls of husks collected from Eden Prime and the Citadel, and our scientists have hypothesized that the Reapers create ranks of command and control units.” She raised one perfect eyebrow. “Do you follow?”

Shepard nodded, already not liking the shape of where the operative was headed. “Yeah, I’m with you.” She didn’t want to be, but she was.

In fact, she knew their hypothesis to be true. Three layers of command had existed among the Reaper units in Tashac’s time. She’d witnessed the dissections, tried to block out the screams of the volunteers used in the feodusi’s experiments. Her gut tied itself in a knot even before Miranda continued. The Reapers corrupted everything they touched, and not just the people they transformed or harvested. Their influence … fighting them had turned the already militant Prothean empire into a creature with so little honour that she couldn’t help but think the Reapers had done the galaxy a favour.

Miranda’s voice dragged Shepard from her thoughts. Damn. How long hadn’t she been paying attention?

“Al’s project is trying to discover a way to interfere with that signal, and turn it to work for us.” The operative leaned her elbows on her knees and steepled her fingers. “He’s proving invaluable, Shepard. He’s actually taken control of active husks for short periods of time. He’s helping us create better soldiers for a fight we both know is coming far sooner than we can prepare for it.”

Shepard stared at the operative for a long time, her jaw hanging slack enough that a cool trickle of breath whispered between her lips. “So that makes it okay then? As long as we’re torturing people in order to learn how to fight the Reapers, that’s perfectly fine?”

Miranda let out another strained sigh, the only sign of her flagging patience. “Not how I would put it, Shepard.”

Standing, Shepard hobbled over to lean against the railing and stare out at the millions of diamonds hanging in the black. “No, but it’s what you said, and it’s what you meant. Plus, he’s not human, right? Basically just a lab animal who can conveniently give verbal feedback.” Her gut rolled, threatening to toss her cookie. “Sweet baby Jesus, what is wrong with you people? And when does it become too many people to justify? Ten torture victims? A hundred? A thousand? Is there no number that tips over to criminal?”

The operative let out another strained sigh, the only sign of her flagging patience. “Facilities like this one exist all over the galaxy, Shepard. They’re run by governments, corporations … even the council. And you can guarantee that there are humans held in some of those, in just as much pain as Al.”

A snort as sharp as a rifle shot escaped. “And that makes it even more okay. They do it, and worse, they do it to us, so that justifies everything.” Shepard gritted her teeth to avoid saying all the ugly
things that sprang into her mouth. She breathed through it, keeping herself under control. “There are alternatives to committing atrocities to combat atrocities.”

Spinning around, she pinned Miranda with a furious stare. “And if you’re going to give me the whole a few suffer so that millions don’t have to spiel … just don’t.” She threw her hands out to the side, smacking her cane off the front of a chair. “And you want me to work with an organization that would torture innocent people? I won’t.” She shrugged and limped back to her chair. “I just won’t. I’ll go back to the Alliance, do what I can through them once I’m completely fit.”

Miranda just stared, her one eyebrow slightly cocked. When Shepard sputtered to an indignant stop, the operative said, “I was working my way to a point if you stop ranting long enough to hear me out. This organization has ethical guidelines for the treatment of test subjects,” Miranda continued, her voice as cool and slick as an otter’s back. “And I don’t believe that Al’s project lead is adhering to them, so I’ve collected what data I could, and I’ll be taking it to my employer later today.”

Shepard gave a derisive puff of air and shook her head. “You could have led with that.” She returned to her chair. “How many more are there, Miranda?” She nodded down the long hall leading the the elevator. “This station is huge. How many people work here? How many projects? How many other poor bastards like Al?”

The operative shrugged, but it came off overfaced, not indifferent. “I can’t know, Shepard. I was in charge of Lazarus. The organization conducts research here in a hundred different branches from ship and weapon design to food preservation. Each has its own project head.” She stood, elegantly unfolding in a way that made Shepard want to punch her. “Anyway, I wanted to let you know that I’m doing what I can.”

Shepard nodded, her eyes drawn to the long hall by the appearance of a single blue figure. “Thank you for looking into it.” Turning on a pale smile as Liara approached, Shepard let out a long, thin sigh. “But so you know … when I leave here, Al is going with me. Any other “specimens” that I find will be going with me as well.”

She stood, holding herself straight and strong as she met Miranda’s stare for a moment before turning aside to greet Liara. The asari closed, her posture and expression already screaming apology. Shepard let out a long sigh. As much as she appreciated Liara’s assistance in recovering her skills and knowledge, the asari’s constant demeanour of remorse wore Shepard out. Knowing that Miranda kept a huge chunk of her life held back caused enough inner turmoil and resentment. She didn’t need the constant ‘I wish I could but I can’t’ vibe coming off Liara.

Standing, she started back toward her room. She had a project to get integrated into her computer terminal before she headed down to the firing range for her favourite part of any day.

“Good afternoon, Shepard,” Liara called, stopping at the door to Shepard’s room. She held up a mock up of Shepard’s old sniper rifle. “I thought you might like to do a little muscle memory work before you pick up the real thing.”

Shepard took the rifle in her hands. “They sure studied me, didn’t they?” She hooked her cane over her arm and stroked her fingers along the sleek lines. “It’s almost identical to Ingrid. Not that I’ll ever see her again.” She winked at the asari and palmed the door control before taking her cane in hand again. “Come on in, Doc. Let’s embrace that eternity.” Shepard chuckled at the dark indigo that crept up Liara’s cheeks and patted the asari’s shoulder as she passed. “You blush worse than Kaidan.”

Three steps into the door, she stopped, realizing that Liara remained standing frozen at the
threshold. She turned back, brow furrowing. “Liara?” When the asari just continued to stare with what Shepard could only describe as terror etched into her features, the captain took a step toward her. “Seriously, Liara. You’re freaking me out. What is it?”

“Kaidan,” Liara managed to squeak out, glancing over her shoulder toward where Miranda had been. “You said I blush worse than Kaidan.”

Shepard’s frown intensified for a second, then broke into a wide grin.

*She raised a hand and waved to Alenko over at his station. “Hey, Sport, suit up, and fill your pockets with singles. We’re going out on the town.”*

“Singles, ma’am?”

“We’re hitting a titty bar, Lieutenant. Got to be prepared.” She laughed as Kaidan blushed a bright red. “Whoa! Damp that down there, Alenko. I’m getting a sunburn.”

*The man turned and fled for the elevator.*

“Wow, note to self: can’t tease that one. He’ll burst into flames.”

“Sport isn’t right,” she said out loud, squinting as she stared into Liara’s eyes. “It’s not the right name.” She pushed at the white sheet, making it billow and snap like the laundry had when her mother hung it out in the summer wind.

“Shepard.” Liara rushed in the door. “Maybe it’s better if you don’t try to remember.” She glanced back toward the hallway again. “There will be lots of time for that once we get out of here.”

The asari’s tone snapped Shepard’s attention back to her, the captain staring into those deep wells of blue, wells that closed off the second she made contact. “What?” She stepped into the asari, clamping one hand down on Liara’s shoulder, the alarm in the back of her head screaming. “Why do you look so scared? Sweet baby Jesus, tell me they haven’t been threatening you.”

“No!” The expression of shock on Liara’s face sent Shepard’s protective reflex back into standby. “No, it’s just that they don’t want you remembering the *Normandy* yet, and I’m afraid that if you do, they’ll ….” Her shoulders bounced heavily, once, her expression so earnest that Shepard almost laughed. Almost. Sometimes the asari came across very much her age -- comparatively. Damn, she really still was just a well-grown child.

Liara reached out to take Shepard’s hand between both of hers. “I don’t know what they’ll do, but maybe it’s best if you wait to stir up those memories.”

Shepard didn’t move, watching the expressions play across her friend’s face. She couldn’t stop beating at the sheet, forcing it to give up …

*Sparky. Not Sport … Sparky. He wanted something a little less eight-year-old T-ball player.*

… it’s secrets. Still, that didn’t mean she had to let Liara know. Well, at least out loud.

“Okay.” Shepard tugged her hand free and turned to hang her cane from the bed railing. “I won’t push.” She nodded her head toward the end of the room where they had enough room to move. “Let’s get my muscles remembering at least.” Standing close enough to the bed’s footboard to catch herself, Shepard took a balanced shooting stance. She lifted her make believe Ingrid to her shoulder, couching the stock as comfortably as she could.
Liara’s smile shone as she stepped up in front of Shepard. “Good. They’re really pleased with your progress, Shepard. Your skills tested in the ninetieth percentile yesterday. Your assault rifle score was perfect.” Warm, soft hands closed over Shepard’s temples.

“Yeah, perfect.” Shepard met the asari’s stare. Try as she might to avoid flinching, each and every time Liara’s eyes turned black and Shepard felt those fingers of consciousness crawl through her eyes and into her mind, she had to clench her teeth and lock every joint to keep herself from jumping away. Still, once the connection was made and Liara moved behind her, the light touch returning to Shepard’s temples, it became bearable.

An image of a forest appeared in Shepard’s mind and she shook her head, her mind telling Liara to find something else.

*Not Mindoir. Never Mindoir.*

“Apologies, Shepard.”

The scene changed to an open desert under a full moon. Shepard grinned as she looked over the low scrub lands from atop a mesa. Arizona. Her father had taken them to the desert for vacation when she was twelve. Two adult coyotes and a trio of whelps trotted along a dry wash carved into the lowest part of the canyon. The adults tracked a scent, weaving back and forth, yipping softly at one another.

Movement in the scrub closer to her brought her rifle around. At the periphery of her awareness, she felt Liara moving inside her mind, slipping along the pathways that guided Shepard’s hand to the manual focus on her scope. Most used autofocus and mods that adjusted aim for the shooter’s biometrics … practically taking the shot for them, but not her. She thrived on setting up the shot, every detail an act of love.

A Mule doe browsed through mesquite, picking off the choicest bits. Shepard watched her for a moment, delighting in the way the muscles rippled beneath her hide, the bright sparkle of her eyes … the way her head popped up every few seconds, large ears swiveling around, attentive to every sound. Breathing deep, Shepard rooted herself, center of gravity lowering as her consciousness flowed down the barrel, an extension of her entire being as it crossed the distance between rifle and target. Settled, she let a long, slow breath out, then squeezed. The shot hit true, tearing through the mesquite leaf at the end of the doe’s muzzle.

Leaping up, the doe pivoted in midair and bounded along the slope, disappearing into the night. Three more shots, three more victims exploded, green bodies strewn to the wind, chlorophyll soaking into the hungry sand.

“A little dramatic for some dead leaves. But fine shooting.”

Shepard just grinned as the asari’s thoughts brushed hers. “I didn’t feel your influence after I started focusing,” she said out loud as she lowered the rifle.

Liara released the captain’s head and stepped around front. “You didn’t need me. Those neural pathways are healed and active.” Liara shifted from foot to foot, dipping her head a little as she spoke.
Odd how Shepard hadn’t noticed before how the asari rarely stopped moving. When standing, she swayed like a poplar sapling in the breeze. Sitting, her hands and head remained perpetually in motion. Shepard smiled and reached out to grip her young friend’s shoulder. “They’re healed and active thanks in no small part to you.” Her hands settled back to her fake rifle, holding it in a natural low ready, and for a moment, tears threatened, brought on by the most amazing feeling of rightness. Captain Jane Shepard, N7, had begun to assert herself.

*Thank the sweet baby Jesus.*

Liara glanced toward the door as if somewhere a clock ticked down on a curfew. “Will you join me in the commissary for the evening meal?”

Shepard grinned and held out an arm toward the door. “Sure, I’ll meet you down there at 1830.” At the threshold, she passed the asari the mock rifle. “Here, you’d better take it back since you signed it out. There’s probably five forms to fill out if I sign it back in.”

“In triplicate,” Liara replied. She took the weapon and walked away two strides before she turned back. “You should probably watch walking around without the cane where the cameras can see you.”

Shepard winced, but grinned. “Thanks, I’ll remember that.”

When Liara headed back on her way, Shepard hobbled back to her bed, using the wall as support. Stupid, forgetting to cover how well she could move. She remained a long way from her old strength, and would need the advantage of surprise if anyone came at her.

She frowned as she sat on the side of her bed and lifted the nightgown off her walker’s basket. A variety of scavenged bits and pieces of tech lay in the bottom. She gathered them all up and placed them on her bed, then sat crosslegged with her back to the cameras. No doubt Miranda knew about the pilfered tech, bloody cameras watched from everywhere, but no need to give them a good look at what she was doing.

“What’s this project?” the soft, raspy voice asked from the other side of the grate.

Glancing up to meet Al’s stare, she smiled. “This little beauty is for you, actually. The plan is to link our omnitools so we can send information back and forth.” She sorted through the pile for a micro transmitter and set to work. “I just need a couple of more components to be able to run a decent hack on their systems. I won’t be able to get into anything secure, but I won’t need to. I think I can figure out how many ‘specimens’ they’re holding here just by checking the kitchen records, housekeeping … the unsecured systems.”

He chuckled. “Do you think they realize how devious you are?”

A bright grin greeted that. “I sure hope not. At least not for a couple more days. I need to figure out a way to get us the hell out of here before they do.” She glanced over her shoulder at the camera. “You getting all this? Jail break being planned, right here … right now. Take notes.”

**19 Days ASR**

Shepard glanced across the desk at Liara, the asari engrossed in whatever she was doing. After a second, she sighed and turned back to her drudgery. Math tests. Funny, but she had a vague
recollection of graduating high school in the distant past … back when she had pimples and arms and legs too gangly and awkward for her admittedly limited stature. She grinned. Oh … and back when Bobby Wilson occupied three out of every four thoughts. Good old blond haired, blue eyed Bobby Wilson. Best part of high school. She frowned, then popped her eyebrows. Only good part of high school, actually.

_Focus, dammit. Do the damned test so you can get down to the range and do something that will actually prove useful._

Shepard flipped down the screen, checking off the answers. All of them insultingly simple algebra and calculus for an engineer. She checked off a few wrong answers just to keep her jailers guessing, then submitted it. Leaning back in her chair, she stared at Liara, wiggling her eyebrows, sticking out her tongue … flaring her nostrils. The asari remained oblivious.

“No damned fun,” she sighed and looked back down at her monitor.

A message along the top read, “Shepard, stop throwing in wrong answers. Score: 100.”

Shepard slapped the back of her hand over her mouth to hide her grin. Her adversaries proved cagey ones. Yesterday, Miranda had known when she skewed the results of her shooting test, and now even Kelly was catching on to her. She stared at the letters glowing on the screen and wondered how many of her other secrets weren’t secrets. Hopefully the modifications to her computer still slipped beneath the operative’s all-seeing notice. The footage she looped through her room’s security cameras took a great deal of ingenuity to do well. She’d had to splice days worth of tedious tasks and reading to create a new hour long movie every day.

“Staring into space won’t get you released any sooner.” Liara glanced up, a slight smile tipping off the corner of her mouth.

“What are you working on?” Shepard leaned, craning to see around the large vid screen. Whatever it was, it couldn’t possibly be more boring than the incessant testing. After reading a few lines backwards, she reconsidered.

“I’m working with a human researcher by the name of Dr. Garret Bryson,” Liara replied, surprising Shepard, who never expected to get an actual answer. The asari grinned, obviously excited. “We’re looking into cross-cultural legends of space-faring monsters.”

“Oh!” Shepard grinned. “Looking for the giant squid behind our Reaper Kraken?” Her heart sped up, her fingers and face tingling as the implications registered. “That’s brilliant,” she replied.

“You can thank Joker.” Liara turned her monitor sideways so they could both look on. “It was his idea to see if we could track down Reaper corpses.” Her grin widened. “Anyway, Dr. Bryson made contact with an eccentric volus billionaire by the name of Kumun Shol. Shol claims that a vision of some higher power told him to go to Klencory to find the lost crypts of the beings of light. These beings of light were embroiled in a war against evil machines bent on destroying all life.”

Shepard considered the asari, a thoughtful frown creasing her brow, her eyes narrowing as if to peer straight through Liara. “Protheans? The crypts of the beings of light could be a Prothean archive or something.”

Liara nodded and brought up a surface scan of the planet. “Klencory is a toxic, horrible world, so everyone thought he was mad, but he sent us these scans yesterday.” She pointed to an area where the rock and ice definitely looked to be shaped by hands rather than nature. “What if it is a bunker like the one on Eden Prime?”
Shepard’s eyebrows rose as her memory triggered. “Whatever happened with that find? Did you get into the area that still had power?”

Anger cut through Liara’s smile, her face darkening. “Yes. I sent them funding and a dig team to help. They’d just excavated that section when a whole series of equipment malfunctions kept them out of the area for a couple of days. Despite their security, when the team went back in, they discovered that someone had removed one of the stasis pods.”

“What?” Shepard lunged forward in her chair a little. “Was there any sign the pod was functional?”

The possibilities roared inside her skull like a surging tide.

“Impossible to tell,” Liara replied, “but there were a lot of intact pods in that section that appeared to have been deactivated over time in order to conserve power for the unit that was taken, so my guess is yes, it had power. If the prothean inside was alive … .” Hunching a little as she shook her head, Liara looked down keying in commands to change the monitor view to a closer scan, then overlaid another scan.

“This second scan is the Eden Prime site,” she said.

“They’re almost identical.” Shepard stood and leaned closer, reaching up to trace the lines with a finger. “There could be living protheans under there.” A slow, calculating smile bloomed as she slipped back into her chair. Other protheans … a faint sigh greeted that thought. Protheans … even a few last remnants having survived the extinction … . Yearning, sweet and aching, swelled in her chest and burned behind her eyes as Tashac keened … a low, tremulous chant of longing for her mate’s hand, warm and gentle against her face … for children long passed to dust … for the lilting song of her language. Shepard’s eyes closed as she pushed back the prothean’s memories, refusing to shed tears for losses fifty thousand years distant.

Why are you so far away from him when he is just a few memories away?

Shepard gave her head a hard shake as she opened her eyes and focused on her computer. “Sounds like a promising lead,” she said to Liara without looking up. Time to focus on getting free and back to her own life … a life only two years dead. A life where she’d actually be able to go to Klencory and see Kumun Shol’s discovery with her own eyes.

A message awaited her, flashing on the monitor. Yet another test, but at least that one actually posed a challenge requiring more than two brain cells firing at the same time. Emergency vehicle repairs, defusing explosives, hacking through layered encryption … the work of the combat engineer. She set to it, wading into it like a lake in August, finding the familiar work welcoming and refreshing. From the moment Miranda woke her up, Shepard hadn’t experienced very many moments of feeling competent or even whole. For the most part, frustration at the lack of all her defining characteristics, skills, and abilities dogged her every faltering step. Until the last couple of days she felt like Frankenstein’s monster in truth: all parts and pieces stitched together but none belonging to the rest or to whom she used to be.

She finished the engineering test, her heart light, her fingers quick and steady over the interface. Jane Shepard had come back from the dead, maybe not whole … maybe not brilliant and maybe not happy, but at least she was reaching functional. She could work with functional. She could make a start from functional.

A test of problem solving and strategic planning followed the engineering quiz, then one on history and the Alliance.

Shepard looked down the questions on the formation of the Council and Spectres and turned to the
camera. “Okay, this is taking the whole high school thing too far. History? I remember high school, Dr. Kelly. I swear … you make me go through puberty again, I’ll strangle you with Miranda’s catsuit.”

The screen flashed. “Promises. Promises.”

Halfway through the test her omnitool zapped her … a sharp sting against the soft skin inside her wrist. “Ow,” she grumbled softly, rubbing it. A single line message appeared to let her know that her hack was complete. She closed the message. It would have to wait until her tests and shooting practice and physio finished for the day. Damn. She glanced toward the bathroom. It would only take a second … .

Yeah, a second to discover enough to pique your interest and make it even harder to get through the next couple of hours. Focus, damn it. You’re getting somewhere. Don’t blow it.

* * * * *

“So this worm of yours discovered a lot of dextro food coming in as well as food sterilizers?” Al shook his head as he shifted, trying to find a comfortable position. “Sterilizers could mean a couple of things but most likely quarians.”

Shepard pointed to a couple of other supplies she found suspicious, but couldn’t for the life of her figure out why. “These supplements … I know I’ve seen them before.” She beat at her memory, but didn’t manage to get past the word on the tip of her tongue stage.

She moved down to the daily allotment of food going to each of many rooms “So, either there are small villages staying in some of these rooms, or they are running some pretty overclocked biotics.”

Al chuffed and straightened a little. “I don’t eat like these people are.”

Shepard laughed and stuck her fingers through the grate to stroke his jaw. “Not on days like today, but when you were all super-turian, I swear they just chucked whole space cows in there for you to gnaw your way through.”

He chuffed again, but a chuckle followed close on its heels.

She let out a slow sigh, glad that he had recovered enough to show some humour. Focusing back on the small screen, she went down the list.

“Okay, so there are at least thirty of us.” She let out a long, slow breath. Damn, so many. Too many. “I can’t see them caring enough about my cooperation to allow me to blackmail them out of thirty projects. You and maybe a couple more … sure, but not thirty.”

“So you leave them behind.”

The skin between her brows and around her eyes pinched into a pained grimace as she leaned down to meet his stare. “Not acceptable.” His mandibles fluttered, melting away her frown. “Oh, I see how it is,” she said and chuckled. “Manipulate Shepard out of her funk. Very nice.” Still, his ploy worked, as ideas about how to organize a mass breakout began to flow. Being trapped on a space station proved the most formidable hurdle. Turning everyone loose on a planet … sure, but there they’d all just get recaptured.

“It might be impossible to get everyone out of here, Shepard.” Al’s milky eyes stared into hers, no sign of manipulation in his expression, just the ugly truth. “What about getting out and coming
back? Bringing council authorities or Spectres?”

“Nothing’s impossible, Al. Nothing. If I have to bring this entire place down around their ears, I’ll do it.” She fixed her attention back on the camera, a cold smile cutting across her face. “And you know I can, don’t you?”
Garrus comes face to face with the unexpected, and the enemy's trap springs.

Perir - (Peririn plural) Turian male under the age of 15.

18 Days ASR

Garrus stepped out of the cab and looked around the Presidium. It felt as though cycles had gone by since he last stood amidst the gleaming white structures and pristine lakes. Everything registered too bright, the light harsh and glaring, the gardens painfully garish. He shifted in his armour, feeling exposed and unshielded, like standing too close to the sun.

He glanced over at Martin, seeing that the kid felt as uneasy and out of place as he did. "Never thought Omega would seem like home," he said, letting out a long breath. Stretching his shoulders, he tried to ease the tension that twisted his muscles into steel bands. Instead of releasing, it just made everything ache a little more. Damn, he really needed to start sleeping without waking up every hour on the hour, panicked and breathless. Sometimes it took almost a full minute before his surroundings registered, dispelling Haestrom's cold, stone tomb and pool of blood.

"Still think we should have brought a protection detail," Martin grumbled, breaking through the clammy frost of Garrus's thoughts. The kid scanned the crowd, his hand resting on his sidearm. "I know you think Daro'Xen was just blowing hot air, but after Haestrom … ." He cracked his neck then nodded toward Barla Von's office. "Let's get this meeting over with and get the hell out of here."

Garrus couldn't argue with that. The press of people sank icy talons into the base of his spine, every nerve ending screaming a warning. As much as he wanted to dismiss it all as paranoia and a touch of PTSD from Haestrom, he couldn't manage it.

"So, why are we here?" Martin asked. Eyes in constant motion, he swept the area, muttering to himself about the area being too exposed. He detoured a few paces to stare into a car parked next to the cab stand. Two figures sat within, barely visible through the tinted windows. The kid's hand tightened on his sidearm, and he backed the rest of the way to the door. "Don't you normally just meet with Von over the QEC?"

Garrus paused, hand raised to hit the intercom. "I do, but apparently a group of batarian art collectors sent a buyer who is worried that the artifacts and art are stolen." He shrugged. "Anyway, the buyer wanted to meet me personally before negotiating to purchase any of it, and we need these funds right now. Badly." He hit the comm. "So we're here, appeasing some art collectors so our people can eat and our ships can fly, instead of saving Wrex's clan." He clenched his teeth and forced the frustration aside. They'd be on their way in a few hours.

"Come in, General," Barla Von's breathy rasp said through the speaker.
The door opened to reveal the normally spartan office crowded with some of the larger sculptures from Hock's Beckenstein home. Four massive krogan guards glowered in the corners of the room, looking enough like statues to blend in. Garrus weaved his way through, spotting Von and the buyer at the far end by the desk.

"What I want to know, Mr. Von, is why these artifacts aren't in museums somewhere," a strident female voice called. Garrus frowned a little at the lilting accent, the way the sentence went up at the end almost like song. "Why are they being auctioned off instead of being turned over to the appropriate governments?"

"At Captain Shepard's insistence," Von replied, pausing for breath, "the entire collection …" Breath. "... was offered directly …" Breath. "... to museums and galleries before …" Breath. "... being offered for sale."

Garrus plastered on his diplomat smile as he stepped around a huge krogan statue and saw a small woman in a smartly tailored suit looming over the squat broker.

"Captain Shepard was very adamant," Garrus broke in, not willing to listen to Von wheeze his way through the entire spiel, "that only state treasures be made available to governments. She was worried that they'd disappear into private collections or be used to broker back room deals instead of being returned to the people. These pieces were all offered to public venues, but not claimed."

He moved to shake her hand and introduce himself, but she turned to face him.

"You're telling me that a Picasso went unclaimed?" she demanded, her entire being crackling with an all too familiar fire. "Sweet Jesus, and you expect me to believe that?"

The woman strode toward him, all flashing green eyes, red hair, and … Garrus staggered back, a heady rush of dizziness washed over him … and a riot of freckles stampeding across her nose and cheekbones.

Garrus's knees buckled, his entire body suddenly ice cold, but for the fiery sting that burned through his hands and feet. He caught himself before he went down. "Dear spirits."

"General?" Martin stepped up beside Garrus, reaching out to grip the general's arm. "Are you okay? Wha—" The kid froze as still as death except for his fingers on Garrus's arm, which tightened painfully, squeezing the edge of the general's armour into his flesh.

The pain barely registered as Garrus stared into the eyes of a ghost.

"Shepard?" Martin whispered, his voice just a soft moan of sound.

A faint keen spooled from Garrus's second larynx as the question broke the spell that locked his brain down tight. He blinked, his eyes suddenly able to pick out the differences between the woman preserved in his memory and the one standing before him. Face thicker through the cheekbones and jaw, her skin not drawn as tightly … deep lines of age and care carved around her nose and mouth … body taller and stockier but not as straight and sharp, the edges ground down … Nonetheless, he found himself staring—mouth and mandibles hanging slack—at the very image of the woman he would have called bond-mate in forty cycles time.

The buyer lurched to a halt, her scowl deepening as her eyes took on a wary, haunted cast. "Are you all right?"

Martin released Garrus's arm and rushed forward, startling the frown off the woman's face. "You've got to be Lucille—"
Regaining his senses, Garrus stepped forward, grabbing Martin's arm to pull him back. They didn't want to scare the woman out of her mind. "Sorry about that," he said, struggling to keep his voice soft even as his emotions rampaged, slamming back and forth between joy, longing, and anger. "Please forgive my eager young friend. It's been a long trip."

He offered his hand. "General Garrus Vakarian," he said, then nodded toward Martin. "And this is Martin Weaver. I apologize that our awkward entrance didn't allow Barla Von to make proper introductions." He took a step forward.

Ignoring his hand, the woman edged toward the door, the haunted look turning to that of a drellak having caught a predator's scent. "My name is Seiben Krellid."

A soft growl rumbled from Garrus's throat before he could choke it off. The name … her slave name … burned like bile in his throat. Seiben … seiben translated to forty-nine in batarian. No way in hell he'd call her that.

Suddenly, the car outside registered, and he cursed his idiocy. Of course she was scared. She was a slave, her handlers were parked right outside the door, and two morons staggered in acting like … well morons, using her proper name and asking questions.

She circled around the other side of the statue, heading for the door. "I'm sorry, I've made a mistake. I'm sure these artifacts are all being offered legally. I'll recommend that my employers—"

Garrus ducked between her and the threshold, heart racing, his hands trembling as they leapt up, pleading with her not to run. "No, please … I'm the one who should be sorry," he said, backtracking. "We reacted badly to a simple case of mistaken identity." He smiled and gestured toward the art. "Please, allow us to give you whatever information and assurances your employers need."

Martin stepped forward, but Garrus shook his head, silencing him even as the kid opened his mouth. They'd been far too ham-fisted already. They needed to back off and give everyone a couple of moments to process.

"Are those your people outside in the car?" Garrus asked, stepping off to the side to allow her an escape route, his training finally overriding his emotions. "Would you feel better if we invited them inside?"

Backing up a step, she shook her head, the fear in her eyes telling Garrus that as much freedom as she appeared to have, she remained closely monitored and under extreme duress. He stepped further to the side, trying to check for any sign of a control device without being obvious. He didn't see anything, but her high collar and the tight bun of hair at the nape of her neck could easily hide a subtle interface.

His gut twisted as he faced what must be one of the universe's cruelest jokes. The resemblance … . Why did Shepard have to be the very image of her mother? No. He shoved aside the anchor of longing that lodged behind his keel. Time for damage control.

He gestured toward a painting, throwing the subject into a 180 degree turn. "I've never really understood this sort of painting." That simply stated truth threw up a wall, and he let out a thin sigh of relief. And it was true; the blocky, warped shapes made no sense to him. "It's human in origin, though, isn't it?"

The rigid planes of her face relaxed slightly, and two hesitant steps eased her away from the door. "Yes. I'm surprised none of the galleries you approached took it. It's called Guernica. It's a very
famous work by an artist called Picasso."

"I find it a little unsettling, if I'm honest," he said, twisting his head around to look at the painting sideways.

A thin smile broke through the panic, the expression only lifting one corner of her mouth. He gawked, the crooked smile and the glint in her eye so familiar that a hand wrapped around his throat, cutting off his air.

She took a step forward and ran reverent fingers along the edge of the frame as she replied, "Picasso certainly isn't to everyone's taste."

Garrus glanced toward the door, then opened his omnitool, sending a message to Martin to get a datapad from Von. He needed to communicate with Lucy without terrifying her half to death or alerting her keepers. If anything he said or did made them suspicious, they'd rush in and spirit her away. He'd never find her again. More importantly, he knew deep in his bones that she'd suffer for his mistakes. "It's certainly not turian," he replied.

"All of this art came from the collection of one man?" Lucy asked. She turned a slow circle, but her eyes returned to lock onto Garrus, her breathing fast and shallow.

"This is just a few pieces," Garrus replied. "Captain Shepard …" He leaned down a little as he held the woman's gaze. " … said that he possessed the head from a statue called Lady Liberty." He shrugged. "That one was returned to the Systems Alliance."

"The Statue of Liberty?" Her words hissed slightly as she forced them through a clenched jaw. "Who was this man? He must have been a very good thief or insanely wealthy."

Martin passed Garrus a datapad, into which the general typed, "Are you Lucille Marie Shepard? How are they monitoring you? Are you wired with a control device?" before passing it over.

"Here is a manifest of the items," he said, in case the handlers had eyes in the room. "As for the previous collector … he was a bit of both along with a healthy dose of old world gangster." Garrus watched her for any sign of flight as she read his message. He let out a breath he didn't even realize he'd been holding when she replied instead of tossing the datapad at him and running for the door.

"I like this one," Martin said, seeming to clue in. He walked over to a statue of a rachni queen. He folded his arms as he leaned on one hip to regard it. "Looks just like Amalair."

Lucy glanced toward the threshold before she passed back the datapad. She turned to follow Martin, putting the massive stone krogan between her and the door.

"That's an extraordinarily interesting piece," she said. "I ran radiometric dating on it, and it predates the Prothean Empire by over a hundred thousand years. It's composed of an alloy I've never experienced before. The implications of its existence are staggering, and to think it was sitting in someone's vault."

Garrus winced, wondering how Von's expert had missed that vital piece of information. "Okay, this one goes back into our vault until we know what to do with it." He looked around, wondering how many priceless artifacts had slipped through their hands. He nodded for Martin to keep up the conversation while he focused on Lucy's text.

"I am no one."

A sigh greeted that simple sentence, the four words dragging more weariness from his bones than
he could ever recall feeling, even after Shepard died. How could Garrus face his love on the day of their reunion only to tell her that he'd failed her, leaving her mother in captivity? He needed to convince Lucy to trust him, to take a chance.

He watched her, looking for the signs he'd seen in long held slaves … signs of being broken. She was clearly nervous, but held herself straight and strong, her head not hanging from her shoulders. Of course, if she behaved that way, they'd never be able to send her out into the galaxy. She'd be useless as a broker, unwilling to stand up in negotiations, fighting down to the last for the best deal. No, either because of her gift or some extraordinary act of will, he didn't believe her broken, just understandably terrified.

He turned back to the datapad. "If you are Lucille Shepard, Cpt. Jane Shepard, the woman who acquired all this art, was your daughter. Just before she died, she asked me to find Bunny. She believed you were dead." He hesitated, staring at the pad without seeing it as he debated the wisdom of showing his entire hand, Deciding that he didn't have time to play coy, he added, "I know this is sudden, and that you're scared. Jane was important to me. Please, I made a her a promise, one I can't keep if you don't trust me."

Garrus looked up as Martin spoke. "So this one is illegal?" The kid let out a merry cackle. "Elcor pornography! Nice." He turned to Garrus, stabbing a thumb toward a sculpture that Garrus didn't feel the need to examine too closely all of the sudden. "Elcor porn. Illegal on Dekunna and all elcor colonies." Martin bent over to look at it upside down. "Oh yeah! I see it now. Wow, who would have thought they could get into that position?"

Barla Von waddled over, twisting to look at the sculpture from every angle his squat form could manage. "We are not asking enough for this piece." He sucked in a long breath. "Vol-clan knows a diplomat who will pay three times the catalogue price."

Garrus hoped Lucy's employers weren't interested in any of the pieces that were headed back to vaults or had steadily increasing price tags. He passed her the datapad, turning himself so that he wouldn't be tempted to try to make sense out of the twisted forms and tangled appendages. Somethings he did not need to know about the elcor. "We could take it back to base just to irritate Melanis. She could complain about it, maybe take some of the heat off Zaeed."

Martin cackled. "You know that he just keeps hanging Winter Garden up to piss her off."

"Winter Garden?" Lucy asked, stepping toward them. Although she kept her voice tightly controlled, and her fascination and excitement for the art had outweighed her flight response, a sheen of sweat across her brow and the back of her neck betrayed the toll his pushing was taking on her.

She talked and typed, doing a far better job of keeping both conversations going than he was. Of course, he supposed that she had far more to lose. "You have Winter Garden in your possession?" she asked. "It's the most notorious painting in the history of galactic civilization." She returned the datapad in a casual handoff as she stepped past Garrus. "A string of more than seventeen people have died while in possession of that painting."

Martin groaned and slumped against Von's desk. "Oh great. Another one of Zaeed's sole survivor stories in the making."

Garrus opened his mouth to answer, but Von stepped in, the financier explaining that the asari relic was stored for safekeeping, and not for sale. Leaving it to Von and Martin to keep Lucy talking, he looked down at what she'd written.
"I saw a young woman on the news years ago," Garrus read. "I couldn't take my eyes off her ... that beautiful woman my dead child could've grown into. I charged into the master's study demanding to know if Janey had survived. He shoved my face into a holo of my husband's corpse embracing my dead child and whipped me bloody. I did not ask again."

Garrus looked up, blinded by rage and sorrow until he saw his tears reflected back in her eyes. But then Lucy straightened, drawing herself up behind a clenched jaw. She wiped at her eyes, the gesture as fierce as it was familiar. He let out a sharp exhalation as Lucille Shepard vanished behind the memory of her daughter. How could the universe be considered just or kind when it pulled shit like this? An indignant fury flared at the base of his spine, scorching its way up through his nervous system. He'd bleed those fuckers for every last drop of suffering owed to Kahri ... her mother ... her siblings ... all of them.

Snapping straight and rigid, he choked the anger and pain down, returning to Lucy's words.

"I am a slave, General," she wrote. "When I leave, I'll be hurried into a car, then shoved into a box at the dock. That box won't open until I'm inside my master's compound where I'll be stripped, hosed down, and then whipped because I've spoken outside my script. That life does not leave room for speculation or daydreaming over dead children."

Vomit burned its way up his throat, but before he could do anything more than let out a strangled moan, Lucy stepped into his space and gripped his hand. He tried to return her stare, but couldn't manage to get past her neck. A vivid red scar peeked out from beneath her collar.

"And Captain Shepard?" Lucy asked, her voice tight and nasal, losing some of its music in her battle against her emotions. "You said she's dead?"

The question smashed through his last hope of control, silent tears burning their way from the corners of this eyes. Swallowing what felt like a grenade, he nodded, then raised the pad to type a reply. If her handlers had orders to keep her away from any mention of her children, they wouldn't let that conversation go unchallenged.

Instead, she took it from his hands, and with a single glance toward the door, entered, "You loved my daughter, didn't you?"

He read it through the back of the small screen, but just took the pad back, frantic talons tapping the interface. "We need to get you away from these bastards. Come with us. There are only two of them out there. We can protect you."

"She was shot," Martin replied to Lucy's question. "The day the council made her the first human —"

"Do you have any other questions about the authenticity of the art?" Garrus asked over the rest of the kid's reply as he handed Lucy the datapad once again.

"I'm satisfied with your explanation of how they came into your organization's possession," she said even as she entered text, "and if they have already been offered to museums, I have no qualms about them finding a place in my employers' private collections." She looked up and smiled, the same tight press of lips and softening around her eyes. "They'll be pleased to know there won't be any title issues. They're very excited about several of the pieces you're offering." She closed her hand around his talons for a moment before relinquishing the pad.

"Excellent." He lifted the datapad, but kept his eyes focused on Lucy. So close. This imperfect avatar held his love so close, but still beyond his grasp. A fierce, aching hunger welled up, clawing
its way out of the ground, frantic, grasping fingers clambering up his body. It dug through the seams and gaps in his armour only to burrow through his hide and take root in his bones. So damned close. For the space of three, impossibly arduous breaths he almost turned and strode out the door. Too much … it was all too much to ask of him.

Instead, he sucked in a fourth, ragged breath and took refuge behind the mask of diplomat/salesman as he said, "Our organization is expanding rapidly at the moment and can certainly use the influx of funds." He closed his eyes, shoring up the walls before he looked down at what Lucy had written.

"I have seven children. As long as I behave and bury him in credits, he keeps them out of the mines and the brothels." Beneath that she'd entered a series of coordinates. "The bastard operates five facilities that I know of. You'll need to hit them all simultaneously." Garrus took his first deep, clean breath since entering the office and looked up, admiration for her courage burning warm and deep, setting loose all the knots tied in his gut. Painful or not, he'd do what he needed to do.

There's no doubt where you came from, Kahri.

After he was done on Tuchanka, he'd get Nihlus and Anderson together with his contacts in the sapient trafficking division of C-Sec. Maybe Nihlus could bring in a few Spectres as well. Regardless, they'd make sure that Lucy Shepard and her children were free citizens within the month. He wouldn't rest until he saw it done.

He glanced back down at the last line. "Is Bunny alive?" The depth of hope and fear expressed in the three simple words dragged a soft, trilling keen along the underside of his breath.

Holding Lucy's stare, Garrus nodded. "As far as I know," he answered out loud, allowing her courage to fill him … to defy their cruelty … their stranglehold of terror. He knew where to find her, and when he rolled into their home, the slaving bastards would learn what it meant to be afraid.

The door opened, and two massive batarians in expensive armour lumbered through, intractable walls of muscle and arrogance. As much as he accepted the inevitability of their entry, as much as he knew he needed to let her leave with them, it took every ounce of Garrus's self-control to keep his hand off his sidearm. He clamped his jaw down on his fury … his disgust, both at the horror of what Lucy and her children had lived through for more than a decade …

… and at his inability to just pull her into his arms, to throw himself between her and harm … to protect her as he'd been unable to protect Shepard.

"Have you concluded your business?" one of the batarians demanded, shoving his bulk between Lucy and the rest of them.

Lucy lowered her head. "Yes. It's good news. The buyers will be pleased." She bowed slightly to Barla Von and then Martin. "It has been a pleasure, gentlemen." Stepping around the batarian, she took Garrus's hand again, squeezing his talons in a way that told him not to worry, that she'd happily take what awaited her if it meant freedom for her and her children. "I'm very glad to have met you, General. Thank you for the information. I feel much better about recommending these purchases."

He gripped her fingers when she pulled them back, unable to let go. How could he just let her leave knowing what would happen to her? She yanked her hand free. He sucked in a long breath and met her stare with a resolute nod. If she was brave enough to go back, he could find the courage to let her go. "I look forward to doing business with your employers. Take care." He stepped back, watching after her as the thugs surrounded her, escorting her out.
"Well," Martin said after the door closed, "guess that explains how Shepard knew so much about art, huh?"

Garrus felt the starved longing return, burning through him like a wildfire. He let it flare, trusting it to settle as he held himself back from running out the door. Two bullets. It would only take two bullets. Gripping that knowledge, that certainty, he tucked the bullets away, saving them for when they wouldn't cost Lucy what little she still held dear.

'Less than a month,' he promised, the oath more rather than less sincere for its silence.

He turned and passed Martin the datapad. "It does at that, kid." As the longing, the loneliness prompted by the glimpse into Shepard's stolen future, began to ebb, weaving into thick cables of connection, he laughed, sharp and clear as glass. Of all the things he could have expected to happen that day, finding his Kahri's mother would never have occurred to him.

Barla Von looked back and forth between them, his round body pivoting along with his head. "Vol-clan appears to have missed important context."

Garrus patted the volus on the back, the action reasserting reality. He still had a great deal to get done. "It's okay, let's get to the rest of our business. I need to send my family on their way home, and then get to Tuchanka and stop a friend from doing something stupid." He sat at the desk, but caught Martin by the arm before the young man could join them. "Head out and see if you can reach my father … get a sitrep."

As casual as he tried to appear, he felt his heartbeat like the timer on that bomb ticking down.

"I want to come to Tuchanka with you, Garrus." Solana stopped so suddenly at the threshold of the boarding lounge that Garrus ran up her heels. She whirled around to face him, giving him a shove when she smacked into his armour. "I can help."

Garrus staggered back a step, a broad grin meeting his sister's petulance. Her fire set off a nostalgic ache behind his keel. His strong, stubborn, impossible Sol. He swallowed an apology for having left her behind so completely, and embraced her, gripping her shoulders tight. The time for apologies had long passed. Time to step up and do better.

"I know, and I fully expect you to be involved in Archangel now that you've had a taste of it, but first you need to get Mari home." Releasing her, he stepped back, regarding her with a combination of awe and astonishment. When had his baby sister stopped playing warrior and turned into one?

"When Pari gets home, come out to Omega, and I'll put you to work, but for now … ." He ducked his head in a shrug consisting mostly of guilt. "It seems as though the entire galaxy is gunning for me, Sol, and I have to make sure that Mari is protected if they try to come at me through the family."

"I'm standing right here, Garrus," his mother said, fisted talons planting firmly on her hips. "And rumour has it that I was a soldier and a cop long before I became your pathetic, infirm, little old matrula. I can take care of myself."

"Forget that my poor old mari could hand me my backside or my head sixteen different ways?" He chuckled and backed up a step, his hands lifting to ward off an attack. "Spirits forbid such a thing happen." The hard core of truth behind his teasing set like steel in his spine. He came from a long line of honour and battle-hardened warriors, male and female alike. Sadness trickled through him as he wished that the three fierce warrior-women in his life had been granted a chance to meet.
As if able to read his thoughts, his mari stepped forward and held out her arms. A wide smile, and a quick snap of her mandibles answered his teasing. "I'm tempted to remind you and send Sol to Tuchanka, but I'll indulge you this once. Mostly because I don't want my daughter anywhere near the combination of enraged krogan and giant explosive devices." She gripped Garrus's shoulders when he stepped into her arms. "Be careful, and send your pari home when it's over. I've gotten used to having him around." Her mandibles flicked. "I sort of enjoy it."

"Just sort of?" Garrus chuckled as he leaned in to touch his brow to hers. "I'll do my best." He pulled away and reached over to give Sol a playful shove. "Safe trip home, and I'll see you later."

Sol arched her neck a little and turned away, the very picture of haughty. "You can count on it." Tossing a grin over her shoulder, she held out her arm to usher their mother into the security line.

"We have clearance for the relay in twenty-three minutes," Martin said from behind Garrus's left shoulder.

The general just nodded, watching after his family, savouring the gift he'd taken for granted far too long. He'd be glad to have Sol join him out on Omega. He missed her.

They turned to wave at the gate, then disappeared down the docking arm. Letting out a sharp breath, he spun on his talons and strode for the elevator. "Twenty-three minutes? Guess we'd better get moving." He gave Martin a hearty slap on the back as he passed, joy and purpose lifting him higher than he'd felt since Shepard died. She might be gone, but she'd left him a hell of a lot to live for. Shame it took him nearly two cycles to see it.

"Been a hell of a day, hasn't it, kid?"

Martin grinned. "That it has, General."

When they reached the Passch, Garrus paused at the bottom of the stairs to the bridge while Martin turned toward the elevator.

"I'm headed to the galley and then to take a nap. I'm a slave to a cruel overlord who refuses to feed me," the kid hollered down the length of the CIC. "Captain L'Tsai, I want to lodge a formal complaint. Seven hours! Seven long, starving hours since I was last allowed to eat."

The asari captain turned from her console next to the galaxy map to watch the young man approach. "I will lodge a complaint … on behalf of the general … accompanied by a request that he be assigned a left hand smart enough to pack a couple of dried fruit bars and a bottle of water when going on a mission."

Martin just sputtered, prompting a grin wide enough that Garrus could make it out from across the deck. He turned away from the confrontation even as Martin bristled, revving up a full dose of smartass.

Even after travelling from Omega to the Citadel with a skeleton crew—most of his people had been reassigned to the vessels in drydock—Garrus still felt as though the ship had been deserted. He climbed the stairs into the bridge, the ghost ship feeling gnawing away at his bright spirits. Only Mi'khal Tref, the batarian beta-shift pilot, sat at his station.

"Come to watch the magic happen?" Mi'khal asked. The easy-going, affable pilot tossed a toothy grin over his shoulder.

"You know it." Garrus rested a hand on the back of the empty co-pilot chair and let out a long breath. "I just thought the ship might feel less empty up here."
Mi'khal shuddered. "It doesn't though, does it?" The batarian glanced around even as his fingers tapped the interface, entering the data needed for their jump. A veteran smuggler, he'd logged twice as many hours as most Alliance pilots, taking the helm of a dozen different classes of ships before Archangel took down the smuggling ring he worked for. Grateful for a second chance, he'd campaigned heavily for one of the six coveted spots piloting the *Passchendaele*.

"So many empty stations is creeping me out." A shudder rocketed up the batarian's spine, violent enough to make his chair rattle. "I've got one of those feelings," he continued. "One of those … smuggling a container that I'm pretty sure is full of something horrible, but I'm too afraid to look … feelings." He shuddered again. "I'll be happy to leave Tuchanka behind and get our asses back to Omega. I'm hoping it's just the creeps, but I keep coming back to something being off, General. Keep sharp."

The pilot turned his attention to the relay as they began their run. Garrus watched, a familiar thrill tingling down his arms as they flew toward the gigantic structure. Awe riveted him to the deck plating. The sheer primal force needed to bend time and space stole the breath from his lungs as it had ever since his father held him on one hip and explained how the relay would arc out to grab the ship and fling it across space. Garrus had been so afraid that first time, the relay so huge compared to their ship, the forces so monstrous and incomprehensible to his six-cycle-old mind. But then his father had held him tight, the sheer wonder in his pari's voice soothing away the terror, replacing it with awe. Smiling, he closed his eyes as the familiar fist wrapped around him and yanked him through space.

They exited the mass effect corridor facing the brilliant yellow-white sphere of Aralakh. The star's light shone through his eyelids, as harsh and unrelenting as everything else in krogan territory. The brightness dimmed, Mi'khal must have polarized the ports, and the general opened his eyes.

"Drift just under 1100 klicks, stealth systems operational," Mi'khal reported, a not insignificant or unwarranted amount of pride bleeding through his tone. "Good clean run."

"Good work." Garrus grinned. "Don't let Joker hear that number. He'll make it his life's mission to beat it." He turned toward the stairs down to the main level of the CIC. "ETA to Tuchanka?"

"Four hours, thirty eight minutes, General." The batarian laughed. "I think I'll send Joker a message right now with that jump data."

Garrus just shook his head. "On your head be the consequences." Four and a half hours ... enough time for a quick shower and a nap. The adrenaline had begun to wear off, reminding him that he hadn't slept more than a couple of hours a night in weeks. "I'll be in my quarters if I'm needed." He jogged down the stairs, long strides carrying him the length of the CIC.

Halfway down the narrow corridor between the ranks of system monitoring stations, he passed the alpha-shift pilot. He smiled and nodded. "Lt. Pirelli."

"Good evening, General," the young woman said, greeting him with a bright grin. "A lovely evening to be headed for sunny Tuchanka, land of everything in the galaxy that wants to kill you."

She brushed past without stopping, whistling as she ran up the stairs, her boots ringing against the metal grating.

Garrus nodded. An accurate enough description of the krogan homeworld. "That it is, Lieutenant."

L'Tsai had returned to her work and looked up at him as he stopped beside her terminal. "Sitrep from Tuchanka, sir." She activated her monitor, bringing up an orbital scan. "Hierarch Vakarian reports that General Victus sent a platoon to take control of the bomb site, but they are having
difficulty reaching it." She pointed to several markers. "These are Victus's men here. A combination of the terrain … the bomb is in the center of a ruined industrial area … and heavy resistance is slowing them down. The lieutenant leading the force estimates at least another four to six hours to reach and pacify the objective." A slightly apologetic shrug accompanied that information, as if somehow the delays were her fault, or she expected him to shoot the messenger.

He nodded and leaned a hip against the point defense console, affecting nonchalance. "They can only do what they can, Captain. I'm sure they're doing their best. What about the evacuation of the Urdnot camp?" His arms settled across his chest, locking away his impatience.

L'Tsai mirrored his stance for a moment before one hand broke free and cut toward the scan. "One more thing about the bomb, sir. According to the general, his people are fighting Blue Suns."

Garrus snapped straight, his one hand falling to rest on his sidearm. "Blue Suns?" That didn't make any sense. What did the Suns gain by blowing up krogan? The answer was simple: nothing. They were a smokescreen for the real enemy … disposable guns to provide a hefty dose of anonymity.

"The hierarch reports that the evacuation is also going slowly despite the cooperation of the krogan religious leaders and the female clan chief. Urdnot Wrex is encouraging his people to remain and defy what he says is just turian intimidation." She answered his soft curse with a nod and an empathetic wince. "However, most of the females and all of the children have been evacuated outside the blast zone."

He nodded, one sharp jerk of his head. "Very well, stay on top of the situation. I'm going to take a shower and try to get a little sleep. Let me know if anything on the surface changes."

The asari's salute betrayed her origins as one of the Destiny Ascension's junior flag officers. He returned it with a turian one, then headed for the elevator. Inside, he turned to face her, then reached out to hit the hold button.

"Please tell me that we didn't give away all our ground pounders, and it won't be just Martin and I trying to fight our way through to Wrex and the giant bomb."

She grinned. "We managed to hang on to six. They'll be coming off their sleep shift in two hours."

He released the door. "Excellent."

After a quick shower, he burrowed under his blankets. His stomach growled, protesting his priorities, but exhaustion pressed at him harder than hunger. He yawned, telling his belly to shut up until he woke, then closed his eyes.

"I hope you know that I found your mother, Kahri," he said to the dark. "She's okay, and you have a pile of brothers and sisters. I'll get her out of there as soon as I can. I promise you that." He let out a long breath and relaxed into the mattress. "Then we'll find Bunny."

Within moments, he fell asleep.

19 Days ASR

Bodies surged through the door, an alien tide of bizarre shapes, slicing blades, and frenzied limbs in the fading light from his armour. Silent, trapped inside his head, he prayed and cursed and cried as his body fought, seeming immune to injury and the passage of time. He screamed, wrestling back a measure of control over his own vocal chords, his own limbs, but his rage and fear went unheard over the droning of the enemy's wings and the drumbeat of their bodies slamming into the half-open door. The horrible wet crunch of shell breaking against metal dragged him back to his
childhood. On one of his explorations, he stumbled upon a group of teenagers beating a *carin crus* with metal pipes … the giant crustacean screamed and snapped its claws, trying to fight back as the *perin* pulverized its shell, and finally the meat and organs beneath.

He dragged his scattered thoughts back to the present as the room tipped and swayed around him. Spirits, his head ached … buzzing … electric jolts of agony ripped through his skull. Shoving that aside, he focused on Roger, the gun bucking into his hands in a steady rhythm. One … two … three … pause. Over and over as he fought to keep the rifle from overheating. If it did, he'd be overwhelmed and crushed just as surely as that poor sad animal on the beach.

One of the creatures made it inside the door, an arm hanging half off, whipping about uselessly even as it raced toward him, it's double sided blade carving the air ahead of its charge. Bullets tore into its shell, the force knocking it around like a ragdoll, but still it charged, its blank, white eyes glowing in the faint light.

It slammed into him, the blade clutched in its hand never stopping. The pain registered only as a hard tugging as the blade carving through his armour, plate, and hide. The organic weapon lodged in his hip bone, tearing loose when he staggered, his leg collapsing as the tendons sliced through. Swinging Roger in a wide arc even as he fell, he slammed the rifle into the creature's head, the chitinous shell cracking open with a sickening crunch.

As he lay there, firing into the bodies that flailed over the mass of their fallen comrades, the hollow gong sound of the their bodies slamming into metal echoed inside his head. Constant ringing, banging … hollow thumping against the metal … .

Garrus bolted upright in bed, heart slamming into the base of his throat as he flailed, tangled in his blankets. Over several seconds, the softness of the blankets against his hide eased him back into his bed despite the hollow, thumping ring of bodies striking metal that continued to echo in his head. It stopped with the whisper of voices, banging, then a crash.

He jumped up, landing on his feet next to the bed, his blankets still wrapped around and between his legs. A dark shape dropped from the ceiling and ran to his door, the orange glow of an omnitool illuminating Martin's face.

"Weaver?" His alarm fading a little, Garrus bent over to wrestle himself free. "What the hell are you doing, kid?" He looked up at a darker spot against the ceiling, a icy trickle of alarm snaking through his guts and setting off the alarm at the back of his skull. "Why are you crawling around in the ducts?"

The dark spot gave birth to a shadow, the form unfolding from above to drop, landing agile and light on taloned feet. The trickle surged into a flood. His hands leapt in front of his face, and he sank into a defensive stance.

"Get dressed," the invader growled, amusement rolling through her subvocals. When he didn't move, too busy trying to figure out what was going on, she stepped close enough for him to make out her features, and his arms fell limp to his sides.

"Kandros? What the hell are you doing on my ship?"

(A-N: Holy cow, Chapter 90, and I think you can see that we're diving into the thick of things now. Events will start to snowball from here. All the loves to my readers and reviewers. Your support helps keep me going. Well, your support and Sassy haranguing me to get back to her chapters. :D She's so pushy! See you in a couple of days.)
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Mass Effect - Future Complex Chapter Twenty Seven

Chapter Summary

Shepard starts fitting the last few pieces into her escape plan. Wheels within wheels.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

19 Days ASR

"I need you to get AI approval to leave his room," Shepard declared, dropping into the chair across the desk from Miranda. Before the operative could speak, she continued. "He's wasting away in that dark hole. Even when it's clean, it reeks of decay and death." She slouched into the leather, tossing her cane into the air as she lifted one leg up over the arm. Catching the cane and slinging it casually over one shoulder, she bounced a little. "Comfy chair. Nice. Could I get one like this?"

Miranda took a deep, highly controlled breath, the slight roll of her shoulders and press of her breasts against the catsuit the only sign that she'd even taken it. "Shepard, you know I don't have any say in what goes on within his program. The best I could do is make a suggestion, but even that would be seen as interference, which is against company policy." She shifted in her chair and leaned forward to rest her forearms on her desk and clasp her hands. "Is this about your grand escape plan?"

Shepard grinned and flipped around to sit in the chair properly. As she moved, she twirled her cane through the fingers of one hand then looped it around her neck to twirl in the other hand before the foot thumped to the floor between her legs. "This is about someone rotting away in your prison when he doesn't need to be. My escape plan will go ahead regardless of whether you let me take him down to eat in the mess or sit in the atrium, but don't worry, you have a couple of days yet." She grinned, a curled wound across her face that contained no mirth, just challenge. "I still have a couple of ducks refusing to take up line dancing."

The smile that Miranda sent back actually did seem amused, but amusement of an arrogant sort, as if she believed the whole plan either an elaborate ruse or doomed to failure. "You're on a space station, Shepard. Even if you do free your little band of lab rats … ." The operative's face stiffened, and she bowed her head even as Shepard bristled. "I apologize, that was unworthy." She sighed, this time audibly. "But that does not change the fact that even if you do break the subjects loose, none of you have anywhere to go."

Shepard nodded. "You're right. Space station." Her shoulders popped in a loose, marionette shrug. "What was I thinking? I'll call the whole thing off." She thrust herself out of her chair to lean, elbows braced against her sides, both hands on her cane. "Meanwhile, Al. Get him permission to go for walks so I don't have to break him out and then hurt people when they try to stop me." She headed for the door.

"Shepard, it's impossible." Miranda rose and strode over to stand in the captain's path. "I already violated policy taking his case to my employer." Her expression softened to what Shepard was fairly sure was supposed to be a plea—it couldn't have found pleading with a lighthouse, a pack of hunting dogs, a deerstalker, and a scanning program. "Please don't make me regret authorizing the
"Impossible?" Shepard threw up a hand, letting the veiled threat slide past. "What's he going to do? He weighs less than you do, and can barely stand up once they strip out their implants. And you're keeping his biotics off line, right? Some sort of injections?" Narrowing her eyes, Shepard stepped inside Miranda's space. To her credit, the operative didn't step back. "Which is another cruelty, by the way. A lot of biotics actually go mad when they're cut off from the source of whatever-the-hell-it-is when they're injured or burn themselves out. Chalk up another monstrous practice you just pretend isn't going on. And I know that you know that I know there are other biotics being held here." She pressed in tighter, leaning in. "It makes me glad I'm not biotic, I tell you that. I swear when I get out of here, I'm going to come back with—"

"Enough, Shepard!" Miranda's hand sliced the air between them. "I've had quite enough of taking abuse for figments of your imagination. The injections don't work that way. If he wanted to use his biotics to meditate, he … ." She snapped her mouth shut, a slight tightening around her eyes the only sign that she knew she'd stormed straight into the quagmire.

Shepard let out a long, slow breath. She'd forgotten how draining she found the whole crazy and rabidly annoying thing. Still, she couldn't give up, not until she got what she wanted. Hobbling past Miranda, she called, "I'm going to go to my room, do some more plotting, and then I am going to take Al down to the mess for supper. I'll do this with or without permission, Doc Frank. And trust me, the 'without permission' part comes complete with injuries on all sides if you try to stop me." She hit the door control. "Just tell his torturers that he'll live longer this way. Besides, they need to get used to him being gone. A couple days tops and we're out of here."

"You know," Miranda called after her, "your Al is no saint, Shepard. From what I saw of his file, he was a monster before the organization picked up his corpse. He's murdered humans, Shepard. A lot of them."

Shepard nodded. "I know exactly what he is, Operative Lawson," she answered without turning around. "He's me, except that you just need bits and pieces of him. I guess I should be thanking the sweet baby Jesus that you needed me intact, huh?" She took a breath to thaw the ice that stabbed down through her spine. "You have two hours to get him permission to leave his room."

Shepard grinned as she headed down the hall, so pleased with herself that she almost forgot her limp. Almost. Miranda would punish her, she harboured no illusions about that, but she was a good two days past caring. Most of what she needed, she possessed. Someone less savvy and careful than Miranda, would have given it all away. No matter. Now that they knew how the drug worked, they could narrow down the options and find out how long it would take before the biotics could use their gifts. She'd made it a good four days past the level of naivety that allowed her the luxury of thinking they'd get off the base without fighting even if, or maybe especially if, Miranda and her employer danced to Shepard's tune.

On her way down the seven corridors and two elevators between Miranda's office and her room, Shepard made covert scans of the security grid. She'd pillaged her scanner parts from five different printers, three coffee makers, and a handful of palm scanners. Although, almost certain the entire station knew where all the missing tech ended up, about seven … ten days … mmm … no, she hadn't even woken up caring about that. Her plan came together a little at a time, strand by strand knotted together right under Miranda's nose.

The operative knew almost ninety nine percent of the plan, Shepard knew that as well. The important bits, the part that would see her off the station and back out into her life … those bits resided in the other one percent. She and Al could never hope to break the rest of the subjects free
and actually escape. Not without that vital one percent. For that ... well, she just had to hope Miranda brought her A game.

Before she returned to her room, Shepard headed for the kitchen to practice her sleight of hand. Al had dropped his cloak when he got up off his bed earlier, and what she saw had made her guts ache. It told her that the corporation had nearly accomplished their goal. They'd started letting him kill himself.

Not on her watch.

She lingered at the counter, picking out an apple and banana for herself, smiling at the cashier as he rang her through. After sticking the fruit in the side pocket on her trousers, she wandered back along the counter, browsing until the cashier headed to the back for a moment. The second he left the counter unattended, she ducked around the end and into the kitchen. So far so good. Next objective. She grinned to herself as she crept along the wall, keeping to the camera blind spots, making her way to the employee locker room. All one needed to slip beneath the radar in the massively staffed kitchen was a set of the uniform overalls—preferably stained—and a hairnet.

Dressed the part, her hair under a kerchief and net, Shepard stowed her cane inside her overalls and strode out into the kitchen. As much pleasure as she took in her covert activities, Shepard felt an equal part embarrassment. An N7 applauding herself for infiltrating a kitchen and stealing sweets ... pathetic.

*Take your joy where you can, Janey, and keep your eye on the goal.*

Staff pushed and shoved, hurrying past without sparing her a glance. Just before supper always proved the best time to raid. Extra people came and went all the time, and with the rush, she attracted zero notice. The only challenge came in avoiding the cameras through the choke point between the levo and dextro sections. Still, it remained a sad challenge.

The dextro kitchen never failed to weird her out, like looking at a levo kitchen through the looking glass—everything just slightly off. Still, armed with the knowledge of what he liked and the fact she had to squeeze everything between the slats on the grate, she managed. As for what Al liked ... she would never have pegged him for having a sweet tooth, but he packed away turian cookies and candy like he couldn't get enough. His favourite was a chewy sort of fudgey-looking pre-packaged thing, but the organization must have had to import them from the Palaven planetary treasury or something, because the staff guarded them like crown jewels.

"Ha! Score!" Damn, has she said that out loud? She winced and hurried over to the trays of cooling, unguarded cookies. Working quickly, she managed to squirrel half a tray into a plastic bag and down the front of her suit before anyone got close enough to catch her. At the other end of the kitchen she knocked over a stack of pots, using the distraction to search out the day's hiding place and grab a handful of the fudge things.

Although it was no N7 mission, Shepard nonetheless allowed herself a small measure of pride in pulling off her daily caper. No doubt Miranda and management knew what she was up to and allowed it—all part of her rehab—but the kitchen staff remained oblivious to where their supplies went each afternoon. Or, at least she hoped they did. If it was all staged, she'd kick someone's ass. Even the undead could only allow a certain level of pathetic before everything just got sad.

Satisfied that her haul would get Al through the evening, she beat a hasty retreat. Taking off her overalls, she leaned heavily against her cane and hobbled back out into the main corridor. Poor, damaged Shepard, so crippled by pain ... so weak.
Her room greeted her like a cool, silent hug as she entered. Odd how, even behind enemy lines, familiar territory could begin to feel like home. She stuffed the overalls, kerchief, and hair net under her mattress along with the others. "Hey, you still hanging in there, big guy?" she asked as she sank onto the side of her bed.

"I smell cookies." She heard him moving around on his bed.

"Yep, fresh from the oven, too." She laid down and started sliding the sweets through the slats. "You ready to go walkabout in a couple of hours?"

Those pale, rheumy eyes stared at her from the shadows of his hood. "This isn't a good idea, Shepard."

She grinned, excitement coursing through her cells like narcotics. "That's the beauty of it. It's such a bad idea that it kills two birds with one stone. It'll give me a chance to see how far they're willing to let me push in the name of getting my cooperation for their mission, but it'll also nail home that I'll do what it takes."

Sucking in a long breath, she winced, the cookie aroma making her stomach growl. "Damn, I should have stolen cookies for myself too. I just got some fruit." She fed the bag through the grate. "Here, put them back in the bag so rats don't move in and start gnawing your toes off while you sleep."

His mandibles spread. "What?"

She laughed at his gobsmacked tone, but the smile drifted away in favour of something that wrapped nettles around her heart, a dollop of bitter mixing with the sweet. "My mama always told me that was what would happen if I kept food in my bedroom." She passed him the candy. "She was a fierce woman, but … " Shaking her head, she folded her arms and rested her chin on one. "… there was no real sting there. She shouted and blustered, but I think it was just because she wanted so much for us." Wincing, she added, "Of course, it didn't hurt that I centered my life around driving her crazy."

"Nothing's changed. You still torture those you see as having power over you." Wrappers crackled on the other side of the wall, and when Al spoke, the words came out muffled as if he'd stuffed the entire confection in his mouth. "My mother was a member of the cabals most of her life, fighting all over turian space." He paused. The slight smacking sound of sticky sweets and pointed teeth locked in an epic battle slid a grin back onto her face.

Something about the battered turian chopped back the tangle of emotional thorns that seemed to ensnare her entire life. Maybe he provided a reminder of the people she'd left behind, or maybe it was just the purity of the moment. No looming battle against impossible forces, no evil empire keeping her away from her loved ones, just a soul who possessed nothing finding a couple of seconds of enjoyment in his candy.

After a moment, he made a happy little grunting sound and continued, "She said she married a carpenter so that her children would have at least one parent there for them."

"The cabals …." Shepard rolled over on her side and pulled her pillow under her head. "That's rough."

He murmured a soft agreement. "When it became obvious that I'd inherited my mother's gifts, she insisted that I keep them hidden. My father hired an asari tutor to teach me control. Eventually, it was discovered, as these things always are, but by that time, my brother had obtained a position of
sufficient power to pull some strings and keep me from the cabals. Of course, I also possessed a prodigious talent for destruction."

Shepard chuckled. "I like that. I think I'll steal that every time someone tells me I've fucked up yet again. I'll just blame it on my prodigious talent for destruction." She shoved herself up to sit cross-legged in the middle of the bed. "Did the hack finish compiling while I was out?"

The orange glow of his omnitool appeared on the other side of the grate. "It did."

The compiled program appeared on Shepard's omnitool. "Excellent. This will get us into the other cells when the time comes."

Al appeared behind the grate again. "You seem extraordinarily confident about how this escape is going to go down, Shepard."

She grinned. "Only because I know my enemy. Right now, all the right cogs are turning. Well, actually, right this second, they're listening to me and wondering what cogs I plan to use. Then they'll have a meeting to discuss turning different cogs, but those ones will be the right ones too. The more they second guess themselves, the better."

Al laughed, a soft, raspy chortle. "You're completely insane."

Shepard looked over at him and wiggled her eyebrows. "Crazy like a fox, my friend. Crazy like a fox." She opened the interface on her omnitool and started working on a tunnelling program to get her past the organization's lock out on her computer. She needed to get past it and into the network to ensure she knew exactly where the other prisoners were. When she left, everyone was going with her.

"Talk to me," she said, tossing a quick grin over at the vent before diving into her work.

"What about?"

She shrugged. "Anything. It helps me think." Her grin widened, sliding into her tone as she said, "Ever been in love?"

He chuffed, a rough snort of sound. "Nothing like going straight to the invasively personal."

"It's my thing. So? How about it?" Shepard took a long, slow breath, letting go of the tension that invaded every muscle and held every tendon rigid even when she slept. His voice really did help her relax and concentrate. Her fingers flew over the haptic interface.

He made a show of grumbling, but then sighed. "Yes, a long time ago. Well twice. Once a very, very long time ago."

Her eyebrows rose when he didn't continue. "Well? Come on, I want details. Dates, names, positions … frequency." Cackling merrily, she spun to face the grate at the foul curse that greeted her demand. "Holy blessed Enkindler buttocks, that was quite the naughty word. I hope you didn't kiss your mother with that mouth."

"Turians don't kiss," he grumbled. Despite the growl laced through his voice, the ill humour didn't touch his eyes, in fact she swore she saw a gleam in their battered depths.

A wistful smile drifted across her face, a wisp of cloud dancing on a breeze. "Some do." She closed her eyes, the sensation of tough, textured plates brushing against her lips, a tongue that tasted of mineral and summer rain caressing hers.
"How about you?" he countered.

"What about me?" She pressed her lips together, biting down on the inside of her bottom lip to control her smirk.

"Don't be obtuse. Have you been in love?"

She nodded. "I am. Well, I guess I should say, I was. It's been two years for him. Who knows where he is. For all I know, he's moved on, met someone else." Her head tipped off to the side. "I can hear him talking to me sometimes, a voice that feels like home—safe and warm. I'll swear I catch a glimpse of him, but … I'm still locked out of those memories."

"They know there would be no stopping you if you remembered him," Al said, his voice every bit as soft as his words sounded certain. "You would have found a way off this station as soon as you could move."

Shepard shrugged. "You don't know me that well, Al."

"Of course I do. We aren't that much different, Shepard. You think if I had anything left out there, I'd be mouldering in here?" He let out a long breath laced with a curse. "Spirits, I'm pathetic." He laughed, softly at first then gaining momentum until he roared with it. When he calmed a little, she heard him shift, his shoulder or brow brushing the wall. "You ever wonder if it's all just some sort of hallucination? That we're actually dead, and some part of us is just too afraid to let go … even if it means living like this?"

"It's occurred to me," she replied, the words a soft whisper. Shepard shook her head and stretched her back, grunting a little with the pain. Almost time for meds. The agony climbed slowly from a ten to an eleven on the Shepard scale. She knew from yesterday that it would hit a solid fifteen before Miranda came in. Although the cracks, caverns, and canyons in her flesh had healed up by a whopping four percent, that left ninety-six percent of unbearable.

"You all right?" Al asked. "You went quiet."

She shook her head and clenched her trembling hands into fists. "Yeah, no worries, buddy. It's just getting to be close to med time. Things are starting to complain more than usual."

"Not much to tell. I rescued her from a pirate base. She'd been snatched from a local colony. That spirit-cursed rock was so fucking cold. I nearly shattered my teeth chattering them together."

"Don't start with me. Our only job for the next couple of days is keeping our delicate, magical turian flower safe from the frost."

Shepard smiled as she listened, knowing that somehow, she'd also found her love in the cold.

"I'm coming back," she whispered, her voice not loud enough to interrupt Al talking about unloading a shotgun into a man who came looking for the woman who had reached out to him for help and stolen his heart. Longing swept through her. A spark when it started at her toes, it built to a roaring fire by the time it escaped through her vocal chords. "I am coming back. Wait for me."
Okay, so first of all apologies for the wait. I wrote Chapter 91 from Garrus's POV, then realized for my super-secret evil plan to work for Chapter 94, I needed Chapter 91 to be Shepard POV. So, yeah. Here we are Shepard POV. Then, yesterday I received a review on FFN that said I hated asari with a NeoNazi level hatred, which, as any of you who know me would guess, threw me into a panic that I'd been unintentionally bigoted, so spent yesterday searching out asari hatred. Still working on that, so yeah. Another day behind schedule. Sorry. There is good news though. Three chapters are now written or nearly written and ready to go. Shepard will be putting her endgame into action on Thursday, then Garrus will be returning to deal with his stowaway on Sunday.

As always, all the love to the readers and commenters. You guys rock! Now, let's get these crazy kids back together and get the Collectors taken DOWN! See you Thursday.
Chapter Summary

Shepard sends her plot into the end game. Is it complexly simple or simply complex.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

19 Days ASR

At exactly two hours, Shepard stuck her head out her door and looked around. No one moved, the corridor all but deserted. A trap? Concession? Could she really have won that easily? Sure, they allowed her to run rampant, calling it rehabilitation and skill reclamation, but she really hadn’t expected that ultimatum to work. She’d needed it to work in order to save Al, but she hadn’t expected it to.

“Hmm.” A twisted, self-satisfied grin curled the corner of her mouth, growing to where it made the canyons carved into her cheek file several complaints … in triplicate. “Hm. Not what I expected, but okay.”

She couldn’t have said what she expected, exactly. Maybe a couple squads of security guards to ensure she stayed safely ensconced in her chambers. Maybe Miranda and a taser … no, too uncivilized. Miranda and a big needle of tranquilizers. Yeah, better. Miranda and the arched eyebrow of doom … not beyond the realm of possibility. If anyone could pull off disabling someone using only the power of disapproval, it was Dr. Frankenstein.

She stepped over the threshold, leaning on her cane just enough to make the limp convincing, but ready to turn it into a weapon at a moment’s notice. When she reached Al’s door unmolested, she chuckled—a bitter, hollow echo of disappointment. Not that she wanted to show her hand, but beating the crap out a handful of guards would have been a nice stress relief. Oh well, violence contained excellent preservatives and featured an especially long expiration date.

The door remained locked, however, and her grin turning into something both real and filled with challenge. She looked up, giving the hall camera a jaunty little salute before she bypassed the door. They wanted confirmation of her door crack program? Not a problem. A smart, elegant little program, it deserved some recognition, and the beautiful, subtle nuances of tech sailed right over Al’s head.

It took exactly 2.3 seconds to get past the lock. Nice. She palmed the control, then reeled away from the door as it opened, the stink of death smacking her in the face. Her hand lifted to her nose to try to block at least a little of it.

“Sweet baby Jesus, Al, are you actually rotting under that thing?” Taking a couple of acclimatizing breaths, she headed in. “Come on, big guy. This is an official jailbreak. Up and at ‘em.” She made her way down the short hall past his bathroom only to find an empty room. “Hmm. Is this a counter move?” She glanced around and then turned and knocked on the bathroom, checking
inside when no one answered. Empty.

Interesting play, but whose was it? Miranda? His staff asserting control? That thought sent her heart rate and blood pressure into the upper red zone. They wouldn’t hurt him? Not just to spite her and her interference? Limping back to the door, she wished she possessed a better floor plan of the station. She thought she knew where his labs were, but she had nothing prepared to hack into their security. They could euthanize him before she even found him. Damn it.

Guilt beat her with merciless images of what could be happening to him … every last horrific thing because she couldn’t just leave well enough alone. She stopped outside his door, mind racing in dizzying loops. She’d built a plan to save him. It would cost her, quite possibly more than she knew, but he deserved more than a bullet in the head as soon as Shepard turned her back. And now she might not even get the chance.

**Calm down, for fuck’s sake, Janey. First thing is to find him. Standing here throwing a panic attack isn’t going to get you anywhere.**

Her omnitool beeped, cutting off Bunny’s nagging with a yelp. Or did the yelp come from her? Either way, only Al could send her messages on her omnitool. Due to completely justified security concerns, Miranda kept her cut off from the network.

Shepard opened the interface. Four words glowed up at her, flipping her terror on its head and setting it aflame. “Fuck! That sneaky ass.” She read the message again then hurried down the corridor as fast as she could manage while still putting on a good show of being lame.

“I’m in the cafeteria?” she shouted from the mess hall door. “You scared me half to death! I thought you were being dissected or something!”

Al turned in his seat, a toothy grin all she could make out under the hood. “Are you finished making a scene? If so, get some food and come sit down.” He chuckled and turned back around. “If not, feel free to stand there and keep yelling.”

“I might just do that!” She glared at the room full of uneasy eyes turned her way. “As you were!” she barked, flapping a hand at the employees. “Just eat your food and get back to work, dammit.”

After another moment of indignant self-indulgence, during which her pulse and all other vital stats returned to something close to normal, she stomp-hopped over to the food counter. She slapped a generous serving of mac and cheese on her plate, covered it with peas, and then smothered the entire thing in hamburger gravy.

“What is that?” Al asked, pulling away from the table as she set her dinner down.

“Comfort food. Not one word about my dinner.” She ripped her chair away from the table, the legs screaming across the tile. “Just eat.” She sat across from him, glaring at him with enough intensity to set his cloak on fire. “You really did scare the crap out of me.”

Cautiously, as if he expected her food to leap off the plate and eat his face, he leaned back in, his mandibles flicking in distress. “It looks as though someone already ate it.”

Shepard banged her fork handle against the tabletop, unable to suppress a furious, satisfied smirk when everyone in the room jumped. “I said, not one word.” Relief swept away the fury, lining the back of her throat and sinuses with a slick, bitter layer of something she didn’t wish to examine too closely. She glanced up at him, not wanting him to see her eyes in case the burning she felt translated to redness as well. “When your message arrived, I was planning how to break you out before they killed you.” She stabbed a forkful of her supper, taking a small amount of pleasure in
the act of noodle-cide. “I thought they’d taken you to teach me a lesson.”

He cleared his throat and straightened in his chair. “You really do have an inflated sense of your importance, don’t you?” He chuckled, then reached across the table to pat her hand, a tiny gesture of contrition. “Relax, Shepard. I just wanted to remind you that you aren’t rescuing a helpless varren pup. I wasn’t always … this.” His mandibles flicked hard. “And I wasn’t convinced your door hack would work.”

She scoffed, a guttural cough of disgust. “Ye of little faith. Of course it works.” Straightening, she looked up, meeting his stare as her eyebrows pulled down, tying a tight knot in the skin between them. “I don’t think I’m rescuing you, Al. This is a buddy caper, and I certainly don’t think you’re pathetic. They’re just willing to give me enough rope to hang … well … pretty much everyone … in the name of getting my help. That just allowed me to get things moving.” She gripped his talons before he could pull them all the way back, ignoring the fact that he stiffened at the contact. “If you’ve felt that, I’m sorry.”

He stared at her hand for a moment, before snatching his back. “It’s fine. I haven’t exactly been active in securing my own escape.” He shrugged and ducked his head a little lower into the cloak. “About time that changed.”

She stared at him for a moment as he shovelled in his dinner, then nodded. “It’ll make things easier. You’re bigger than you look through the grate. Not sure I can carry you all the way through the ducts to the docking bay.”

“All the way?” His head tilted and that warm chuckle rolled over her again. “I doubt you’d get my feet off the floor.”

She shrugged and shovelled a couple of mouthfuls in. “I dunno. I had a turian bigger than you use me as a ladder once. Damn, he was heavy.” She frowned, the picture appearing clear as day … the steep bank of rubble and dirt … the molten lava glowing below them … dark blue and black armour. A sharp pain stabbed into the base of her skull, arcing up along the right side to lodge behind her eye. Miranda wasn’t lying about that much at least. She glanced up at the camera above the entrance, a fierce grimace of a smile greeting the memory.

Well, Janey, you couldn’t have planned that better if you tried. You realize this could very possibly kill you, right?

She needed to remember to thank Liara for the subtle erosion of the walls around the few memories that the nanites had reassembled. Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself the best she could and then bashed herself against the wall locking her away from the torin who clung to her armour over that precipice. The pain revved up—a drag racer waiting for the green light—blinding, ramping higher and higher until she was pretty sure she smelled burning rubber.

A soft shrill of suffering escaped between clenched teeth as the heel of her hand leapt to her eye socket, pressing in hard to keep her brain from chewing its way out the easiest escape route.

“Shepard!” Al called, his voice low and firm … the voice of command. “Stop pushing. Let the memory go. If you push … spirits, you’ll fry half the hardware keeping you alive.”

Exactly. Ignoring his advice, she lunged into the memory, reaching for the torin hidden within.

Come on, let me see him. Give him back to me. I’m going to need him—his strength—for what I’ve got to do next.
She knew without even knowing how, that he’d been a huge source of her strength. It forged the center of her, even though he was only a few words, a few snippets of conversation. She followed that connection back to that hole under Therum. They slid toward the edge and death ... his talons gripped her armour. Bucking harder as the resistance grew, she tracked those talons to long arms and broad shoulders. The pain burgeoned, hatching a thousand claws that gouged at her eyes, gnawed into her temples, and swarmed through her sinuses ... rats fighting to escape a drowning bucket.

*Not good enough, Janey. If you’re going to push until your brain explodes, don’t play at it. Fucking push!*

Fingernails scrabbled against the drum-tight shroud that hid her love’s face, struggling for even the smallest hold … . A whistle, like the sound of a hard-swung baseball bat, gave her a half second of warning before the drag racer popped the clutch and slammed into the back of her head. A battery of fireworks detonated along the underside of her skull—shrapnel and flashes of molten darkness tearing loose a wail of immaculate defiance … a battle cry railing against every blockade, every shackle … against the hooks they’d cast into the cool waters of death to drag her back.

Something rough and sharp cracked against her cheek hard enough to snap her head around, and an entirely new pain sliced through the blast damage inside her skull. Her teeth scraped together then snapped down on the side of her tongue.

“Did you slap me?” she asked, scowling at her ‘just-tripled-my-pain-meds’ slur. Numb fingers reached up to rub her cheek. “That hurt.”

He pressed something to her nose again. “It was either that or let you turn your brain into porridge.” When he pulled back a little, she saw a broad splotch of crimson creeping into the woven fabric of his cloak.

Reaching up, she dabbed at her upper lip, fingertips retreating streaked with blood. Shepard laughed weakly and leaned forward, draping her arms over Al’s shoulders, her brow pressed against his mandible. “I was wrong, you know.” She tightened her grip on him as he stiffened. “I thought they needed me whole, but they’ve carved me up almost as much as they did you. You just can’t see most of the pieces missing from me.” After a couple of breaths, she whispered, “Do you think that scared the shit out of them?”

He chuffed, a harsh combination of cough and laugh. “You did that to what … prove some sort of point? Spirits, Shepard. You’re a fool.” He let out a loud raspy sigh, then nodded. “I’m sure it aged Miranda ten cycles or so. It certainly did me.” Taking her by the shoulders, he pushed her away, settling her back in her chair before he stood. “Don’t do anything that stupid again. This is my freedom you’re playing with, as well.” He turned her chair around. “Eat your plate of vomit.”

Planting her elbows on either side of her plate, Shepard dropped her head into her hands, waiting for the pressure to ease back. When Al shoved a folded napkin in front of her face, grateful fingers took it from him and pressed it under her nose to ease the slow bleed.

“I’ll give you this,” Al said, thumping back down into his chair. He picked up his utensils and directed a nod over her shoulder. “You know how to clear a room.”

Shepard lifted her head and looked around. Sure enough, all the other tables sat empty, food
abandoned on plates. A few chairs lay on their sides, knocked over in their occupants’ haste to flee the crazy woman with the exploding brain. She chuckled, the soft laugh building to a hearty chortle as she glanced toward the kitchen and saw all the staff hiding behind a counter. When Miranda and Kelly burst through the door a second later, the laugh morphed into helpless, whooping gasps for air.

“That couldn’t have gone better if I tried,” she cackled, snapping Miranda a violent, jaunty salute even as the operative’s omnitool activated and scans began to run. After levelling a furious glare on her medical staff for the count of twenty, Shepard tucked into her supper, eating with a manic relish that completely eased back the earlier pain. Control her? Manipulate her? They could fucking try, and she’d run fifty laps around them before they knew she’d moved.

“Shut up,” Al grumbled under his breath without looking up.

“The pain … that series of explosions that caused the fountain of blood running out your nose,” Miranda called, looking up from her scans, “was two hundred nanites overloading and detonating inside your brain, Shepard.” The operative strode over to the table, rigid and tightly laced up, but obviously furious. “You’re lucky that little stunt didn’t destroy two years of delicate work.”

Kelly sat on the chair next to Shepard. “You’re lucky you didn’t kill yourself. We aren’t keeping you from making those connections to be cruel, Shepard. We’re trying to protect you.” The psychologist places a hand on Shepard’s forearm. “A huge portion of your nervous system was blown out the back of your head, Captain. It was supposed to be replaced gradually over the next four to six months while you remained in a coma.”

“Definitely leave the ‘scared straight’ stuff to Miranda, Red. You haven’t got the eyebrow for it.” Shepard sighed and looked up, calming the anger enough not to lash out at the young woman. Kelly didn’t deserve the stripes. “I have places to go, Kelly, people to see, and things to do … and I’m going to get started on that. I’m awake. I’m nearly back to functional. They can’t keep me locked in stasis any longer.” She cut a hand toward her cold, congealing dinner. “Now, my dinner is getting cold, so the two of you need to go. I’m no worse for wear, and I think we all learned a great deal from my little experiment.” Sharpening her stare to chips of obsidian, she met Miranda’s eyes. “Didn’t we? Have a wonderful night.”

Miranda gestured for Kelly to vacate the chair at Shepard’s side, slipping into the seat the moment it was empty. Leaning forward, the operative crossed both arms over one knee and looked up, a stare just as sharp as Shepard’s focused on the captain’s face. “Shepard, this organization is trying to prepare to fight the Reapers. You are our big gamble in that war. Billions of credits have gone into the Lazarus Project and making sure you have the equipment you need.”

Shepard leaned back and rolled her neck, letting out a long groan as she crossed her arms. “Not the ‘you’re a massive investment’ lecture again, Miranda. I’m a person, not a very large canon or a ship. I don’t give a rat’s ass how much money you spent. I really don’t. If you give me a Lamborghini and throw me onto the race track, you can’t bitch if I crash it.”

“That’s a flawed analogy, but … no …” The operative shook her head, a sharp, decisive gesture. “… this is the lecture where I explain that even my employers are not immune to being infiltrated by Reaper agents. Indoctrinated agents slip through cracks we can’t fill. Look at Wilson, and the nurse before him. This demonstration of yours has probably already been reported back to the Reapers. Thanks to your selfish little tantrum, you’ve placed yourself and everyone else on this station in danger. Thousands of people live and work here, Shepard. It’s not just about you.” She stood. “Go back to your rooms and remain there until management and I figure out what to do.” Turning to Kelly, the operative said, “Be sure your department is prepared for emergency
evacuation, and hope that we manage to intercept that transmission.”

“No,” Shepard replied. “I promised Al dinner—which is now ice cold—and a walk. I’ve spent a week working to get him out of that cell. Now that he is, I intend to take advantage of it and bang him until he can’t see straight.” It took every ounce of control and willpower she possessed to stay focused on Miranda when Al let out a snort that sounded like it originated in his feet. He gasped for a second and then started to choke.

She held the operative’s stare, giving nothing away. “We’ll both return to my room when we’re finished. If you need to speak with me, you can contact me then.” Looking down at her plate, she sighed. “In fact … this now looks as disgusting to me as it does to you, Al. Come on. We’ll load our pockets with cookies and eat on the move.”

The torin got up and followed her to the counter. “I really hate being called Al,” he grumbled. He detoured toward the dextro section, ignoring the cowering staff, all of whom shuffled toward the back of the kitchen, clutching one another like terrified ducklings.

“What do you want me to call you?” she shouted after him. “I would have thought Specimen Alpha lacked a certain warmth, but I can call you by your full name if you like.” When she saw Miranda and Kelly still standing at the table, she didn’t need to fake the disdain that pulled at her, weighing her down.

She focused back on her partner in crime just in time to see Al shoot a glare over his shoulder at her.

_Not pathetic, indeed. There might be some fight left in the ol’ boy yet. Good, he’ll need it._

A second later, the snipe she’d thrown at Miranda came back to haunt her and the grin died, dropping from her lips like a moth hitting a bug zapper.

_Bang him until he can’t see straight? Did I just make a purchase my credit chit can’t cover? Sweet baby Jesus, give me strength._

Damn, it had been a long, long time since she last pulled out the old weapon. At least it wasn’t crawling all over that slimy C-Sec asshat in Chora’s Den. Despite the churning of her gut, she grinned, remembering the horror on Sparky’s face. The smile faded as the memory clouded over and pulled away. Why? What did she and Sparky find that Miranda deemed unfit?

_Focus! No, this isn’t climbing on Harkin, this is so much more important. There’s so much more to lose if you fuck it up._

That was true. If she’d fucked up the act with Harkin, all they would have lost was time trying to find evidence against Saren. If she couldn’t pull this one off, if she chickened out or freaked out … it meant Al’s life. She harboured not a single doubt that Miranda and her employers were mercenary enough to kill him in the name of controlling her. Hopefully, she could be mercenary enough to flip it around on them.

It came down to strength. She’d need every sort and variety of strength that she could find to go through with her plan. Sugar couldn’t hurt either. A half dozen peanut butter cookies and two bananas found their way into her pockets, then she returned to the threshold to wait for her companion.

Miranda glided past, looking coolly very-nearly-affronted, her expression practically whispering, ‘I could force you to go back to your room. You’re just very lucky I don’t.’ Shepard both envied and
pitied her for living governed by that level of control.

Shepard gave Kelly a wink then jerked her head, calling the psychologist over. “Just in case Miranda’s right, make sure to dress in patient sweats and a t-shirt as soon as you get back to your quarters. No uniform. Have your emergency bug-out kit ready. Arm yourself but with something you can hide up your sleeve. No guns. You need to blend in with the patients, and come straight to my room as fast as you can without running. Pass the word to Liara and Vincent to do the same. No one else. Okay?”

Kelly stared into Shepard’s eyes for long seconds, then gave her a single nod before hurrying after Miranda.

“Are you coming, or do I need to call emergency services?” Shepard shouted toward the kitchen as she watched Miranda and Kelly get in the elevator. When the door closed behind them, she turned, smacking face first into the torin’s arm. Sighing, she looked up at the bag of goodies he held cradled in one arm. The smirk crawled back over her lips as she moved on to meet his eyes. “Did you find everything you need? Would you like carry out service for that, sir?”

Looking into the bag, he nodded. “They had a lot of food I haven’t seen in two cycles.”

She held out an arm to usher him over the threshold. “Yes, well, my raids are always limited to what I can cram through the vent.” Where Miranda and Kelly had turned left, she led Al right, following the corridor that ran the full five hundred metre width of the station. The entire place seemed oddly quiet, even for evening shift. Apparently the organization appreciated a certain work ethic, because the hallways and offices usually bustled twelve to fourteen hours a day. Right then, however, it appeared everyone had hurried home to see the game. Or they were warned away from the hallways thanks to the presence of two zombified lab specimens with possible emotional and behavioural issues.

Shepard shook her head. No, there definitely had to be a big game on somewhere.

Focusing on the task before them, namely escaping the station, Shepard opened her omnitool, sizing the screen too small to be visible to the cameras. “See this right here?” she asked, pointing to it. “This is the big plan … the master plan … what is going to get us past all the security and off this station.”

The turian leaned down to peer at the display, studied it for a moment, then whispered, “I don’t see anything. What is this?”

She grinned and nodded, then pointed to three words embedded in the gibberish on the screen.

He squinted, ducking down to read them, then looked at her. “Follow your lead?” he whispered. A turian curse rumbled through both larynges, setting the hair on the back of her neck on end. “There’s no plan, is there?” He stopped, looked around for a moment, then turned to place himself between her and the nearest camera. As he stared down at her, she could practically see the wheels turning behind his eyes.

Before he spoke, he stepped in close, his voice barely loud enough for her to make out his words. “You’ve just been baiting Miranda with a fake escape plan? You think she’s going to act to get you out of here before you can bring the whole place crashing down around her ears?” His mandibles spread, and he let out a harsh laugh.

She nodded and gave him a prickly, fake smile. “Exactly, the trick is going to be getting everyone
“else out, too.” She called up her door hacking program. “This will get the cell doors open when the
time comes—all of them—but we’re going to have to split up … each take half.” After sending the
file over their link, she sent him a second. “The biotics are in these rooms here. I think you should
go after them. Hopefully being rescued by another biotic will engender trust. And then the last set
of coordinates is our rendezvous. We don’t want to go together, or else we’ll just get caught.”

He nodded. “Better off moving in small groups, taking to the station’s infrastructure.” Looking up,
he stopped and turned a slow circle. “Where are we going? I didn’t get a chance to finish my dinner
thanks to someone shorting out half her brain.” As if to emphasize his words, his belly growled. He
frowned, his brow plates dropping. “And what was that about, exactly?”

“Sorry about your dinner.” Shepard chuckled and bumped him with her elbow. “Come on, let’s
keep walking.” She sighed and shrugged. “As for abandoning your dinner … Miranda would have
sat there and stared at me with the eyebrow doing its …” She wriggled her fingers just above her
eye. “… thing, if we’d stayed. Besides, tonight is mostly about getting you out of that hole, and see
how well you move … how strong you are.” She turned off her omnitool and shoved her fingers
into her front pockets, pulling her shoulders up tight in a shrug that never relaxed. “And I need to
show you something. Well, and talk to you about something.”

“What?” Al trotted a couple of strides to catch up with her. Leaning forward, he twisted around to
look down into her face, his eyes almost white in the light. “How about you start with why you
shorted out half the tech rebuilding your brain?”

Shepard let out a long breath. “I set off the timer.” She shrugged. “That’s it.”

She could see him working through what she’d said to what she hadn’t … struggling to find all the
pieces.

“Timer? You did it so Miranda would go to her employer and tell them that they need to move
before you either kill yourself or remember the stuff they’re keeping from you?” He nodded and
turned around, continuing down the corridor. “So, where are we going?” he asked at normal
volume. It seemed deafening.

Her mouth twitched, a smile teasing at the corners, but then she met his stare, and her stomach
flipped over. As much as she’d grown attached to him over the week, she didn’t know if she still
possessed what it took to pull off her plan.

“You’ll just have to find out,” she said at last. A few metres down the corridor, she led him into an
elevator. Metal only halfway up the walls and doors, the elevator offered a view out through
reinforced windows in the upper half. “You’re going to want to keep your eyes open for this part,”
she said, the tiny smile tugging her lips a little wider. “It’s pretty awesome.”

Four floors up, the lift cleared the lower half of the structure and entered a wide section of nothing
but girders, graphene sheeting, and force fields. The effect felt like shooting through the stars on a
rail. At the top, Shepard stopped the lift. When the chime sounded, the VI announcing their arrival,
and the doors opened, the sensation yanked her back to her zero G training graduation. The floors
were dark grey non-slip decking, virtually disappearing into the deep black, diamond studded
magic of space.

“They call this level The Summit, and I can see why,” she said. Standing there felt like being
poised at the top of a mountain that reached all the way up into the heavens. Shepard felt her
nerves and the slight squelch in her stomach calm. If she could go through with her plan anywhere,
it would be there … everything she hoped to get back just over her shoulder, just beyond her reach
… her hope of salvation gleaming like a silver and black falcon a couple hundred metres away.
A crooked smile managed to find its way back onto her lips, shifting them a little to one side when Al asked, “Do you remember your first time?”

As eagerly as a smart ass quip leapt to answer him, she knew what he meant and nodded. “Of course. I’ll never forget that moment … the stark terror, the wonder … the nausea. Then an all new terror, that I’d be the only one to fill my helmet with puke.” She chuckled. Nothing ever topped that first space walk … whether for the sheer miracle of a thin suit and helmet being all that stood between her and the emptiness between the stars … or the amount of vomit in her helmet. Luckily her stomach got one look at the wonder and shut the hell up.

She grinned as Al let out a long, easy breath. “Awesome isn’t it? This is actually the station’s power generation.” Closing her fingers around his talons, she led him along one of the many maintenance catwalks all the way to the terrifyingly thin layer of graphene solar paneling between them and space. After staring out for a moment, he looked down at her.

“Awesome is definitely the word, Shepard.” His mandibles fluttered. “But why did you bring me all the way out here?”

Cocking her head a little, she swallowed a tight wad of nerves and whispered, “Look to the left. At the end of the docking bay.” She followed her own instructions, unable to stop herself from grinning like an idiot as she caught sight of the sun gleaming off a sleek dorsal curve and wing-mounted thrusters.

Just like falling in love.

Al stepped closer to the window and leaned over the wide, flat railing. When he spoke, his voice resonated, echoing around the shell-like space. “She looks like the Normandy, but what … fifty … sixty percent larger?”

Shepard turned from the ship, one eyebrow cocking a little as a soft, crooked smile tugged at one side of her mouth. “Yeah, just like the Normandy. Isn’t she a beauty?” Savouring the gleam that settled in Al’s eyes, the way his mandibles lifted and his neck arched, Shepard followed the lines of his face, made all the more stark by the play of light and shadow in the dimly lit space.

Now that’s the way a turian should look.

Al turned slightly and pulled his hood back away from his face when he saw her watching him. “Shepard?”

She reached up and touched his cheek. They’d removed a good quarter of his face to get to the implants, leaving behind terrible pits and fissures; healed but ragged. Laying her hands on the rim
of his cowl, she let out a tiny, breathy sigh. “Do you trust me?” she whispered after a moment.

After a moment, he nodded. “From the first moment I saw you, the fire blazing in your eyes, every particle of you burning with outraged honour, I could see exactly who and what you were. A liar.” His chuckle rolled over her, rumbling and kind. “But one who believed in doing what was right, even if it meant breaking the rules.”

She chuckled and ran a gentle hand over the side of his face. “I was so angry, felt such betrayal.”

“You remember?” His tone, although still too soft to travel past them, practically trembled with … what was it? Uncertainty? Wonder?

She chuckled and cocked her head. “Well, we met a week ago, didn’t we?” She winked, then took a deep breath. “We’ve come a long way in a relatively short time. At least … it feels like a short time.”

He leaned down, his voice raspy as he whispered, “Shepard, why are we standing close enough to hold a credit chit between us? I’m following your lead, but … .” He cocked his head a little.

Shepard nodded, packing down her nerves and the churning in her gut as she leaned in closer. She needed to keep emotion out of it. Stuff everything down and focus on the goal … the cold mechanics. Getting into that mercenary, it’s just a body … just a very effective weapon, headspace had once been second nature. Even though it felt a hundred thousand klicks and years away, she needed to get there. If she didn’t, she’d never be able to go through with it. It felt too much like betrayal.

Taking a slow, deep breath, she steadied herself and whispered, “Right now, you are etched in stone under the liabilities column on Miranda’s ledger.” She stared into his eyes until she saw agreement register there. “She is working very hard to keep me from forming attachments to anyone who doesn’t work for this organization. When the fighting breaks out, and it will, she’ll have every gun under her command aimed at you.”

His brow plates and mandibles worked slowly for a few seconds. She saw him put it together. He nodded, just once, then lifted a hand, skating the backs of his talons along her jaw. “And you think this will shift me over to leverage? If Miranda believes she can control you through your attachment to me … .” A faint sneer twisted his features. She knew the idea of being under anyone else’s protection … anyone else being responsible for his fate would rankle. Still, he laced his talons into her curls.

“She lets you live long enough to get on that ship, yes. Then, our first stop, you go on your way.” Tightening her grip on his tunic, she pulled him down closer and pressed her cheek against his. “I know you’re proud, but it’s not charity. It’s not saving poor Specimen Alpha because he can’t save himself. It’s partners, making sure they both get out. You said you trusted me, knew what I was from the first. Well, I saw what you are at the end, and I need you at my back until we’re out of here and clear.” She pressed her lips against the upper plate of his mouth. “I know you can’t stay there once we’re free, but for now … ?”

Pulling back, Shepard shrugged and gave him a slow, suggestive grin, her hands trailing down to his belly. “Do you have a better plan? I’m willing to entertain suggestions. Well, providing they’re huge, noisy, messy, and guaranteed to drive Miranda crazy. I do have a reputation to maintain, after all.”

“And you need to keep shouting and waving so she doesn’t see what’s going on in the silence.” He stepped back, large hands cradling her head, and for a second she thought his answer might be a
quick twist. But then his thumb talons caressed her cheeks and his hands slipped down to her waist. “It’s been a long time since I last did the shoved into a corner, thumping myself against my partner routine, but I think I remember how it works.”

Her fingers moved to the fasteners up the front of his tunic, opening it high enough to get at his leggings. “It’s going to have to look good,” she said, glancing toward the cameras without moving her head, “but let’s keep it in our plates, okay?”

He grabbed her, spinning her around, then reached around to undo her trousers. He leaned down close, his breath right next to her ear. “You do think a lot of yourself, don’t you, Shepard?” He chuckled and pushed them off her hips before releasing her.

She stepped clear of her trousers, then bent over to snatch them from the floor, draping them over the railing. His jab helped ease the knot tied in her guts. It took her back to one of her missions as an N6. She and a partner had spent nearly a month pretending to be married pirates while they infiltrated the gang: no privacy, packed into a little freighter … a dozen horny pirates leering at them. Neither one of them had the slightest interest in the other, so they spent their time ‘making love’ locked in a worst pun competition and whispering bad jokes in one another’s ears. The easy camaraderie got her through that mission.

A warm smile kissed her face as she looked up at Al. Thank the great glowing asses of the Enkindlers for him taking it there. It was a mission, the torin pressed up against her was a fellow operative.

As she turned in his grip, she ran her hands up her body, stretching her arms over her head with a little flip of her hands at the end.

Celebrate it and flaunt it, Janey. Celebrate it and flaunt it.

“Where’d you go?” he asked. Gloves off, he slid his hands up her body to snag her fingers and then pulled her in, sheltering her inside his cloak.

She shook her head and slid her hands up the front of his tunic to rest on either side of his keel. Nodding back toward the railing, she said, “Lift me up. I don’t think you’ve got what it takes to hang onto me the whole time.”

He shook his head, but boosted her up to sit on her trousers. Pressing her knees open, he stepped between them. “Take your shots, Shepard.” Gentle talons caressed her neck then travelled down her body. “You any good at this, or am I going to have to carry the performance?”

Despite knowing that he was teasing, she met his eyes with an honest nod. “At faking it? Absolutely. If the Alliance needed someone to get in and out without firing a shot, they came to me.” She stroked the backs of her fingers along the underside of his fringe. “I once kissed and fondled my way through ten floors of guards to steal a weapon prototype.”

Closing her eyes, she brushed soft kisses along his mandible and caressed his face with her cheek. “It’s sort of ironic that their go-to seduction expert had never taken the plunge.” Her brow furrowed with a deep scowl. “At least, I don’t recall ever making love to anyone. Doesn’t seem like something one should forget, but who knows with all of the walls Miranda stuck inside my head.” She slipped her arms around his neck as he jerked away, coaxing him back.

“You’re … .” Taking her face between his hands, he lowered his brow to touch hers. “Shepard … we don’t even have to pretend to do this. Does Miranda know that Al would be your first? It gives her too strong a hand.” Without lifting his head, he threw his cloak over the railing to cover her. “If
she knows, that could throw me from leverage straight to weapon.”

“It’s okay. First stop you’ll get off and vanish. She’ll have no hold … imagined or otherwise over me.” She tilted her face up to kiss him. “I’m not leaving anyone behind in this hell hole. If I have to fight our way out of here, I will, but that means at least some of their victims getting hurt, so let’s do this. If I know Miranda, she’s already gathering her forces to come after me.” She grinned and kissed him again. “I’m pretty sure she only let us get this far because she thought I was joking. Right about now she’s staring at the monitors with an expression of horror on her face—which I’m sort of sad to be missing.”

He let out a throaty sigh, his subvocals rumbling unhappily, at least until she grabbed the front of his tunic again and gave him a little shake.

“No.” She tucked her face in against his neck. “Don’t take this there. I’m no more some fragile little bird that needs to be pitied and sheltered than you are. I’m a fucking Spectre.” She slapped his side. “Come on, or are you worried that you’re going to get tired and fall asleep halfway through?”

He chuckled. “I don’t suppose human mating involves punching one another in the jaw?” His hand reached down between them, being very careful not to touch her as he aped moving her underwear aside. “Because suddenly, I really want to do that.”

Damn, he was going to pussyfoot … . A sharp snort of laughter snuck out. She tried to crush it, but then another leaped out right behind it, and a fit of giggles took hold.

*Focus for God’s sake.*

She lifted her hips into him and wrapped her arms around his neck, shoving her face in against his cowl to stifle her laughter.

“What … ?” He stiffened and started to pull away.

She drew him back and wrapped herself around him more tightly. “Pussyfoot … you wouldn’t understand. Just keep going, dammit. I’ll get the giggles under control in a second.”

“What do cats’ feet … ?” he whispered, annoyance creeping in at the end.

“Oh, God,” she moaned as she gasped for air, fighting to get the ridiculous, hysterical laughter buttoned down even as she moved against him, working to make it look convincing despite having to hide her face. The elevator chimed and began to descend, killing her mirth in a half second flat. “Damn.”

“It’s beginning;” he whispered, his breath a mid-August breeze against her ear. “You did it. You set off the timer.”

“Yeah, we’re going to have to make this fast and furious.” She sped up, flipping her face and movements from the ‘oh god, I just want to feel you inside me’ phase to the ‘holy fuck, yes! Yes!’ phase. Gripping wads of his tunic in both hands, she arched backwards. Al sped up, matching her, his bony pelvis hitting hard enough that she was pretty sure she wouldn’t be able to walk properly for a week just due to impact bruising. Bending over her, he lapped and nipped along the curve of her neck, the points of his teeth pinching just hard enough to make her jump before dragging over the sensitive skin, leaving an icy burn in his wake.

She closed her eyes and focused on the performance. Right gasp here, proper movement there. Hearing the elevator ascending once more, she called out, preparing to fake her gasping release.
“Now! Oh god, yes … .”

His hand slipped between them again, not touching other than the odd, accidental bump as he ‘helped her along’.

Letting out a cry that echoed embarrassingly loud in the barren space, she stiffened and counted to fifteen before collapsing into his arms. Drawing her in tight, he thrust straight into the end game of his own performance, although he whispered, “Five … six … seven ships incoming. Saw the corridor flashes near the relay.”

Shepard nodded and buried her face in his neck, nuzzling the horrible bits and pieces of tech sticking out through his hide. “Wait to hit the peak when Miranda gets out of the elevator. It’s on its way back up. Might as well make her good and damned uncomfortable since we’re at it.”

A flash of discomfort with her mercenary tactics and level of bitchiness ignited but burned out almost instantly. Squeezing her eyes closed, she focused on the goal. Get the hell out alive. Get Al and the other subjects out alive. Nothing else mattered, not her tender sensibilities, not Miranda’s feelings or discomfort … none of it. They’d brought the twitchy bitch back to stop the unstoppable evil, and dammit, they could live with the fucking consequences of their own damned mistake.

He chuckled, holding her along the side of his keel, his body and his cloak sheltering her, keeping this one small thing, this strange little secret held carefully between them. Shepard smiled, a warm, tender smile for her battered friend … the last person in the entire galaxy she’d ever thought she would come to care about.

The elevator arrived on their floor, all four of its occupants standing in a loose sort of cluster, facing the center of elevator, their eyes practically bolted to the floor. As the door opened, it chimed and the VI said, “Arrival. The summit.”

Shepard snorted, smothering her laughter in Al’s chest as he began to rumble as well … the timing of that passionless voice just too damned perfect. He covered his laughter by letting out a long, deep guttural roar and slamming into her a handful of times before sagging a little against the railing.

“Oh, no plates over here,” she grumbled under her breath. “I’m going to have chafing. My poor thighs.”

A low, susurrus of laughter vibrated against her. She smacked him and hissed, “Stop it. We can’t both be cackling like idiots. Come on.” Still, it took biting her lip and several deep breaths to compose herself enough to pull away. Taking Al’s face in both hands, she kissed him long and deep, not allowing her eyes to be drawn over to the awkward shuffling going on at the elevator door.

He slid his talons through her hair and gave back as good as he got. A first rate performance.

Miranda cleared her throat once, then again at quadruple volume. Then she took ten strides forward. “Shepard! Enough! You aren’t a sixteen-year-old out behind the prom. Seven enemy ships just arrived at the relay. We’re evacuating the station.”

“So worth waiting a week and writing two tunneling and three hacking programs,” Shepard said, lacing a deep throaty purr through the words. She slid down off the railing, taking shelter in his cloak as she slipped her trousers back on.

Once she was decent, she stepped out of Al’s cover and made a show of tucking in her shirt.
“Miranda.” She nodded toward the ships on the other side of the graphene sheeting. They were still too far away to see, but close enough for the sensors to set off the alarms. Shepard winced as the blaring siren echoed back at her from everywhere. She waited for Al to get himself organized, then slipped her hand into his talons and led him toward the elevator.

“So, how long do we have?”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so this chapter has been rewritten so much that I can't keep it in my brain any more. Shepard took the plan I had for the thing and flipped it on its ear. She just refused to cooperate with my version. And she was right ... this is truer to her and to Al and it gives them both a ton more agency. But, it is also is terrifyingly Jane 'Sassy' Shepard and so I have hesitated for over a day, terrified to post it.

So you, lovely readers on AO3 are my guinea pigs. LOL Oh, that's terrible, but true. Was Sassy right? Or have I listened to a mad woman and made a terrible, terrible mistake?

Oh, and thanks for reading, you know I love you all. And sorry for being so late. I blame it completely on her >>> points to Sassy.
Mass Effect - Future Complex Chapter Twenty Nine

Chapter Summary

Garrus and the unfolding plot of doooooooom

Chapter Notes

(A-N: Thanks to my readers and reviewers. Just a quick note this time ... I am adopting a post them as they're ready policy, so if you aren't following, you might want to check and make sure there haven't been multiple updates. *hugs* to all who like the hugs. )

Gro-Po: Short form of Ground Pounder. I borrowed this term from Babylon 5's name for ground operating Space Marines because it has a no-nonsense sort of toughness about it that appeals to me. Vega is sooooo a Gro-Po. :D

19 Days ASR

"Well?" Garrus asked when Nyreen didn't answer immediately. "Why are you here?"

"I stowed away before you left Omega," the tarin replied. She crouched, talons poised, her gaze restless as if she expected attack to come at her from every direction. She snapped her head around to nod at the closet. "Get dressed. Fast. We need to get out of here." Three loping strides carried her to Martin's side. "That lock scrambled, kid?"

Martin straightened and shut off his omnitool, plunging them back into almost complete darkness. "Yeah, they'll have to cut their way through."

Garrus straightened, and opened his mouth to get some answers, but before he could utter a sound, his answer came in the form of muffled gunfire.

Nyreen cocked her head, an alert, avian jerk to one side than the other. "Sounds like they've made their way to the engineering deck." She spun, stared at him for a half second then threw up her hands. "Why are you still standing there? Blue Suns are gunning their way through your ship."

"Blue Suns?" Again? Garrus sprang into action, shaking off the last vestiges of shock. He threw on a leggings and a light tunic, then wriggled into his armour's underlayer. "Fill me in," he demanded, heart beating fast and light as he settled the yoke over his cowl.

"About ten minutes ago, two Archangel ships pulled up alongside of the Passch," Martin told him. "They didn't hail or respond to recog codes, so Cpt. L'Tsai called general quarters, but it was too late. The Stinger ripped down our shields and blew open the shuttle bay. That took out our gro-pos before they knew what hit them. Then the Suns boarded and started gunning their way up through the decks."

Garrus locked his girdle into place, his extremities buzzing as adrenaline splashed through his
bloodstream. He shook it off, focusing on getting out there to save as many of his crew as he could. Casting a quick glance toward Nyreen, he said, "Now you. Where were you for all this?"

The tarin flicked her mandibles at him, the only sign of being put off by his suspicion. "I stowed away in a medical locker. Came out when I heard the stinger fire and headed straight for the ducts." Stabbing a thumb at Martin, she said, "Stopped to get the kid, and here we are." She paced a few steps one way then back the other, pausing every round to press her head to the door, listening.

"But why are you on my ship? You're supposed to be seeing to the deployment of our troops," he demanded, stopping to listen for a half-second as the gunfire grew louder.

"Yes, well, while you were spreading Archangel troops across the entire known galaxy, you weren't protecting the most valuable asset Archangel possesses," Nyreen said, her words a hiss pressed between clenched teeth underscored by a deep, disapproving subvocal rumble. "I decided that someone needed to, and I didn't know who I could trust in the organization, if anyone."

"Our facilities are our most important assets," Garrus said, lifting his torso armour over his head.

"Seriously?" Nyreen stared at him, her mandibles spread wide, then arched her neck and glanced over at Martin. "Is he for real?"

Martin grinned, a grim slash of teeth across the tight planes of his face. "I have to answer with both, 'I'm afraid so', and 'thank God, yes'."

Kandros chuffed. "It's you, General," the tarin said, pacing to the door again. "You are Archangel."

Garrus mirrored her. Faint gunfire. It sounded like it came from the CIC, maybe the elevator.

A fierce growl rumbled through her sub-vocals. "We're running out of time. Hurry up with that armour. Once they've secured the ship, they'll come for you." As he settled his armour over his carapace, Nyreen stepped closer to eyeball him and then the hole in the ceiling. "This could be a problem."

Garrus sealed it in place and boosted it up to settle comfortably over his shoulders. "As long as we stick to primary ducts, we'll be fine. I've run boarding drills through these ducts fifty times over the cycles." He jumped slightly as gunfire erupted just on the other side of the door. "However, these bulkheads aren't completely bulletproof. Both of you, helmets on, and get up into that duct. I don't trust these mercs to avoid putting a bullet through the hull."

A fierce grin spread his mandibles, lifting them high as the gunfire dragged on. At least his people were putting up a hell of a fight. "How many Blue Suns?" he asked, grabbing his sidearm and hanging it on his hip. Maybe if they opened the door, they could hit the mercs from both sides, take them down in the cross-fire. It was a hell of a lot faster to get to the CIC via the usual route than through the ducts. Besides, if they ran things smart, he could secure the crew deck and prevent the enemy coming in hard on their backsides when they took the CIC.

"Over a hundred, General." Nyreen shook her head. "We can't take them head on. Our best bet is to reach the CIC while they're still spread all over the ship."

"A hundred?" He nodded and dragged the chair over under the hole in his ceiling. "Helmet on, Kandros, and into the duct." He crooked a talon at Martin. "Move." He returned to the closet and yanked on his gauntlets before sealing the armour up his arm. "A hundred mercs to take out thirty
crew? Two stolen Archangel ships?" Perplexed, he gave his head a good, hard shake, as if that
could settle the thoughts into the correct order.

"It's not just about me," he said, certainty steel-plating his words. "The ships are the key. If they
wanted me dead, a bullet at any point in the last two cycles would have done it." He sealed his
armour up his other arm as he talked. "They could have ripped down the shields and blown
the Passch into pieces. No, they're after Archangel's most valuable resource, but it's not just me."

The picture solidified inside his head the moment before it sent his gut crashing down to slosh
around in his boots. Shoving the helpless dread and nausea aside, he holstered Ingrid and his new
assault rifle on his back. The gunfire outside continued as he stood next to the chair, laced his
talons, and held them up for Martin to step into.

He shot a glance over his shoulder at Nyreen. "People see us doing what no one else is willing to.
We've shaved the gangs down to twenty percent their previous numbers on Omega and cut crime to
its lowest rate in the history of that damned rock. Not to mention putting a hell of a lot of slavers
out of business."

Nyreen let out a rumble of understanding, but it was Martin who put voice to the issue as he
clambered up onto the chair. "They're going to set Archangel up for the destruction on Tuchanka,"
the kid said as he stepped into Garrus's hand and hopped up to grab the edge of the panel.

Nyreen waved off the general's help, jumping up onto the chair, then springing easily to grab the
duct. A quick swing and she disappeared feet first into the darkness. "So, we take out some turian
troops, a hierarch, a general, and a bunch of innocent krogan," she whispered from above.

Snatching Shepard's picture from his pack, he stuffed it into his armour. "Archangel becomes
public enemy number one."

"But only two of our ships are here." Martin looked back, waiting for direction. "Where are the rest
of them?"

"Let's move. The gunfire is slowing, and I doubt it's because our people have taken out all the
Suns." Garrus pulled the chair away from the hole in the ceiling. "Seal that up. Bear left to junction
L-C-2 then right. At the next junction ... left." He acted out the directions as he gave them. "Ten
metres along there is a ladder up. At the top take the branch to the right. Follow it around twenty
metres or so. Another ladder up. Follow that shaft right to the hatch that will drop you down to the
right of the elevator. I'll clear this deck then come up through the elevator. Be careful."

"You'll ... what? Alone?" Martin asked, his whisper an arrow slicing past Garrus's head.

"I have Droney." He lifted his wrist a little. "Shepard's omnitool." Garrus sighed at the dagger that
followed the arrow, and shrugged. Martin could flail him about clinging to Shepard much, much
later. "Be careful," he said, his tone brooking no argument.

The two of them both glared at him, but then moved the panel back into place.

"Do you remember any of what he just said?" Martin whispered.

"Shut up and go that way."

Garrus directed a worried scowl at the ceiling—they were going to end up lost in the ducts for a
week—then hurried to the door, listening. It sounded as though the fighting had moved to the crew
quarters. If he knew his people, they'd retreated to cover, drawing out the Suns' line. If so, he had a
good chance to clean up the stragglers and then hit them from behind.
Overriding Martin's hatchet job—the kid knew how to mess up a locking control—he popped the manual seal on the door then eased it open and peered through. The fight had indeed moved away from the center of the ship, leaving enough corpses in blue armour to force a furious grin onto his face. Shoving his shoulder into the door, he cued up the drone even as he pushed, waiting to activate it until he engaged.

He hadn't used Droney before … well, at least in combat. Sometimes he activated the stupid thing and just let it roam his quarters back at base or while on the Passch. It didn't make sense, but it felt like company without the intrusion of someone else trying to keep conversation going or making demands. Only Nihlus and his father managed to share the same space without making it arduous. Funny, that he still craved Shepard's company after two years despite … or perhaps because of … how arduous that company could be. She'd deny it, but she demanded everything … even in silence.

He peered around the door when he got it wide enough for his armour. Two Suns stood guard either side of the elevator, their backs to him. After spawning Droney right in front of them, he crept up behind the closest, dropping the turian silently, an omniblade shoved under his jaw. The drone shot rockets at the batarian on the other side, not as silent a diversion as Garrus would have hoped for, but his blade slipped in and ended the second merc's life before anyone came to investigate.

The rest of the back half of the deck was silent, so he ducked around the corner and headed for the port side crew quarters. Sporadic gunfire belched out from the other side. Behind him, he heard the chiming pop of Droney's timer running out. Why were the damned things timed anyway? Take enough damage, destroy them, sure … but … .

*Focus, Vakarian. You're on a timer.*

Taking cover on the blind side of the door, he palmed the control and sent Droney in ahead. When he heard the drone fire, he stepped through, his rifle firing a steady pattern of three as he took advantage of his few seconds of surprise. One eye glued on his shield indicator as projectiles ate away at it, he took stock of the situation. Putting down his second merc, Garrus counted fifteen Suns, none in cover, and at least two of his people crouched behind bunks.

"Friendly and drone just inside the threshold. Recog code beta! Hamster's favourite food?" he called. Another merc fell, his life leaking out onto the deck plating before Garrus finally had to duck down behind a couch. Not the best cover, bullets tore through the leather, punching past him. He glanced up over the back in time to see Droney take down a trooper. Two sentinels stood just outside the bunk room door. Damned tech armour. He really needed a set.

"Captain Munch cereal!" one of the Archangel soldiers called. She sounded young, wounded, and terrified. Still he heard an embarrassed sort of giggle follow the answer to his question.

Garrus shook his head. "Roger that." Another one of Shepard's ridiculous ideas, even if the random strangeness did make their recog codes almost impossible to fake. "Hold tight, I've got your back."

Cueing up an overload, he spotted the hotkey Shepard had set for his shield modification. Three hundred percent extra shields couldn't hurt. He tapped the interface, traded his rifle for his sidearm, and stood back up, striding forward, the pistol allowing him to close and finish them off with his omniblade.

The two soldiers popped out of of their hiding spots, hammering away at the mercs' backs as the Suns' turned to face the new, more deadly threat. As his overclocked shields failed, letting out a lightning-sharp crack, Garrus sent Droney to give his people some cover before he threw himself
behind the pool table.

Five Suns remained. Garrus took a few deep, quick breaths to saturate his system with oxygen. His legs trembled, and every body part he owned ached. Crawling through the ducts suddenly seemed a very appealing option.

*Okay, Vakarian. Five more bad guys. On three.*

By the time he counted to three, his regular shields had returned, and he ducked around the base of the pool table, strafing the Suns' legs with rounds. They crashed to the floor, firing at his position, but he'd already launched himself over the table to finish them off.

"Clear!" he called, sagging against the pool table a little. Damn, he needed to get himself back in shape and fast.

"General." The one who'd answered his recog code gave him a weary but relieved smile. "Sure glad to see you, sir."

He pushed himself up and nodded toward the door. "Ready to help me secure the deck?"

They saluted and took position a couple of metres behind him, on his flanks. The rest of the sweep consisted of two mercs in the head, four outside the main battery, and two stationed outside medbay. He counted thirty eight dead mercs and twelve of his people as they made their way through to medbay. The door had been scrambled … Kandros, no doubt, to protect the doc.

He banged on the door and then called, "Dr. N'Alin, you alive in there?"

A reply came back in the form of muffled yelling and metallic banging. Garrus sighed. Sounded like Nyreen had stuffed the doctor into the medical locker. A mixture of respect and annoyance greeted that thought. Kandros didn't do anything by halves. He'd yet to decide if that was a good thing.

He looked to his two battered crew. "See if you can get in there. Pull the doctor out of her locker, get your wounds treated, then keep this deck secure." After returning their salutes, he strode for the elevator. "I'm going to lock down the elevator door, so stay alert, but you shouldn't have too many visitors."

Five minutes later he locked down the elevator at the CIC, ensuring that it wouldn't move without override codes, then tried his comms. Nothing. He hadn't expected to get through. As much as he detested everything the Blue Suns stood for, he maintained a healthy respect for their professional attention to detail.

Taking a deep breath, he cued up both the shield boost and Droney, then sent a vague prayer that Nyreen and Martin had made it through and awaited his attack. He opened the door and sent the drone to the far side of the space, but stayed in cover inside the lift. His visor showed nearly thirty red blips.

"That's a hell of a lot of bad guys!" Martin yelled even as Garrus heard the heavy clunk of his frame armour hitting the deck.

"Shut up, idiot, and get into cover," Nyreen snapped, her subvocals exasperated.

Relief flooded Garrus's bloodstream, cool and a little giddy, and he chuckled, grateful to have been spared twenty minutes of them sniping at one another. Somethings were so much worse than bullets. Peering out, he saw them dash to cover behind the XO console.
All right, time to get his ship back. He stepped out and opened fire. The Suns didn't even notice him until his overload tore down the nearest centurion's shields and tech armour. Drony went down in a flash of heat and force, it's detonation throwing the enemy onto their asses.

Martin and Kandros moved up, taking cover behind new consoles. Both of them had opted for their assault rifles, whittling down the heavily shielded Suns with impressive efficiency. Between shots, he caught the shields around Martin's frame armour flare. He thought about shouting a warning not to be stupid, but then the cooldown on Drony pinged. By the time he respawned the drone, Martin charged, a gun in both hands.

_Damn, Kahri, the kid's gone and become an action hero._

Not having the advantage of the cutting edge armour, Garrus followed more sensibly, clearing the left hand side of the space from partial cover, moving up from console to console. Drony distinguished itself well, chalking up five kills with it's missiles. When they cleared the main deck around the galaxy map, he stepped out into the open.

"That's what … ?" He scanned the floor, pausing to put a couple of bullets through helmets. "... thirty more. Thirty eight on the crew deck. That could mean as many as thirty two more of these bastards." He nodded toward the side door to the cabins at the back of the deck. "Go clean out the war room and loop back through science and the computer core. I'll go up and clear the bridge and check the airlock."

He strode off without waiting for their reply. He needed a minute to regain control. Adrenaline surged through his veins making his pulse pound at his temples and throat—a drumbeat that called for revenge. It called to go back to the bodies lying on the ground and snap their necks with his bare hands. How dare they? How dare they invade his ship and kill people who wanted nothing more than to protect the galaxy from a terrifying doom?

_And for nothing more than credits. Fucking, spirit-damned credits. As if even one of these people wasn't worth every blood-soaked coin the Suns had received._

Clenching his rifle so tight that his knuckles ached, he stalked up the center aisle. When he reached the stairs, he called out, "Anyone alive up there?" daring anyone to answer. When no one replied, he let out a sigh of combined regret and relief and launched Drony into the bridge.

Silence. Bracing himself, he climbed, sweeping the assault rifle back and forth. Two dead Suns, and one dead alpha shift pilot. He closed Pirelli's eyes, then leaned over her body, scanning the open monitors. Ship was still on course for Tuchanka.

Gunfire from aft spun him around. Once the ship was secure, he could worry about everything other than being shot in the back.

He cleared the airlock, then raced down to the door leading back to three small state rooms, a washroom, then the computer core and the science lab. Suns lay strewn down the corridor. Someone had gone down fighting hard. He picked his way through the tangle of corpses, finishing off enemy soldiers that still drew breath.

Black ice settled in his core; mercy a concept for other days and other places. As he waded through the carnage, he saw only two Archangel soldiers. They'd stood fast and acquitted themselves with honour and pride. No leader could have asked for more. And he would see every last Sun bleed for the cowardly ambush.

The right hand door at the end of the corridor opened, Blue Suns spilling out of the port-side head.
They pushed and jostled one another, laughing as they imitated a woman begging for mercy.

The first one, a human by his voice, laughed and elbowed a turian by his side. "Let's get the rest of this deck cleared. Maybe we can find some more entertainment."

"Did you hear the way that bitch screamed? Almost enough to make you want to give her something to scream about," the turian said, his voice flanged, a callous rumble of disdain colouring his subvocals.

"No, I didn't hear her," Garrus said, spawning the drone at the end of corridor, just beyond them. "What did she sound like?" He opened fire, a cyclone roaring down on them with such force that they quailed, not even reaching for their weapons before he stepped over their bodies to mow down their comrades still inside the washroom.

He found L'Tsai laying propped up against the back wall. For a moment, the rage spilled over into a deep, rumbling keen that would have sent any turians who heard it fleeing for their lives. When he put two bullets in the last begging merc, her eyes flew open, and she scrambled backwards for a moment before her gaze latched onto the gold wings on the breast of his armour.

Crouching before her, he hesitated, trying to find words, then merely held out his hand. The fact that her armour appeared to be intact held his horror at bay despite its grip on his vocal chords.

She took his talons, her grip shaking but firm. "It's okay, General," she said, her voice hoarse and thick with phlegm. "They were saving me for later." She tugged against his grip. "Help me up. We have a ship to get under control."

Garrus stood, pulling her up with him. "Glad I got here in time." His arms jumped almost straight out, talons flailing a little when she stepped into him, slipping her arms around him to hug him tight. "Ahh … Captain?"

"I am too." Stepping back, she cleared her throat, her eyes glancing at his faceplate, then quickly away. "I need a gun." She shook her head and strode over to tear a Locust from the hand of a fallen, but still live merc. Three hard, vicious kicks to his head stopped his breathing and she stepped over him. "What still needs to be secured?"

"I sent Nyreen Kandros … ." He held up his hands, palms out to halt her question. "And Martin around the other way. They should be to the science lab by now." Sure enough, he heard gunfire, the sound muffled enough to be at least a couple of compartments away. He stepped up to the door into the computer core when L'Tsai turned to keep an eye on their backs.

The computer core stood empty. The Suns holding it must have either fled from the sound of their buddies in the head being taken out, or ran toward the comm room. Most likely the latter considering the relative tactical worth of the two rooms. He hurried through to the door as the gunfire heated up.

Before he overrode the lock down, Garrus shouted through. "Hey! Kandros! Kid! I'm on the other side of the science lab door and coming in." He bypassed the lock. "Don't shoot me."

Martin's laugh came back an octave too high and manic. "Roger that, General. Recog code gamma?"

"Illogical egg repair men," he replied, then added, "Seriously. Don't shoot me." He reached up to palm the control, but hesitated. "You sound like you're flipping your shit. You okay, kid?"

"All dead, General," he said as if it were an answer. Again that laugh. It crawled beneath Garrus's
plates like maggots. Gunfire. "Well, almost all. Oh! All the king's horses."

Sucking in a deep breath, Garrus palmed the door control, taking cover against the wall as it slid open. A Blue Sun flew backwards through the portal straight into a hail of projectiles from L'Tsai's SMG. When he hit the floor, she opened fire into his helmet.

Garrus jumped away from the splashback. "Enough, Captain, you got him." He stepped over the pulped mess in the door and sent the drone in, distracting the Suns from what appeared to be three points of fire. When the last merc fell, Garrus strode straight over to Martin and grabbed the kid by the shoulders.

Martin didn't look up at Garrus, instead, he stared down at the blood covering his armour. He'd seen battle before, brought down mercs on Omega, but Garrus always held him back, keeping him in a sniper position and reporting the enemy's movements … an obvious choice given the kid's augmented vision and Garrus's promise to take care of him.

"You holding your shit together, kid?" Garrus asked, trying to get Martin to look up. "I still need you. We have to try to get around their comm lockout, or jamming … or whatever."

Martin nodded. "Not locked out, General." He gasped a little, a fish out of water. "They destroyed all the comm equipment in the war room. Even the QEC is obliterated. All personal comms are jammed." Finally taking a deep breath, the slack mask of shock lifted from the kid's face. "I might be able to jury rig something from the console on the CIC." He pushed past, grinning as he spotted L'Tsai. "Captain! Good to see you."

"And it's good to see you, General," a gravelly voice said from Garrus's right. Mi'khal limped around a biostatis unit, leaning heavily on Nyreen's shoulders. He nodded toward the tarin. "This one was sure you'd get yourself killed."

Nyreen rumbled deep in her throat. "Good thing he's as lucky as he is stubborn."

"I made it as far as the war room through the ducts," Mi'khal said, diverting the subject. "They changed our course, set it to ram the bomb site, General." He let out a shaky sigh, his hands doing a little, helpless flip. "Add the detonation of the Passch's drive core to that bomb, not even the evacuation site will survive. The blast radius will take out everything for five hundred klicks in every direction … the fireball, three times that."

Garrus nodded and turned to follow Martin, the thunderstorm brewing along his spine demanding release … satisfaction of some variety. "Then let's get this fucking ship under control." Back at the galaxy map, he opened the command console, trying to get a handle on what was going on. All sensors and communications remained dead. They needed to be able to talk back and forth if nothing else.

Ten minutes into the epic battle of general versus sabotaged systems, Martin gave voice and action to Garrus's frustration by punching the communications terminal. "Fuck, I can't break through their jamming on our personal comms."

"Aren't you supposed to be our resident expert?" Nyreen ran over and pushed in next to him, her talons poised just above the console. "I'm a sentinel, not an engineer. What am I looking at?"

"It's no use, Kandros. You can't toss a lift grenade at it." He pushed her aside. "If we had a day or two, I could fix it. We're down to just over two hours." Martin moaned and dove back into the station's guts. "We're so screwed."
Garrus scowled, helplessness rolled through his bones, churning into the fury until the volatile mixture formed a magma flow beneath his plates. "Stow the fucking bickering!" he snapped, then bit down on the rage, packing it down to simmer just beneath his plates. He took a deep breath through a tight throat. "We need to contact the planet. If we can't do it from here, we'll have to take shuttles out, get free of the jamming."

Absent-mindedly, he reached up to rub an itch on the side of his head only to smack his talons into his helmet. After staring at them a second, he let them fall back to the console. Even if both shuttles remained functional, they still had the Stinger and the other heavy frigate to contend with. How would they get past the other two ships?

Closing his eyes, he saw Victus's ships sitting in the orbit above the bomb site, his forces fighting on the ground … Herros and the rest of Victus's people trying to evacuate the krogan … Wrex charging the line of … no one … the Suns would pull back before detonation. Then the Passeh entered the picture, streaking toward the surface, no one at the helm.

He opened his eyes, shoving the fear down next to his anger, covering both in thick layers of frost. His control needed to hold. "Forget the comms. Get down to the shuttle bay, clear it, secure it, and see if we can use the shuttle." Turning on L'Tsai and Mi'khal, he nodded for them to follow, then strode for the bridge. After three steps, the clock ticking down inside his head, throbbing alongside his pulse, threw him into double time. He took the stairs to the bridge in two leaps.

"What do you need to get this ship under control?" he demanded when the other two arrived. He helped the injured beta shift pilot into his seat, then loomed over him.

Mi'khal's fingers flew over the interface, flipping between screens, checking everything too fast for Garrus to keep up. "The systems are a mess. We aren't going to be able to fly her, the best we can do is disable her." The batarian glanced back. "The bridge is trashed. I might be able to get enough thruster control to steer us clear of the planet, but that's it. And, even that much will mean someone working down in engineering." He winced and shrugged. "I need to be here, and things would go a hell of a lot faster if the captain helped."

Garrus nodded. "On my way." He ran to the top of the stairs and glanced back. "How long until we reach Tuchanka?"

"One hundred and thirty-seven minutes."

He set his omnitool to countdown with ten minute warnings then bolted for the elevator. "You two seal yourselves in here. Who knows how many Suns we still have aboard," he shouted back.

"Yes!" Martin crowed as Garrus trotted down the ramp and circled around the galaxy map. "We have partial helmet to helmet comms." The kid stood and threw his arms in the air. "I'm a genius! They'll be patchy, but better than nothing."

Garrus grabbed him by the armour and shoved him toward the elevator. At least Kandros had obeyed his orders. "Excellent genius, but you failed to notice that your partner headed down to the shuttle bay alone. Get your ass down there and help."

Garrus hadn't thought anything could beat the Normandy's elevator for sloth until that trip down two decks accompanied by Martin's semi-hysterical fussing. Keeping his assault rifle trained on the doors, he counted the seconds, clinging to his temper and praying that he didn't have to stop and fight his way through thirty mercs. The lives of Wrex and General Victus's men depended on them getting away and sending a warning. That didn't leave time for fighting.
The images and nagging questions from Tuchanka flashed through his thoughts again. Had his father managed to evacuate Urdnot? Had Victus secured the bomb? None of it would matter if they didn't get a message to Tuchanka and stop the Archangel ships headed that way. All the Blue Suns needed to do was fire on that bomb and Archangel would become enemy number one on every world spinning. Good luck preparing for the Reapers then.

He shoved the what ifs from his mind as the doors opened, needing to focus on the task. Harder he concentrated, faster he would get the repairs wrapped up. Martin shouted something after him, but the doors closed, cutting it off.

More bodies lay strewn along the corridor, a good number of them wearing Blue Suns armour. Once again, the rage spawned a deep, vicious pride that his vastly outnumbered crew had gone down killing. The sheer number of bodies between the elevator and the door to engineering gave him hope that the dead had bought the engineering staff time to do something that helped him. He'd taken the basics during his time in the academy, but when he'd served, he'd always been at a console on the CIC, never in engineering making the damn thing run.

Sure could use you and your cereal-box-diploma engineering skills right now, Shepard.

He hesitated before palming the door control. Anything could be waiting on the other side. He checked his helmet seals and ran the repressurization cycle before palming the control. The door opened, a slight shift in the air rocking him a little.

He pulled his assault rifle from his back, grumbling yet again over its lack of heft. He really needed to convince Anderson to find him another Mattock. He chuffed at his own distraction and pressed close beside the door. Too much to expect that anyone survived inside. Still, only dead men rushed into a sealed cabin. Well ... dead men and Shepard.

He leaned out, the rifle following his scrutiny. Nothing moved. Still, he remained vigilant, eyes scanning constantly, searching out all the places an enemy could hide. Clear. Time to test Martin's comm repairs.

"Vakarian to bridge. I'm inside. Tell me what I need to do, L'Tsai." He hung his rifle up and strode toward the bank of consoles, offering up a prayer that the captain had studied her ship as rigorously as she claimed.

"L'Tsai here, General. Go to the power systems console. It's the second from the right," the captain replied.

Although he wasn't quite that clueless, he didn't waste air on telling her so, and just strode over. "I'm here. Now what?"

"Good news on the shuttle front," Nyreen broke through. "Both shuttles are functional. Guess they didn't expect anyone to survive the attack. Want to take one or both?"

"Both and heat up their weapons. Now stay off this channel, I'll be down in a minute."

Garrus heard the low whistle of an incoming blow a second before it connected, long enough to spin, deflecting the majority of the force with his shoulder. Grabbing the pipe with his other hand, he tore it from his assailant's hands and tossed it. Even as he gripped his attacker's armour, hauling them off their feet, he realized that he'd been attacked by one of his own people.

"Name?" he demanded, setting her down. Relief at finding someone else alive raced through him like a hot gulp of amarceru, comforting but slightly painful. He held her on her feet, her entire body...
shaking so hard he wondered how she managed to sneak up on him.

"Emily," she said, her voice squeaking out. "Um, I mean Second Lieutenant Emily Johnson, engineer second class."

"I'm General Vakarian, Emily. We've taken back the ship, and I'm very glad to see you." He lifted a hand to his radio. "L'Tsai, I was attacked by an engineer, Emily Johnson. I will now let you talk her through what you need." He released the engineer but remained poised to catch her if she keeled over.

"Aye, aye, sir. Patching through to her now," L'Tsai's channel closed.

"You okay, Emily?" he asked, watching her carefully as he backed up a step. "I'm going to fry the locks on the way out, so no one else will be able to get in. At least without a laser. Okay?"

She gave him a weak smile through the faceplate of her helmet and nodded. "Yes, sir, General."

He chuckled. "We're old friends now, Emily. You've tried to kill me. It's just Garrus."

Her laugh, high and mouse-like, settled the trembling in his own gut. One more life. Maybe others hid as well. The hope buoyed his spirits a little as he scrambled the lock on the first door.

Garrus had just finished sealing engineering behind him when he heard Emily let out a whoop of victory that he assumed meant the thrusters were under their control. He reached up to his radio. "L'Tsai, do you read me?"

"Barely, sir. Comms … patchy … best. I ... Mi'khal on the bridge to keep … one connected," the asari said, the transmission cutting out for a moment as if to prove her point. "... the ship, we'll … likely lose you."

"It's okay." He strode for the elevator. "Don't deviate from this course until the last second. We're too wounded to fight back. The plan is to get Victus's ships to move in and take out our escort. The longer the enemy thinks the Passch is still under their control, the better." He hit the elevator control. "Do you copy that?"

"Yes, sir, maintain course as long as possible. Good luck … . L'Tsai out."

Garrus paced the elevator as it descended to the rear shuttle bay, trying to come up with a plan that got the shuttles past the Archangel frigates without being blown into tiny pieces of metal composite confetti. Any other ships, there'd be no problem, but Archangel ships could scan for their sister-ships' transponders. The Suns might not know that, but he wasn't willing to bet his life or Martin and Kandros's on it. The best shot they had was making themselves hard, high risk targets.

The elevator stopped, Garrus ducking into cover next to the door before it opened. "Vakarian on elevator," he called. For a breathless moment, no one replied. Would he have heard a gunfight through three decks if Kandros had walked into an ambush?

"Recog code zeta," Martin shouted back, and Garrus let out the breath he'd been holding.

Relief set his talons tingling. For a moment. Wait? Which code? His teeth ground together as his jaw clenched, annoyance flashing hot enough to vaporise iron. Zeta. Fuck. Garrus sighed then said, "How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?" He really needed to stop letting Martin set the recog codes.
"Can a woodchuck chuck wood?" the kid returned, chortling to himself.

Garrus strode out of the elevator, hurrying past dead mercs to where the two shuttles sat side by side at the large hole in the hull. "Weaver and Kandros, you're together." Without waiting for confirmation, he turned toward the shuttle on the left, and without looking back, stepped inside and pulled the hatch closed.

Seating himself in the pilot seat, he strapped in and ran a quick check of the systems. "Ready to launch?" he called. "Let's stick together through this. When we're clear, stay glued to the hull and move toward the bow." He activated the prototype geth stealth drive, hoping that it would provide enough of an advantage to see them clear.

"That's a go for launch, General," Nyreen called through the comms, her voice broken and crackling with static. Still, it was enough for them to coordinate.

"Launch in ten … nine … eight … ." As he finished the countdown, Garrus tweaked the thruster fuel mixture and the inertial dampeners. He was going to need to be able to accelerate fast and push the shuttles' maneuverability past its tolerances. A fierce smiled lodged itself on his face, his emotions all calming, sharpening down into focus. Time to dance with death. "... three … two … one … launch." Lifting off, he sent the shuttle out the gaping breach in his ship's hull. Once clear, he swung it around to face the Passch's bow and set the VI to keep pace while he surveyed the situation.

Looking out along his flagship's broad underbelly, Garrus saw her two sister frigates, sleek and deadly, leading the way about ten klicks off her port and starboard bow. Looking down that narrow corridor of imminent death tweaked his memory, and he grinned. "Hey, Kandros … you ever do any stone brushing while you were at the Cipritine academy?"

The tarin chuckled. "I may have run the canyon walls once or twice, but I admit to knowing nothing about how my father's new Blackout ended up with its front end sticking out the rear panel." She sucked in a quick, sharp breath. "Are you thinking what I think you're thinking, sir? Because that's crazy."

Garrus laughed and opened the weapon interface, setting it for his right hand. "East or west wall, Kandros?"

"West." He could hear the manic, terrified excitement in her voice. "I'm left handed … need every advantage. This … madness, sir."

He nodded to himself. It was madness, but also their best chance to escape. "Target external weapon mounts." he ordered, entering a course that would send his shuttle darting along the starboard frigate's underside, skimming the surface too close for either enemy ship to risk firing on. As he started his count down, an old warrior's blessing ran through his mind. His first CO had said it prior to every engagement. It had never seemed more appropriate.

"May a praela carry you safely through battle, bathing you in blood that is not your own," he whispered. "And if it ends in fire, be waiting to welcome me home, Kahri."
Chapter Summary

Shepard's escape plan ... can it survive the unexpected? We shall see.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Buratrum** - The realm of the spirits of dishonourable association.

**19 Days ASR**

The first, faint screams coincided with the first massive fireball that plumed, brilliant gold and orange against the black, a phoenix barely able to unfurl its wings before being slain by the vacuum. Four more followed as Shepard strode from the elevator to look out the thin layer of transparent sheathing between her and a frozen, agonizing death.

Movement snatched her attention, yanking it over to the docking bay. The large ports along the side revealed that, although the evacuation remained orderly, something volatile wormed its way through the healthy, motivating fear. It announced itself with those screams, crawling forward until it teetered on the edge of clawing off its civilized face. Did the employees know something? They looked like cattle being herded into a transport. Destination: slaughterhouse.

She shuddered, all the heat and sensation abandoning her face and her hands. Opening and closing her fists, she pulled herself together. Superstitious terror … her old enemy.

Jumping as an arm slipped around her waist, she snapped her head around, then sighed and thumped Al in the side with her elbow. Damn turian, sneaking up on her.

Ignoring her reaction, Al leaned down pressing his mouth next to her ear as he whispered, "Whatever their plan was, someone just tore its spurs off."

She nodded and gave him a tight-lipped smile, grateful to have been dragged on course. She needed to get them all on that fancy new ship, and it didn't require psychic powers to see that it was going to take some craftiness to get anyone out of there alive.

"Grab your bag of munchies. Something tells me you're going to need it before we're done."

Snagging his talons as he pulled away, she looked up, meeting his eyes. "Can you use your biotics at all?" If the snakes slithering through her intestines proved reliable … her little squad would need all the weapons it could get its hands on … and even those might not be enough.

Al shook his head, his expression drawn but resolute. His confidence—having his cycles of facing the unfaceable at her back—bolstered her courage. She knew that he shared her suspicions about who—or what—had come for them, that common nightmare anchoring her resolve.

"I'll keep pushing." His hand abandoned her waist to squeeze her shoulder. "And you forgot your cane." Mandibles fluttering, he nodded to where her cane still hung from the railing.

"We're going to need guns." Shepard turned away from her cane, her stare meeting Miranda's and
latching onto the operative with steel claws. "Are any of you armed?" She looked over at the other three, letting out a sigh when they shook their heads. "Where are the weapon lockers in this section?" She directed the last toward Miranda.

Miranda remained silent, lips pressed thin, caught in the door on her cage of duty.

Kelly stepped forward, shoulders folded in around her chest, hands clenched in front of her; defeated before the battle even began. "I'm probably more of a danger to the rest of you with a pistol in my hand than I am to the enemy," she said without the slightest trace of humour, her porcelain skin turning to wax.

"You'll do just fine, Red. You've got guts to spare," Shepard reassured her, striding toward the group. She glanced over at Miranda. "Give Al the code for the locker on this level, and then we need to talk about getting the rest of the subjects onto that ship." She spun back toward the drama playing out in the docking bay. "And where the hell are those people going?" she demanded. "If they're getting on ships … what's to stop them from being blown out of the black as they run? Do you have fighters scrambling, AA mounts … anything to cover their retreat?"

Throwing up her hands, she turned on Miranda again. "I understand that it was supposed to be a staged attack, but it clearly isn't now, so what the hell are your bosses doing?"

"They sent me, and I'm trying to get you out of here." Miranda stormed over. "So, let's move. The other divisions will see their people reach the lifepods."

"There's no plan for the rest, is there?" Shepard looked to Al, who'd stopped partway down the walkway. He barely hesitated before he shrugged, the gesture turning loose a pack of coursing varren in her guts. He didn't care what happened to the thousands of innocents, no doubt seeing them as all being complicit in the organization's business.

Miranda ignored Shepard's question, barrelling on through. "I can't authorize weapons for Spec … Alpha and the others. We just need to move and move fast, Shepard."

"Give him the code, Miranda." Shepard turned and closed on the woman, making herself as tall and sharp as possible as she stepped into the operative's space. "This is why you brought me back. This is what I do. To do it, I need you to follow my bloody orders and arm these people. Is that understood?" She tried not to look up too much—having to crank her head back to meet people's eyes never felt dignified, so she stared at Miranda's neck. At least refusing to look into Miranda's eyes carried an aura of cool disdain.

When the operative opened her mouth, the tendons and veins in her neck standing out, rigid and determined, Shepard turned on her heel without waiting for the woman to speak. "Then this is where we part ways." She waved to the others. "Let's find a damned weapon locker and get the hell off this station."

For a moment, she thought it might just be Liara, Al, and herself fighting their way through, but then Vincent and Kelly trotted up to take position on her flanks.

"Do you really think there's no plan to save everyone?" Kelly whispered, her voice tight.

Shepard glanced over, meeting the young woman's glassy eyes with a slight head shake. "We'll do what we can Red."

"It's been a long time since I last fired a gun," Vincent muttered. "Didn't think I'd have to when I left my old life behind."
Shepard reached back without replying, squeezing his fingers when her took her hand.

"Found a weapon locker," Al reported, sticking his head out through the door of a maintenance room. "They weren't concerned about the specimens getting loose. It wasn't even locked."

Left open? That didn't make any sense, even for the "let Shepard think she's escaping" plan. The sleet building up on Shepard's insides started to feel like it was trying to reveal something, like charcoal rubbed over paper to reveal what lay beneath, but hell if she could make sense of the message.

Yet. You can't make sense of it yet. Meanwhile, keep—

"Is it stocked?" she asked, cutting Bunny off at the pass.

Al grinned as he held up a Mattock. "And stocked well."

"Oh, it makes me miss Roger." She met his grin with a teasing shake of her head. "You're going to make me wrestle you for that, aren't you?" One eyebrow climbed up a tiny bit and she craned her head as if trying to see past him. "Don't have a decent sniper rifle in there, do they?"

"Two Shurikens, two Carnifexes … ." His mandibles tilted along with his brow plates as he looked to Kelly and Vincent. "Not exactly forgiving if they shoot us in the backs by mistake." He dove back in and came out grinning, a Mantis held in his talons. "Will this do?"

"Oh, she will. Thank you." Shepard stopped outside the door, taking the rifle from him with almost reverent care. "Hello, beauty." She nodded back toward the others. "Liara would prefer a Shuriken if I recall correctly. And you can give Kelly and Vincent the hand cannons. We'll take two minutes to acquaint them with the kick."

"Shepard!"

The captain took a long breath before she turned to face Miranda. "We have maybe an hour before those ships get here. I don't have time to argue over every order."

Miranda hesitated long enough that Shepard almost turned back around, but then the operative nodded. "Very well, but I need to speak to you alone." She spun on her heel and stalked off several metres.

Glancing back, Shepard called. "Liara, help Kelly. Al with Vincent." When she got nods of agreement, she turned and followed her Dr. Frankenstein partway down the length of The Summit. "Okay. I'm here," she said, holding out her arms. "Talk fast, we have people to rescue."

Miranda walked away a couple of paces and stared out into space. "The rest of the specimens are already aboard the SR2, Shepard. You're not the only vital project this base housed." She let out a long breath. "Their project leads were given the evacuation order while I was rushing to the cafeteria to stop you from blowing out all your cranial implants." Pivoting on her heel, she spun to face the captain. "All we need to do is get you onto that ship and escape."

"Shepard!" the note of panic in Kelly's voice threw Shepard into a run before she even got turned around.

"What?" she demanded, then followed the young woman's outstretched arm to the view of the docking bay's exterior.

Shepard squinted, not seeing anything until she walked up to the railing. "What in the great living
fuck?" Shooting a loaded glare over her shoulder at Miranda, she called, "Get over here and tell me what the hell your organization has thrown us into."

Five long, dark missile-like shapes streaked through the vacuum, taking aim along the docking bay. Shepard shoved Kelly back.

"Negate that order! Everyone in the maintenance room." Shepard didn't follow her own advice, praying that the force field on the other side of the graphene would both keep shrapnel out and the air in. Of course, she'd already been spaced once, but no doubt blowing up to twice her usual size, being scorched by solar radiation, and then freeze-dried would probably hurt a lot more without being dead first.

When neither Kelly nor Miranda followed her orders, she let out an exasperated hiss. "The next person who ignores me, stays here."

Kelly turned and ran, grabbing Miranda's elbow and dragging the operative along with her.

Shepard winced away from the impending blast, her arms leaping up to cover her head, but then the missiles slowed. "What the … ?" Her brow furrowed, heavy knots tying in the skin between her eyebrows. Not missiles. What? Drones? She pressed up against the railing, running sideways along it, trying to get a better vantage point.

The drones slowed to a stop outside five of the exterior docking hatches and sat there. For a long couple of breaths, she thought they might be breaching pods, but then the docking hatches opened as if inviting the enemy in, and the drones entered as slick as shit. As soon as they hit atmosphere, the top of the drones detached like beetle wings, and a swarm of … a swarm of … what the hell were they? A swarm of what appeared to be insects or maybe smaller drones flew out, forming a cloud so thick that it dimmed the light in the decon chamber. Then the outer hatch closed.

"Sweet baby Jesus," she muttered, the snakes in her guts starting to gnaw their way out. Oh, this was so much worse than superstition or some hysterical fear. The terror before her amounted to the foundation upon which all that crap had been built … the truth behind the monsters under every child's bed and in every closet. Monster given fifty thousand years to create newer and more efficient ways to commit their atrocities.

Shepard backed away from the wall of windows as she saw the inner hatches open, the swarms poured out among the evacuees. The thin veneer of calm in the docking bay cracked wide open, shattering into panic as the insects attacked. Each person stung froze in their tracks. Some fell, but most just stopped. Alive or dead?

"Sweet baby Jesus," she whispered again, the tiny part of her who still believed adding, "protect them." Tearing herself away from the chaos and terror, Shepard leapt into a run, following the others to the maintenance room.

"We need to get out of here and now, try to gather up as many people as we can, get them onto that damned ship."

Her body stopped at the threshold, her mouth hanging open, halfway through commanding Miranda to put a pair of coveralls over her catsuit, the hand that reached for the sniper rifle dropping limp and useless to her side. For a moment, Shepard stretched thinner and thinner, an elastic band drawn between several places and times. Inside her mind, a presence struggled to bridge a chasm thousands and thousands of light years across.

Heart hammering in her chest, sweat prickling on her skin, she struggled to break free, to close that
open line and regain command of her body.

_Not the spiders. Please._

Instead ... music poured into her. A familiar, eerie voice sang a lament of such exquisite luminosity that it shattered reality. Crystalline and razor-edged, the shards pierced her through, tearing away the ruptured, fabricated body that weighed her down. So very heavy, that mortal yoke. Crying out in both agony and joy as her flesh sloughed away, Shepard threw herself into that sea of infinite sensation—infinite connection—seeking currents intimate, known and comforting. Revelling in her return, they wrapped her in ribbons of glacial embers and salient velvet ... and memory.

_Welcome home, stolen child._

Notes of peridot, coral, and thistle burst onto Shepard's tongue, sweet and bitter. Gentle claws sliced through the tangled maze of neurons and machinery inside her skull, coaxing and tugging until they eased a memory free of Miranda's blockades.

_Thunder filled the space between the crumbling earth and the perfect bubble of the clear, violet sky. It churned, a massive wall of sound rolling over the land, every bit as devastating as a sandstorm, the antecessors' clarion announcing the arrival of Death. Shepard clutched her courage tight around her. If she lost heart, how could she help the refugees maintain theirs?_

_A dome of green energy arched from her raised, trembling hands. Shimmers of lightning still raced along its skin, but weaker ... so much weaker than they had three setixs ago when the first swarms appeared. Reaching down to where that lightning made its home along her nervous system, she scraped the well of resolve and strength, finding just enough to repel the whirling flights of creatures. The refugees who ran outside the biotic shell never made it very far before they froze, their bodies caught in a quagmire of the little monsters' venom._

_Ahead of her, Merol sustained another sanctuary ... her children clinging to his armour, three tiny sets of terrified hands. Her mate looked back, his expression more weary than she thought possible, but also broadcasting that they'd almost reached their destination. One more bout completed in the fight. Then rest and food ... a long drink of gittan sap to help recover her vigor ... and then back to save some more. Always more. The exhaustion felt like being flayed alive, but their biotics proved to be the only defense against the swarms ... the indigenous peoples' only hope of reaching the evacuation vehicles._

"Shepard?"

_Al's voice pushed in as the song retreated, the music ... Shepard smiled ... no, the queen having delivered her message._

_How did you know?_

_Shepard didn't need the queen to reply for an answer to appear. She and Amalair had bonded somewhere deep and solid. Somewhere forever ... perhaps even somewhere beyond the veil of death. What Shepard saw and heard, the rachni queen saw and heard ... or maybe just knew. Either way, the memory had shown her how to defend her people long enough to get them clear._

_Why haven't you contacted me before now?_

_That answer just appeared as well. She'd been too wounded ... probably still was, but necessity trumped caution._

"Shepard?" _Al and Liara leaned in, staring at her, voices and expressions acting in concert._
Shepard winced away from them, their faces a mere hand width from hers, and swatted at them without any real malice. "Get back, close talkers. I'm fine. Just had a little conference call with the rachni queen. I know how to get us to the ship." She snatched the Mantis from Al's hand and grabbed the second Shuriken. She hated using SMGs—twitchy, hard to control buggers—but a hail of goddamned bullets was a hail of goddamned bullets.

The guns settled into their places, easy and comforting. Shepard allowed herself a tiny smile as the game reached the end of the first quarter. Time to get back out on the field. Sitting on the bench left her far too much time to think, her place was in the middle of the action, but not the one moving the ball. Oh no, her job was to make sure the one with the ball got an open shot at the end zone. A sardonic grin slashed across her face. Galaxy's tiniest left tackle.

Wow, way to flash back to Dad there, Janey. Remember Sundays? Soooo much football.

Shepard pushed away the nostalgia and looked to her unlikely team. "Once we come in contact with the swarms, Miranda will form and hold a barrier bubble around us. When she gets tired, Liara will take over." She glanced at the turian. "If your biotics come back online, you can spell the ladies. Vincent, keep an eye on them, let me know if they get into trouble." Shepard smiled at the psychologist. "Red, you keep an eye out for survivors and get their butts into our bubble. Let's try to save as many as we can."

When everyone acknowledged her orders, Shepard jerked her head toward the elevator. "All right, let's move and move fast. Al, you've got drag. Watch our six."

When he nodded, she gave him a slow wink, one corner of her mouth quirking. "Let's get the hell out of here."

They double-timed it to the elevator, Shepard's entire body humming with adrenaline, her pulse beating hard but steady as her mind shifted players on the field four moves ahead. They needed to return to the main corridor and then it was a straight elevator ride down from there to the docking bay. She didn't anticipate much resistance until they got off the elevator. Not if the swarms were spreading out from the docking bay. If they'd entered elsewhere … things would get interesting a lot sooner.

The fear she'd felt seeing the swarms had pulled back a bit—thank God for Amalair and Tashac—but she could feel it pacing at the back of her skull, pausing to snort and paw like a bull ready to charge. It warned her to stay alert, keep on her toes, because the battle had just began in earnest. Sovereign, all of that mess … even dying … it all just amounted to the initial salvo.

Rimy tendrils wormed their way through her, whispering dreadful promises. It could get so, so much worse than dying.

"Every cycle there are hundreds like you. Hundreds who fight back, who organize and resist. We find every single one of you, destroy you from the inside out, and then turn you on your own people. You aren't special. You aren't mighty, and in the end, we'll reduce you to dust, just like the thousands before you."

Shepard gritted her teeth and stared forward as the elevator descended down through the station's power generation plant. Setting up walls she hadn't needed in two years, she braced herself to kill … and so much worse.

Then Miranda's hand jumped to her ear, grabbing Shepard's attention. A thoughtful, searching scowl twisted the operative's face, her head tilting in that 'trying to filter sense through bad comms' way. "Jacob? Jacob, I can barely read you."
The elevator stopped, but Shepard hit the door control to keep it closed. They'd move once Miranda's attention returned to her task. Watching the operative from the corner of her eye, Shepard noted the way she straightened, stiffening. Bad news—not that her conclusion amounted to much of a leap, considering. Dr. Frankenstein's hand dropped away from her radio, hanging limp but for a sporadic, helpless sort of flutter.

Very bad news.

"Fifteen minutes?" Miranda's stare latched onto the side of Shepard's head with enough force to turn the captain around. "All right. Thank you, Jacob. Good—" Her hand flipped once, hesitating halfway to her ear before rising the rest of the way to close the channel.

"Bad news." Shepard kept her tone as flat as possible. She might not trust her benefactor, but she certainly didn't wish for anyone to experience the sort of pain that flashed across Miranda's face before disappearing behind her usual mask of cool, professional control.

"The station is overrun," the operative said, her words clipped and coming out just a hair too quickly. "My employer gave the evacuation and self destruct order from the executive yacht." She swallowed. "It was destroyed on the way to the relay despite its stealth technology."

"How long do we have?" Shepard asked, but then just pushed through. "That was the fifteen minutes?" She held Miranda's gaze, steady and empathetic but also businesslike. "Are you ready?"

"Of course, Shepard." Miranda reached past the captain to open the doors. "A great deal of work remains to be done, work larger than one man or one organization." Pushing none too gently past Shepard, she exited the elevator.

Shepard followed, the scowl that had formed when the drones unleashed their payloads deepening until a vicious ache settled behind her eyes. The corridor, even as far down as the atrium and cafeteria, stood silent as death. She strode forward, but sent her team a glance that warned them to be ready for anything. No matter how orderly or efficient ... no evacuation could have cleared the core of the station suddenly and completely enough for silence. They should be able to hear something.

Her hand drifted past her hip, the Shuriken settling uneasily in her grip despite finding its way to low ready. Bending a little at the knees, she dropped her center of gravity, and glided forward. The soles of her feet barely clearing the floor to minimize her footsteps, she moved quickly and quietly toward the central corridor and the elevator to the lowest levels. As she began to take more shallow breaths and her heart thumped light and quick, faint dizziness crept in behind her eyes. She needed to stay grounded and strong.

_In, two, three, four, five. Out, two, three, four, five._

The old trick worked, her body settling back into lean, mean, fighting machine mode. After so many years walking into and dealing with so many unknowns, what was one more?

"What level for the ship?" she asked, her whisper carrying far too well in the tomb-like silence.

Miranda held up five fingers and then two.

They found the first victim in the atrium, poised in mid-twist. The man's hand still clutched the writhing creature that had stung him. Shepard stopped, motioned for the others to keep guard, and leaned in to examine the insectile drone. It possessed a single, reticulated carapace; four limbs, and a stinger. Even though very organic wings fluttered on its dorsal surface, its lack of anything
resembling mandibles, mouth, or even eyes led her to the conclusion that it was a construct rather than an organically evolved being. Reaching out, she crushed it, then turned her attention to the man.

His eyes followed her, watching her through amber and ebony vapours … or was it smoke … or perhaps even energy … a dark energy form of biotics perhaps? Twining spirits of fire and death, the stasis encased him in greedy fingers that whispered over his form like an over-friendly cat, or a mock lover’s caress, before detaching to fade into the ether.

It looked like a biotic effect, but not the normal sort. What was the black? It tickled her memory. She'd seen tendrils of absolute nothing like it before, but … not stasis. Maybe they had the same source? One curious finger stretched out to touch him, but Miranda cleared her throat. Right. Not worth the risk. Not with the high chance of Reaper involvement.

"Eleven minutes, Shepard," the operative said, her tone so even she might have been announcing tea service.

"Can you move at all?" Shepard asked the man. Apparently not, since only his eyes responded. She looked to Miranda, already knowing the answer in her gut but needing someone else to stand at her back when she condemned him. Despite opening her mouth to ask if the operative possessed even a single idea as to how to release or save the man, Shepard bit the question off before it formed.

A deep, rumbling vibration thrummed through the air, impatient fingers drumming against Shepard's breast bone.

"Now, ladies, if you would?" she whispered before looking back at the frozen man. "I'm sorry," she said, unable to leave him without acknowledging the crime she was committing. But then, she took a deep breath, straightened, and walked away.

A low, resonant whump of sound and air pressure accompanied the sizable sapphire dome that burst from Miranda's outstretched hands to encompass them all.

Without looking back or toward the heavy droning sound that echoed from the direction of her quarters, Shepard led the team to the elevator. They needed to move. If they found people who had yet to be frozen, they'd bring them along. If not, well … she envied them their return to that sea of infinite music and connection. Even after that single moment of immersion in the currents that married all things, she understood why she'd chosen to forget it.

The elevator opened at the end of a long corridor littered with frozen people. The swarm filled the air, swooping toward the elevator the moment it opened. They rebounded off the barrier, each impact setting off a tiny detonation. Well, that confirmed some sort of biotics at work.

Miranda let out a low, shaky sounding moan as they set out, more and more of the drones attacking the barrier. Liara stepped in, shoring up the lagging protection. Still Shepard could see that compensating for each detonation cost them both too much. The barrier would fall long before they reached the ship. Panic began to whip the fear until it bellowed to be released. Shepard shoved it aside. She hadn't suffered and fought and made Miranda's life miserable for three weeks just to die to a bunch of damned bugs. Fury built a wall around the panic as she clenched her jaw and brought up the Shuriken.

"Going to do an experiment, ladies. Tell me if it helps or hurts." Striding forward, Shepard brought up the Shuriken, each squeeze of the trigger launching three projectiles. She cursed as the muzzle continually jerked toward the ceiling. "And this is why I hate this bloody thing." Still, it effectively managed to bring down quite a few. And damn, wasn't it satisfying to pepper bad guys—even
"Helps," Liara said between gasps. "The rounds pull the barrier down a little, but not as much as those things exploding against it."

Al opened up with the Mattock, although the more erratic spray and pray fire of the Shuriken brought more of the tiny targets down. Vincent took the other SMG off Liara's hip and picked off the drones with an efficiency that surprised Shepard and begged the question as to who he'd been in that old life.

As they closed on the docking bay doors, they began to find survivors who'd avoided the swarms. It fell to Kelly to coax the traumatized evacuees out of their hiding spots. Not an easy task when they had to dodge nightmares and a flurry of bullets. Still, by the time the group reached the doors into the docking bay, they'd gathered nearly twenty people, Space in the bubble became tight.

Shepard hit the control to the large double doors, steeling herself for a fight, but when they opened, they revealed a silence as absolute as when they'd stepped off the elevator upstairs. Nothing moved. Stomach heaving, Shepard swallowed spasmodically, trying to wash away the burn of defeat and despair as it clawed its way up her esophagus.

Taking her first steps into that forest of more than a thousand frozen, helpless people, her knees trembled and a scream tried to bully its way up from the pit of her churning belly. She knew where they were headed. Perhaps that was the worst part … perhaps not, but … dammit, she knew that even though the tools had been upgraded, the purpose was the same. Living building blocks.

Somewhere the Reapers' servants were replacing Sovereign, and using humanity to do so.

You have to leave them, Janey. The only other choice is meeting their fate. Having seen why Miranda brought you back, can you just let it keep happening?

"Two minutes," Miranda warned as if she could read Shepard's thoughts. "We're going to have to run." The heavy oscillation in the operative's voice drew Shepard's eyes to her. For Miranda to show weakness, she had to be nearly spent. And sure enough, she looked about ready to collapse.

"Okay," Shepard called. "Let's go. Stay together, help each other, and run." After a glance at Liara and Al for confirmation, she took off, running as fast as she could manage. Going so far without her cane had sapped her strength, and her little pantomime with Al had the insides of her already tattered legs feeling as though someone had dipped her in acid.

Failure is not an option, Janey. Quitting is not an option. Suck it up and run!

"Great plan, Shepard," she muttered, ducking around a small cluster of people. She stumbled, nearly going down on one knee, but someone grabbed her and hauled her back up. "Yeah, the escape plan couldn't have gone better." Not that she could have anticipated the attack of the evil bugs, but damn … so many innocent—

The last airlock before the SR2 opened, admitting yet another swarm. However, unlike the others, those drones glowed as if filled with magma to the point where it burst open their carapaces, the rents bleeding the black and amber almost-smoke. They poured into the enormous space, wheeling and swooping more like a flock of starlings than insects. At least they did for the first ten seconds.

On the eleventh second, they stopped dead, and, in perfect unison, turned to face Shepard. Despite their not having faces or eyes, she knew every single one of them was focused on her.

The copper and iron tang of terror burst in her mouth as the spiders began to crawl out of the folds...
and crannies of her brain, skittering along neurons. They swarmed for her eyes and ears, the familiar tar-slick darkness clouding the edges of her vision.

Someone pushed her from behind, and she realized that she'd ground to a halt. Someone shouted at her, but the words made it through the crush of bodies too muffled to understand. Hands grabbed her, dragging her forward, but the narrow tunnel of her vision remained glued to that swarm.

Her heart stopped as a massive tentacle of the nebulous energy exploded from the insectile ranks. Gasping, sweat beading on her skin, Shepard faced the impossible. She had to be dreaming, didn't she? Things like that nightmarish arm of malevolence just didn't happen in the real, sane world. As the first tiny stream of liquid fear trickled down her temple, the tentacle snapped across the metres like a whip, slamming into Shepard's still chest. Her heart restarted, pounding against her ribs, a terrified prisoner trying to escape its death sentence, even as the blow tore her off her feet. She flew five metres before slamming into a small cluster of frozen evacuees.

Rearing back, the tentacle split into several tendrils. It hesitated, as if giving her a moment to realize what was coming, then lunged at her, stabbing into her eyes, ears, nose and mouth, pouring into her. She screamed, a clotted, choking sound. Clawing at her face, her fingers struggled to free her from the chill insouciance … the macabre contempt of that darkness. Her scream devolved into garbled gibberish, the tentacles wrapping around her heart and lungs, crushing them.

Fireworks of dark energy exploded behind her eyes, and the spiders rejoiced, fawning over the darkness like a pet long separated from its owner, or perhaps like children reunited with their parent. Yes. She felt the rightness of that. Children.

Then the tendrils burst into black flame, searing through her in a blast of trenchant agony, and she knew that the horrible magma glow showed through the cracks in her flesh. Laughter, manic and terrified cut from her throat as the flame incinerated her fear, leaving behind molten rage. She came made to order.

_All the glowing cracks, no waiting._

"I am the Harbinger of your perfection," a deep, terrible voice boomed … and not just in her head because she felt the person holding her flinch away from it. "The forces of the universe bend to me. Relinquish your form to us."

Like hell. The rage flared through her bones and muscles, infusing her entire frame before it cooled into steel. Reinforced and resolute, she pushed back, fighting against the abyssal fire … the pitiless, almost nihilistic, presence that sought to possess her. She'd burn before allowing them to use her against the rest of the galaxy.

Scraping her last reserves of strength, she managed to scream, "Run!" channelling all her pain and terror … even the steel-clad fury into the cry. The others needed to leave her and go.

"Fight back," Al's deep, cracked voice whispered in her ear, his talons gripping her arms hard enough that the clean, true pain cut through the rest. "It can be fought. You know it can, but being afraid of it gives it power." The hard, ruined plates of his face pressed against her temple as he commanded, "Fight it!"

Shepard managed to nod, forcing her heart to beat strong and true … willing her lungs to draw in the good, cool air.

_In ... two ... three ... four ... five. Out ... two ... three ... four ... five._
A wave of renewed determination swept over her, and she dove … delving deep into the core of who she was … digging down past the walls she'd erected as she lay in Anderson's arms on the shuttle ride away from the only home she'd ever known. The weapons she needed lie beyond the brick and mortar shielding her from the pain of losing everything.

*You didn't lose everything, Janey. Bunny's voice barely registered. You didn't lose your heart and vanish into hatred. You gained so much strength … so much compassion and honour.*

"That's it. Yes," Al coaxed. "You've got to stare right into it. It's going to hurt like the spikes of buratrum, but you can face it."

The fire lashed at her with an ancient, barbed whip. "You cannot escape your destiny, Shepard," the voice roared, somehow coming out of the fire. "You escaped us before, but even then you knew that we had become your true architects … your creators."

Even as the thong tore into her, the fall embedding in her flesh, she didn't fight the pain. She didn't need to fight it. The pain—the horrible presence behind the fire and the darkness—already lived so far down inside her that her entire being had formed around it, a tree's flesh growing around a nail. The bands squeezing her heart and lungs eased their grip.

*Through the stink of blood and urine, sweat and feces … through the hood that sealed away the outside world, Janey felt her father approach and stand over her. Despite the numb chill that encapsulated her, his familiar energy and strength warmed her. She felt his knees brush her arm as he knelt, then his gentle arms embraced her ruined flesh.*

Daddy. A thin smile accompanied the soft, trill of raw sound that spilled from her lips.

*It was okay. Surely now, it would all be okay. Daddy had come to send her on her way to Jesus. The nightmare would finally end.*

"I'm so proud of you," he whispered, his face pressed against the hood, his breath heating the coarse material. "I've never been more proud … no, not proud … in awe of anyone or anything in my life, my beautiful girl." She felt a kiss, a soft blessing high on her cheekbone. "No matter what, you have to survive this, Janey. Something big, and probably terrible, is waiting for you, and I know that you'll face it. I know that you'll beat it, kiddo."

Agony … no, not agony. Agony was mere pain. The monstrosity that tore through her as she faced the moment of knowing … of knowing what was to come … of knowing that she wouldn't just be allowed to die … of seeing the truth behind the beautiful lie she'd told herself all those years. Her father hadn't given her his blessing and told her she could let go. Instead, he'd trapped her … forced her to stay behind, using her love to bind her. That torture amounted to every evil and stygian concept dreamed up in nightmares.

Shepard screamed, shrill and unearthly … a sound to stab madness into any mind that heard it … a sound to freeze tears solid.

"Yes," Al whispered, pressing close. "Keep digging."

*Her father whispered one last thing before a gun roared and his body fell over her, pressing her into the gravel and mud. As she lay there, the breath squeezed from her lungs, she felt the darkness seep into her. Silent, it slithered between her cells, creeping all the way in to her center as the hours passed. There, it took root.*

*Then light … a terrible, searing light and a kind face smiling down on her even as tears rolled from*
its eyes. She’d screamed then too, but it hadn’t been a scream of pain or defeat. Defiance raged at
the heart that continued to beat in her chest, at her father's last charge, at the cruel universe that
would leave her alone … alone and so very soiled.

As she stared up into the dark brown eyes of her saviour, her father's last words whispered through
her mind, finally registering through the storm within her. They calmed the scream.

"Millions suffer, thousands rebel, hundreds lead, but it only takes one … the right single heart to
beat them. You are that heart, my beautiful girl. You are that heart."

The anguish drew back, easing until Shepard could draw a full breath, the scream fading from her
lips and her mind. Wrapping herself in her father's love and admiration—his complete faith in the
strength of her heart, mind, and will—she forged it into armour. She knew Harbinger's words
formed truth, but just a tiny piece of it. The Reapers and whatever they served had created her. The
darkness had shaped her, but not into a tool. Never into a tool. Her father hadn't condemned her,
he'd armed her.

"Yes, you created me," she called out, challenging the darkness and flame. "And that was your first
mistake, because I know what you are." She managed to wrestle one arm under her control and
reached for Al's talons, closing her fingers around them like vices. "I'll never believe your lies, and
I'll never let you possess me … never let you subvert me. I'll fight you to my last breath, and I'll
win because … this is who I am. I'm not afraid of you." Although the last was a lie, she knew it
needed to be said … no shouted, as loud and as long and as many times as she needed to make it
true.

"I'm not afraid of you!"

"You thought to build a tool, but instead you created a weapon." Power—true, liquid fire—poured
into her, burning her clean. Clutching Al's hand, she bullied herself up onto her feet.
"Congratulations, Harbinger, you created yourself a nice big nuclear bomb, and it's going to blow
up, right in your fucking faces." She gathered the flame and the spiders, wadding the whole mess
into a ball.

Under her feet, the floor rocked, the station bucking and heaving in its death throes. Shepard
forced back the tar-black slime until she could see that cluster of tiny, possessed monsters.

Born in fire? The phoenix rising from the ashes? Was that always to be her fate? She threw her
shoulders back so hard her back snapped. Fine. If that was her fate, she'd meet it head up, hands
fisted, heart and mind focused. She might stumble, but she'd be damned if she'd let them—any of
them—throw her down.

Turning a fierce smile on that glowing swarm and the gigantic mind speaking through it, she
launched the whole mess—spiders, darkness, black flaming nightmare and all—right back in their
faces. "Now, get the fuck out of my head, and stay out."

A high, manic laugh of relief tumbled from her as Harbinger's presence vanished, and consumed by
his possession, the insectile drones crumbled to ash. Shepard turned toward Al, her free arm
hooking around his neck as he snatched her up into his arms and ran for the ship.

"I need to get to the bridge," she called as they entered the main hatch. Not trusting her legs, she
allowed him to hold her as the decon sweep passed over her. When the door opened, he leaped
through.

"Here!" Miranda called from their left.
Al set Shepard down on her feet behind the pilot's seat. She clutched the leather, nails sinking into it to hold her steady as the ship detached, wheeling away from the docking tube.

"Stealth systems are active?" she asked, wincing at the broken sound of her voice. Without waiting for an answer, she continued, "We're going to need more power to the inertial dampeners. This is going to call for some fancy flying."

"Yes, ma'am," the pilot answered, his hands flying over the controls.

"Good. For now, keep the base between us and the incoming ships." Peering through the ports, she saw explosions tearing through the base, working their way up through the levels. "When the whole thing goes up, hit the accelerators hard and fly us straight at the starboard vessel. Get as close as you can, keeping it between us and the other one, then head for the relay."

"And pray?" the man asked.

"And pray," she confirmed.

In a blinding flash of light and fury, the station succumbed. Shepard threw an arm over her eyes but quickly dropped it back to the chair as the pilot made his move. Picture perfect, handling the large frigate as if she were a fighter, he swooped around the explosion and straight into a roll. The enemy vessel to starboard fired, but the SR2 was already well into its evasive roll and dodged the massive … .

"Particle beam?" Shepard yelped as Tashac's memory came through for her again. "That's a particle beam. It'll go straight through shields." She slapped the pilot's arm as he dropped them nearly ninety degrees to miss another blast. "Nice flying there, Tex. How nimble is this baby?"

He chuckled. "Nimble enough." His fingers flew over the interface, setting a evasive tactics for the run on the relay. "Don't worry, captain, I'll get us through."

Shepard nodded and just held on for dear life as the frigate's inertial dampeners struggled to keep up with the rolls, twists, and dives.

"Relay in sixty seconds," the pilot called. "Entering calculations."

Shepard counted down in her head as blasts from both cruisers' cannons tried to catch the little ship and carve it into slag. Three or four times, death appeared certain, but then the arc of blue lightning reached out, grabbed them and tossed them through space.

Letting out a long breath, Shepard clapped the pilot on the shoulder again. "Excellent work there, Tex. Excellent work."

"Thank you, ma'am, but the name is Cortez, Lt. Steve Cortez." He flashed a brilliant smile over his shoulder at her, looking as relieved as she felt.

"Well then, excellent work, Lt. Steve Cortez." Shepard turned on wobbly legs. "We … ." Darkness slammed down on her, driving her to her knees, but Al caught her before she hit the floor. "We … ." And then it crushed her completely.
Thank you all you gorgeous people who comment. I really do love hearing your thoughts on the chapters. I love that AI has people guessing. *cackles evilly* There should be some stuff in this chapter to start some wheels turning as well. I've always loved examining life/death, fate ... whether anyone in the right circumstance can rise up and slay the dragon, or whether some people are fated to slay them. Good stuff that is, and very relevant to the ME universe and Shepard. :D Anyway, hope you enjoyed the chapter.

The super secret surprise is now slated for Ch 96 because I need Garrus to either get blown up or make it to Tuchanka first. Mwahahahahahahaha! I think people will be happy with the change that comes with Ch 96 and the surprise.

*hugs to all*
Mass Effect - Future Complex Chapter Thirty One

Chapter Summary

Urdnot Wrex! Where the heck are you?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

20 Days ASR

Performing fighter maneuvers in a flying brick amounted to attempted suicide. Garrus accepted that going in. At least at the distance … or lack thereof … involved, if he went down, the Stinger would end up sporting a shuttle-shaped hole somewhere. He chuckled at the visual, then grumbled a curse at Shepard. She really was a terrible influence even after so long.

"All right, you bastards," he said, his subvocals growling, talons quick and steady on the controls, "this is where you learn what a massive mistake it is to turn a torin's weapons against him." Another sentiment his Kahri would enjoy.

He knew his fleet's specs, therefore the strength and weakness of each design, inside out. One hand maneuvered the shuttle while the other entered his firing solutions. The Stingers boasted an emitter system that covered a vast portion of the ship's skin. The geth packed in equally massive shields to try to offset the glass cannon issue, but if he could get inside the shields, even one well-placed shot could overload the entire electrical grid. End result: one ship down.

Now, he just hoped that the shuttles had been left on the Passch to facilitate the Blue Suns abandoning ship before the end. Fairly safe bet.

"Come on," he muttered, bringing the shuttle in nice and easy, lining it up for entry into the shuttle bay. "Come on … comms are jammed. You don't need me to verify before welcoming me back."

A fierce grin greeted the crack of light that showed along the top of the shuttle entrance. Yep, just one big happy family taking cash to bring down the galaxy. He dropped back, giving himself a bit of room in case of blow back, then opened fire. His first shots tore down the aft shields, the next volley strafed the interior.

Dropping low and hard, he flipped the shuttle into a half roll, the explosions ripping out the shuttle door licking the belly of his metal-clad, thruster-driven drunken space cow. Adjusting the trajectory to compensate for the vehicle's reluctance to do anything other than flounder, he managed to bully it into a parallel trajectory. Hitting his second pre-programmed attack sequence, he peppered the hostile ship's belly, taking out the rear GARDIAN laser. The front point defense would have a harder time targeting him. Still, they didn't waste any time trying, and he winced as the first shots sizzled past.

Now to get his one, lucky shot.

"Come on." The whisper came out as a strained sort of hiss as he nudged the shuttle closer and closer. The Stinger's underbelly loomed large in the ports … the GARDIAN's ultraviolet lasers
even larger. Too damned large, but he still remained a good five hundred metres outside the shield envelope and without a clear shot at one of the emitter hubs. Sweat pricked his neck, trickling down into the collar of his armour.

"Quit being so damned cautious, Vakarian. What's the worst that can happen? It'll be a quick, glorious death." Taking a deep breath, he clenched his jaw and took the shuttle in. He really needed to give the geth the go ahead for the new troop carriers. It had just been so much easier on the budget to modify existing kodiaks.

He chuckled again, low and sardonic. "This might not be the best time for setting a new budget."

Threading the shuttle through the hole in the aft shields, he hit the firing control. A huge arc of energy ripped along the ship's hull as the system overloaded, but his drunken space cow was already lumbering away and breaking off on a course ninety degrees to starboard. The shuttles would never be able to outrun the bigger ships to Tuchanka, the plan was just to bring down their weapons and make a run outside the jamming zone.

"This is an emergency transmission for General Adrien Victus from Gen ... ." Garrus hesitated over using his title. On one hand, generals who had earned their way up through the ranks of their militaries no doubt considered him an upstart pretender … a merc commander at best. On the other hand, how could he expect them to accept him as an equal if he constantly apologized for himself?

He steeled himself and owned it. "... General Garrus Vakarian. Please respond."

Something that could either have been maniacal, victorious whooping or tormented death screams came through his helmet comms from the other shuttle. Although performing some sort of spastic attempt at a barrel roll, the other vehicle remained on his scanner, flying off on a trajectory that mirrored his own. Safe enough to opt for maniacal whooping, he supposed.

Garrus repeated his hail on a loop, easing the shuttle into a long arc toward the planet. How could the Suns manage to jam comms so completely over such a huge area? Unless they were working for the Reapers directly, they just didn't have that sort of tech. Something caught his eye in the starboard port … he turned to look at it directly. What was it? Thousands of klicks away, a large dark spot blacked out the stars behind it. It appeared to be moving relatively slowly, as if pacing the other ships. He looked away and scanned the area, but nothing showed.

A stealth ship? Or his imagination? It couldn't be a Reaper. They didn't use or need stealth, not when terror formed a good chunk of their arsenal. But then who? If it was a ship, it had to be dreadnaught class, and a large one at that.

… Pain … Indeterminate centuries of so much pain … .

Garrus slapped a hand against his helmet as a blast of agony sliced through his skull … acid pouring in through his eyes to burn away his brain. Voices. Thousands … hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions of voices … all screaming.

It hears us … the light, all alone in the black … it hears us.

All screaming for eons beyond recounting.

The shackles are too tight. They cut into the flesh. All is the flesh, trapped and tortured for so very long.

Then something silenced the voices, a soundproof curtain dropping in the thousands of kilometres between. Garrus sagged in his seat, the pain vanishing as quickly and mysteriously as it appeared.
After a couple of deep breaths to banish the trembling it left behind, he turned back to the port. Scowling brow plates lowered over his eyes, his mandibles dropping and spreading before giving a hard flick. Nothing. A strange combination of relief and emptiness greeted the star field, the tell-tale black area of covered stars gone. He stood and looked out the port, searching as far as he could see in all directions but saw nothing at all. Maybe he'd imagined it?

"You need to get some sleep," he muttered to himself as he slipped back into his seat.

"General Vakarian, your transmission has been received." An even, almost emotionless voice cut through the black, shattering the moment. "Stand by for General Victus."

Garrus let out a long sigh of relief at the studied, neutral tones of the turian comm officer. At one time, he'd found it hilarious that all comm officers sounded the same. He and the other junior officers on his vessel entertained themselves for hours sending random messages, each stranger than the next, trying to provoke comm officers on friendly ships. However, alone in his drunken space cow … his entire life under siege, he found it incredibly comforting. For all the universe fell apart, some things held. Thank the spirits that some things held.

"Vakarian, Victus here. We're reading three of your vessels incoming, all damaged. Find some trouble on the way to join the relief effort?"

Garrus took a breath and set his spine. "You could say that, General." Victus was going to think him the galaxy's most inept leader, and rightly so, but that embarrassment could wait. First, they needed to save the krogan. "Two of the incoming Archangel vessels are hostile—stolen during an attack on one of our shipyards. Hostiles boarded the third and set it on course to impact the bomb site. We've retaken it, but its weapons and most systems are severely crippled. It is non-combatant." He sent the Passch's transponder code so the turians could avoid vapourizing L'Tsai, Mi'khal, and Emily Johnson.

"My people brought down the hostile vessels' weapons, but they should be approached as combatant."

"Understood. This will take some explaining, Vakarian, but we have other pressing concerns." The general cleared his throat, his subvocals clearly indicating the truth behind his claims to more important concerns despite his voice's carefully modulated tone. "Five minutes ago, my ground team reported a complete evacuation of hostiles from the bomb site. Their communication then ceased abruptly, coinciding with a massive power surge."

"The Blue Suns have powered up the bomb," Garrus said, his gut dropping into his boots. He checked his countdown. "The Passch was due to crash in exactly ninety seven minutes. Want to set odds on that being the detonation on the timer?"

"Not if my life depended on it." Victus let out a low rumble. "That's enough time for my men to get there, but I doubt the enemy will have made it possible to defuse the bomb … at least, not in that time frame."

"This entire operation has been too well orchestrated for them to leave that end loose," Garrus agreed. "How far in was your team?"

"They'll arrive at the bomb site within moments now they aren't fighting for every centimetre." He let out a loud, rumbling breath, then went silent for a moment, allowing Garrus to hear the organized chaos of the evacuation in progress. "Vakarian, I can send my ships to intercept your vessels." Another pause. "My shuttles are all loaded with krogan, and if that bomb is going off in just over an hour, I don't have time to complete the evacuation and then pull my men out." He left
the favour unasked, but it hung out there just the same.

"I have two shuttles at my disposal, General, and I'm on course for the bomb site. I have to try to pull Urdnot Wrex out of there before he gets himself killed. I'll give your men the one shuttle. Hopefully they can help me locate my rampaging krogan clan chief, and we'll all be able to sit down and figure out what the hell is going on." Setting a new trajectory for the bomb site, Garrus pushed the velocity a touch beyond the safe maximum. If it held, he'd have maybe a half hour to drop off the one shuttle and take the other after Wrex. "Nothing like cutting things stupidly close," he muttered.

"Good luck, Vakarian." Victus chuckled, but it was a dry, vicious sort of sound. "Do you want your ships back?"

Garrus's previous rage rekindled, sending a sound through his second larynx that made Victus sound positively comforting. Ships ... ships he could replace. He needed to send the bastards behind the attack a decisive message. "I'll warn the Passch to cut out once you're in range, and then blow those other bastards to hell, General."

"Roger that. See you on the other side. Victus out."

Garrus sent messages to L'Tsai and Kandros, then settled in to draft his acceptance of the geth's new shuttle plans. Sitting still certainly wasn't an option, and it was a lot easier to hang on to confidence if he stayed focused on something. Once he reached scanning range for the shuttle's sensors, he could dedicate himself to tracking down the turian force and his wayward krogan.

§

Victus's men had made it to the bomb site, significantly decreasing the effort it took to locate them. Wrex, on the other hand, was taking an uncharacteristic amount of care to avoid scans. Somehow, the battlemaster had discovered a way to make twenty krogan warriors far stealthier than Garrus would have imagined.

Just over a half hour remained in the count down when Garrus landed the shuttle at the base of the massive crane and its deadly payload. After gawking open-mouthed at the bomb for three seconds he threw off the shock and awe in favour of action. The turians were already scrambling across the field of rubble to meet him when he opened the hatch and jumped out.

"Who's in command?" he demanded as the team surrounded him in a loose semi-circle.

A young fellow wearing lieutenant bars stepped forward and gave him an uncertain looking salute. "Lt. Tarquin Victus." He nodded behind him. "This is my team."

Victus. Garrus raised his brow plates as he returned the salute. Not surprising ... the Victus family was military to the bone, just like Kandros's. "The general ... ?"

The young torin nodded, straightening with an unconscious pride and respect that forced Garrus to push down a smile. That respect and love said a great deal for both the general and his son. "General Victus is my father. And you are?" Victus lifted his chin in a slight challenge as if daring him to say anything. Garrus understood that touchiness far too well. It was never easy being the son of a noteworthy, brilliant parent.

"General Garrus Vakarian." He nodded toward the massive bomb. "Have you had a chance to assess the situation?"

Victus and his team all turned to look before the torin nodded and met Garrus's stare again. "The
timer mechanism is completely fried and fused to the bomb. We'd have to cut it off and there's no time." He glanced at the other shuttle as Nyreen brought it in to land several metres away. "Are you here to pull us out, sir? We have forty minutes to put a seventy-five klick radius between us and the blast."

"That shuttle is for you and your men," Garrus replied. He nodded toward his shuttle, impatience beginning to gnaw at him. The turians needed to get moving so he could get to the considerably less straightforward task of his own retreat. "You've been ordered back to the evac site. I still have to find Urdnot Wrex and his team. Did you catch any glimpses of him on your scans?"

Victus nodded and opened his omnitool. "This scan plots where he showed up. His last known location was four hundred thirty metres southeast." After transferring the file, Victus pointed toward a large, crumbled structure. "It sounded as though two decent sized squads were trading a lot of bullets near the base of that building, but then the Suns retreated. Haven't heard anything since."

Garrus slapped the kid on the shoulder, grateful to have been given somewhere to start looking. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Now get your people out of here."

Victus saluted, already sidling toward the shuttle. "Thank you for pulling our asses out of the fire, General. Appreciate it."

Garrus returned the salute, then turned and ran for the open shuttle hatch. "My pleasure, Lieutenant."

Martin met him at the open hatch, both pausing to watch the other shuttle lift off and wheel away. "Do we know where Wrex is?" the kid asked.

"Yeah, we have a starting place, anyway." The shuttle lifted off, nearly dumping Garrus out the door. Swaying, he clawed at the metal, breaking off a talon tip before he caught hold of a harness clip and hauled himself back. He nodded toward the open hatch. "Keep your eyes peeled. Don't let Kandros toss you out."

Keeping a tight grip on the shuttle, Garrus hurried hand over hand to the cockpit, then threw himself in the copilot seat. "You might want to warn people before you lift off with an open hatch," he grumbled, but without any real heat. His mind was already focused on downloading the information Victus had given him into the shuttle's nav computer.

"How hard can twenty krogan be to find, anyway?" Martin shouted forward.

Kandros scoffed. "That's not the question. The question is: when we find them, how do we fit twenty krogan in this shuttle?"

Garrus answered her only with raised brow plates and a slight nod. That was problem number sixteen. He flipped the nav screen around to face her and pointed to a spot about fifty metres north of where Victus figured the shooting had originated. "Drop Martin and I here. We'll cover as much ground as we can on foot. If either we find Wrex or we hit the ten minute mark, pick us up."

Kandros nodded, moving the map to a more convenient spot amidst her other screens. "I'll keep her hard on your six, General." She guided the shuttle down to a fairly flat spot in the rubble. "You're going to have a hard time seeing anything from the ground, sir."

He let out a soft grunt, agreeing with her. "But if he hears us yelling, hopefully he'll come out of hiding." Without any more words, but a great deal of acidic churning in his gut, Garrus stood and
stepped into the troop compartment.

Without waiting for the kid, Garrus jumped out, groaning under his breath as every single half-healed incision in his body complained in unison. Damn, he must be getting old before his time. "Pace me at about thirty metres out," he ordered, gesturing to his right before setting out at a decent run.

"Yes, sir." Martin loped off at an easy gait, his frame armour doing most of the work for him as he climbed, clambered, and hurdled. Although Garrus envied the kid's easy movement, he'd tried a set of the armour himself and found it far too cumbersome. Trading in his light armour for the greater protection of heavy had proven a hard enough challenge to overcome. The frame armour just made him feel as though he'd been swallowed by a large mech.

Still, at about the fifty metre mark when his back and legs started begging for mercy, he sort of hated the kid a little.

"Urdnot Wrex! Where the hell are you?" Garrus yelled. His voice echoed off the shattered buildings, sending a small cluster of pyjaks screaming and running for cover.

Grinning as the ground under his feet rumbled, he decided maybe it hadn't been his voice that sent the pyjaks scurrying. Somewhere, kilometres distant, a thresher maw moved beneath the ground. Maws weren't a threat so deep into the old cities; the foundations, rubble, and thick layer of concrete on the ground proved too much of an obstacle for the giant worms. However, that didn't stop an electric shiver of both excitement and dread from racing down his spine as the earth trembled.

"Urdnot Wrex," Martin called, "don't make me run much farther, old man, or I'll kick your geriatric backside when we find you!"

A wide smile settled onto Garrus's face. As odd as it seemed—to him most of all—he loved Tuchanka. Ugly and ruined, it was completely wild, and proved to be a constant, as well as completely unforgiving, test of wile, skill, guts, and will.

He'd dreaded his first visit, certain that filth and constant lack of comfort would wear thin very quickly. Instead, the planet made his blood roar in his veins. Every moment proved a keen-edged blade poised to slice open his throat. Adrenaline poured through him like a narcotic, heightening every sense and sharpening every reaction.

Tuchanka made him feel brilliantly, agonizingly, wholly alive.

"Wrex! Answer me dammit!" Garrus hollered, shoving the rest of his thoughts aside. They needed to get out before Tuchanka made them all wholly dead. "That bomb is counting down, and we can't stop it. You need to come out and get on my damned shuttle!" A thin wheeze whistled out of him as he hurdled a low wall. Pausing, he leaned on a hip to catch his breath. "I know you can hear me, you stubborn, old ass."

He glanced at the timer again. They needed to keep moving, but first … maybe they'd come out far enough to escape the jamming. He lifted his other hand to his radio to open his father's channel.

"Pari," he called. "Pari, can you read me?"

"Garrus," his father's voice came back. "Where are you?"

A dizzying rush of relief sent Garrus stumbling for several steps before he caught himself against a half-fallen wall.
"Still too damned close to the bomb site. Spirits, the thing is huge. Calculations say a gigaton. It's going to take out everything for seventy-five klicks or so in every direction in under twelve minutes. Are the civilians safe?"

"We'll be fine, Garrus. We're nearly four hundred kilo— ancient cultural site. Just get out—" The response clicked and stuttered then cut out.

"Still too close to the jamming range for reliable comms," Martin hollered. He ran a few more steps. "Wrex! Goddammit, Wrex! Where the fuck are you?"

"Come on, kid," Garrus said, waving a weary arm forward. "We've got two more minutes before we have to give up. Let's make the most of them."

Garrus took four steps before three varren rose above the rubble at his ten o'clock. He slid to a halt and pulled in a long, steadying breath. "Martin. Going to need you over here." Damn, if the alpha and two subordinates were showing themselves, that meant at least another three hiding on the flanks waiting to move in.

They did not have time for a pack of varren. He glanced at the countdown. Eleven minutes. Sweet baby Jesus, they were all going to be incinerated.

"Fuck!" the kid yelped. "On my way."

Garrus could hear Martin clambering and leaping, covering ground at a good clip, but he didn't take his eyes off the alpha. Slowly, as to not trigger an attack, he shrugged his assault rifle into his hand. "This day just keeps getting better and better," he muttered. "Watch the flanks," he called, keeping his voice low.

One of the subordinates leaped at Garrus, but the alpha spun on it, throwing it to the ground. Bodies crunched and jaws snapped.

Using the distraction, both Garrus and Martin opened fire, assault rifles pelting the varren with rounds. For a moment, it looked like they might just blow through the pack, but then the alpha charged and everything went to hell.

Two hundred kilos of wild fangs and claws slammed into Garrus with the force of a small skycar, throwing him onto his back. His rifle flew into the rubble as the pair of them half-rolled, half-slid headfirst down a ramp. The varren rode down on Garrus's belly, its extra weight grinding the cowl of the torin's armour into the concrete so that it screamed like talons slicing through reinforced steel. Garrus fumbled for his sidearm, trying to throw the massive animal off and roll free.

Exhilaration burned through him like a match set to tinder. Clawing for the varren's eyes, Garrus let out a bestial roar, all the pent up, gut churning stress and responsibility flaring like a biotic corona. He'd rip the fucking thing apart with his bare talons if he had to.

Then the animal's head erupted into a cloud of muck, splattering the faceplate of Garrus's helmet with red mist and chunks of bone and brain. A large shape stepped in front of the sun, casting a long shadow across the general.

"Vakarian," Wrex grumbled. "What are you doing here?"

Garrus rolled to his feet, casting a quick, grateful glance at Martin as the kid shoved his assault rifle back into his hands. "Looking for your stubborn old ass." He turned and waved Kandros in. "What the hell are you still doing out here?"
"We were sneaking up on the enemy until you idiots arrived!" The behemoth towered over him, flanked by seventeen of his warriors. He turned on Garrus, a hand slamming against the general's keel. "Give me one good reason to have my boys hold their fire, Vakarian."

"The bomb was never controlled by the turians, it was Blue Suns—probably working for the council—and they've all evacuated." The words spilled out so fast he couldn't even be sure Wrex would understand. "The bomb is going to go off in ten minutes, and if we aren't more than seventy klicks away, we're dead."

Wrex lumbered backwards, putting several metres between them, his entire body bristled and defensive. His pupils had constricted to pinpricks, a sign of the rage coursing through him, messing with his reason. "Why the hell should I believe you?"

For a moment, despair slammed down on Garrus with an intractable fist. He didn't have time to argue Wrex down. He just needed to get keep his word to Shepard, and get Martin on the shuttle. They still had enough time to clear the blast zone and get the shuttle parked somewhere.

"Because he's telling the truth you gigantic varren with the brain of a pyjak," Martin shouted back, breaking through Garrus's defeatist thoughts. He raced toward the clan chief, only to be snatched by one of the warriors. The kid spun into the contact, breaking the hold, then turned the krogan's momentum against him, flipping the massive male over his back. Pinning the warrior with one arm twisted just about out of the socket, Martin shoved the muzzle of his sidearm under the edge of the krogan's plate. "Don't touch me."

Garrus stormed up to Wrex, pulling his fist back before he even got close. "I just escaped my own damned ship ..." He swung, the punch slamming up into Wrex's chin with enough force to sit the krogan on his ass. "... to run halfway across your planet to rescue your stupid, stubborn ass, and you have the quad to ask me why you should believe me? When have I ever lied to you, Wrex? Swallow your fucking pride, and just listen to me. So far, your rash, bullheaded shit has nearly cost you your clan, and it's about to cost you your life, so get the fuck in that shuttle." He stabbed a finger behind him without bothering to see if Kandros was in place.

On cue, the shuttle settled to hover just above the ground a handful of metres away.

"Your people are responsible for this!" Wrex bellowed. "It wasn't krogan who buried that bomb to wipe us all out the moment we regained any strength. It was the fucking turians." He grabbed Garrus by the yoke of his armour and shook him hard enough that the general bit his tongue. "That was the plan the entire time, wasn't it? Every time we tried to stand up, you'd come along and slam us down so that we never recovered."

Garrus slapped the battlemaster's hands away, frustration and anger incinerating his good sense. "That was the plan over a millennia ago while your people were laying waste to everything. I wasn't there, and I'm not oppressing your people. I'm standing in front of you, trying to get your fat ass on my damned shuttle. My father and one of our best generals are evacuating your clan. General Victus sent his own son to disarm that bomb." Slamming both hands into Wrex's chest, he shoved the behemoth away. "Too bad the turians are all trying to bring you down, Wrex."

He shook his head and threw up his hands. "Forget it. Martin let that other idiot go, and get in the shuttle. I'm done trying to save this moron from himself." He backed away from Wrex. "You have the first opportunity since the krogan rebellions to sit down and actually negotiate with a top ranking member of Palaven's hierarchy, and with one of her top generals." His brow plates peaked as Wrex actually paused at that. "This whole incident puts the council over a barrel you could use to leverage your way into a fucking embassy. Imagine how many clans would have fallen in line behind the leader who pulled that one off?"
Wrex straightened, his pupils starting to return to normal.

Throwing an impatient hand behind him, Garrus turned. "In two years, I've never said this, Wrex, but I'm glad Shepard isn't here. Seeing you throwing the krogan away like this would make her sick."

Martin leaned out the shuttle door and bellowed, "Can you recommend someone to take your place?"

Garrus gave the kid a wild, almost maniacal grin as he jumped up into the shuttle. Reaching up, he started to shut the door, but then a giant hand yanked it open, wrenching Garrus's shoulder. The general met Wrex's eyes for a fraction of a second, then nodded.

Throwing himself into the copilot chair, he grabbed the map screen away from Kandros. "Head out of the zone, I'll try to find us a place to put this bird down."

Martin hit the floor between the seats, a massive body in burgundy armour pushing in to loom over him. Wrex shoved Garrus's hand out of the way, and shifted the map. "We need to get underground. Not enough time to get clear." He centered the scan in on a short, broken down tower. "Here," he said, jabbing a thick finger at the screen. "It's an old missile silo. Goes down a good seventy metres or so."

Martin wriggled up to peer at the screen, and moaned, "That's a hell of a long way down if the place collapses."

Garrus chuffed, the sound's nonchalance belying the thin yearning that accompanied the memory of Feros. "I've been buried deeper."

Wrex buffeted the general from behind and grumbled, "It'll hold. There's no one for you to cuddle with this time, Vakarian." The clan chief glanced over at Nyreen. "Well …." He turned and shouted something to his men. A couple of seconds later, reply came back. "Everyone's in."

Kandros shot Garrus a worried glance as her talons flew over the interface, taking the packed drunken space cow up just far enough to avoid smashing through ruins. Garrus just shrugged a little and tried to ignore the heavy pulse pounding under his jaw and at the top of his keel.

Following Wrex's advice and hunkering down amounted to the best they could do at … he glanced at his omnitool … six minutes and twenty eight seconds.

The time seemed to tick down too fast, the ground moving under them too slow … and yet the combination stretched the minutes into an impossible sort of slow motion. He thought about calling his father again, just to check in … to … to what? Say goodbye just in case?

They arrived at the ancient missile silo, the irony of hiding from a doomsday bomb within one of the sites responsible for Tuchanka's devastation not lost on Garrus. He held his breath while Nyreen eased their overloaded beast of burden down through many storeys of ruin and detritus. A couple of times, he started to say something, but then she'd cock a brow plate at him, shutting him up.

Just before they reached the bottom, static crackled loud in his aural canal, coming through his radio. A hand lifted to press to the interface on the side of his helmet. "Hello?"

"Garrus?" Nihlus's voice cut through the static. "Finally … trying to … you for …." The Spectre faded back out.

"Nihlus, you're breaking up." He cranked the volume. "Repeat."
"Distress call ... human colony ... —dom's Progress. Investigating ... ."

"Nihlus! Tuchanka was a set up," Garrus called, shouting despite knowing it wouldn't help. "Blue Suns boarded the Passch, trying to set Archangel up for the bomb. Be careful. Take back up."

The shuttle set down at the bottom of the silo, Kandros putting in a professional landing. No one paid much attention as they all focused their attention on him and his partial communication.

"Garrus?" Nihlus's voice disappeared beneath the static. "Repeat last. Blue Suns?"

The channel died. Garrus had just enough time to wonder why it had cut out so suddenly before the ground heaved. A giant caught in the throes of a seizure, the planet threw them around the cockpit like stones shaken in a can. Thunder boomed, deafening Garrus completely, the heaving of the ground exchanged for both the rumble and roar of a massive freight train speeding toward them.

After long moments, the roar of destruction faded into the susurrus of falling sand and the odd rattle of rocks tumbling down onto the space cow's metal hide.

"Do you think Nihlus heard you?" Martin whispered, as if afraid speaking to loudly might bring the whole place down on their heads.

Garrus shook his head as he peeled himself up off the floor in front of his seat. Everything hurt, and a thin trickle of blood rolled around the curve of his eye to drip off the end of his nose. "I don't know. I hope so."

Chapter End Notes

(A-N: Phew! Wrex you stubborn, proud old fool! So next chapter! I'm so excited, and I think you guys will be happy with the new development. At least I hope so. :D

So ... we are coming up on chapter 100, and I was thinking, I should do something special to mark the occasion. Some sort of event. Not being sure about these sorts of things due to my sad, sad fanfic cred ... I'm such a noob ... I thought I would ask you, the readers, if you would like anything special. Drabbles from Sassy, Garrus, and Nihlus's past. Some fanart? Whatever. I am open to suggestions.

Thanks to everyone who sent comments. I really do appreciate hearing from people. *hugs* to all!)
So, the surprise chapter! That is all. :D

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Vir:** A male chosen by the Prothean Genetic Authority to sire a female's children. Only during the last of a Prothean female's three fertile cycles was she allowed to choose the father. The government stepped in and enacted laws during the last half of the war due to the dwindling genetic base of the prothean race, and the need for genetically superior stock.

**Regulikar:** The Prothean central government.

**Netichik:** Insect analogues native to Palaven that have been exported to many colony worlds. About two centimetres long, they live in colonies burrowed into trees. Meat eaters, they drop out of trees in large masses onto the backs of animals passing beneath their nests.

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**20 Days ASR**

"Garrus?" A low growl of frustration rumbling through his second larynx, Nihlus leaned closer to the comm panel, as if that would help his voice carry through whatever interference had cut his *fratrin* off mid sentence. "Repeat last. Blue Suns?" He tilted his head and squeezed his eyes closed, straining to hear anything further, but got nothing. Too much interference. He slammed the heel of his hand down on the console, choking down worry with a burning swallow of disappointment.

As if he didn't have enough to worry about, already. Any second Anderson would arrive and want to know how he knew the colony on Freedom's Progress had come under attack. How in the name of *buratrum* was he going to explain that? Could he explain it? He laughed, low and bitter. No. Not a hope. Anderson would just glance at Nihlus's hip flask and then stand the *Normandy* down. If he actually wanted to get to the colony while they had a faint hope of finding out who and how, he needed to pull some 'Spectre channels', 'can't reveal my source' bullshit.

Shoving that aside, he focused on his current communication issue. Setting the recording back to the beginning, he filtered and cleaned it up the best he could, then ran it again, slightly slower.

The door to the comm room opened. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw it was Anderson and turned his full attention back to his *fratrin*'s message.

"Nihlus! Tuchanka was a set up." Nihlus squeezed his eyes closed again, struggling to pick Garrus's voice out of the static. "Wha … ?" he muttered. "Blue Suns." Letting out another rumble of annoyance, he rewound the last bit again.

"Blue Suns boarded the *Passch,*" Anderson supplied. "Something about the bomb and Archangel." He stepped up beside Nihlus, his head tilting as well. "Rewind it again."
"He said that the Suns tried to set Archangel up for the bomb on Tuchanka," a smooth, accented voice said from the back corner of the room.

"Thank you, Miss Goto," Nihlus replied without turning. He'd thought he felt the brush of her cloak as he entered the room. Spirits, he hoped he didn't ramble out loud at any point. He looked over at Anderson and cocked a brow plate. "Tried to set Archangel up for the bomb?" His hand ticked back toward his hip. No. He needed to keep moving, keep everything locked down. Pivoting on his talons, he paced to the door and back, his mind spinning through the possibilities. "How?"

"If he escaped or retook the Passch, maybe some of the crew survived," Anderson offered. He walked over to the closest seat and lowered himself onto the edge, a mask of concentration set over his stern, stoic face. "Maybe they can shed some light on what he's talking about."

The Spectre hadn't worked with many humans other than Shepard, but if he knew one thing, he knew that David Anderson would have been a fellow Spectre had it been Nihlus overseeing his evaluation. Anderson possessed intelligence and … more … a wisdom that tended to see the best way through situations. The captain had become Nihlus's tough-as-nails, unflagging bulwark and advisor since Hackett assigned the Normandy to liaise with Archangel.

However, that just made it harder to see the man struggling under the weight of the past nineteen months. Right then, Anderson looked so beaten down and exhausted that Nihlus nearly offered him a drink. Nihlus chuffed and pulled his hand away from his flask … again, slamming a door on the brandy's siren song. Of course, the captain never would have accepted the offer. He considered Nihlus's drinking to be a compromising weakness. Not that Nihlus disagreed, he just didn't have the time to stop and deal. That door closed hard as well, sealing two cycles worth of betrayal and loss away before the ghosts reached through to stab him with their frozen daggers. If the ghosts escaped, the other door would open as well, and he'd be excusing himself to visit the head while Anderson watched him with that knowing, disappointed stare.

He couldn't afford to give in to the yearning, not yet.

Drinking wiped the hard drive clean, at least for a while, and he needed to think … to reason the situation through. He closed his eyes, taking a second to steel himself against the need and all the reasons it burned through his bones. Later. When he got back from Freedom's Progress.

He heard the slight, electrical crackle as Kasumi materialized on her way across the comm room. At the console, she tapped away at the interface. "So, the Passchendaele was boarded by Blue Suns." She glanced back at Nihlus, her eyes flashing, just reflections under her hood. "Who knows the Suns best?"

Nihlus grinned despite himself and reached up to his radio. "Massani, get your ass over to the Normandy and up to the comm room."

"Yeah. Yeah. Unclench your scaly arse-cheeks, Kryik," the old merc grumbled. "Goddammit, I'm supposed to be semi-retired. And what am I bloody doing? Am I fishing? Drinking beer on a dock somewhere? No, I'm asking how fucking high every time some stick-up-his-arse says jump." He out a phlegmy cough before going back to a muttered diatribe of abuse and cursing, but Nihlus could hear his boots on the deck plating.

Asking how high? That would be the day. More like complaining about aching knees and a bad back, then asking for a cigarette and a boost.

Nihlus closed the channel without rising to Zaeed's bait and leaned over Kasumi's shoulder to see what she was doing. Hmm. Trying to isolate the Suns' jamming signal. Not a bad idea. If they
could get through to the *Passch*, they could find out what the hell was going on.

He shook his head when he saw where she was headed. "No, that algorithm might work if we were trying to break through Alliance or Hierarchy jamming, but mercs … ." A heavy scowl settled over his face even as he pushed in beside her. Something moved through the data … something that pricked at his memory. "Wait." He held his hands over the console, talons spread as if trying to frame the numbers, or maybe even feel the rhythms and undercurrents that lie beneath what he saw. "Look at this jamming signal."

His pulse thumped hard and fast at the top of his keel where the artery slipped over the bone, and his entire body hummed, as if charged. He knew that signal, dedicated half a lifetime to studying it … trying to understand it.

The thief stopped her work, then shrugged. "That's not a jamming signal. That's just background radiation … space noise."

He cocked a brow plate at her. "Space noise?"

She grinned and shrugged. "What else are you going to call it?" Another careless shrug changed the subject. "Anyway, that can't be the interference. It's spread over too large an area to be some sort of jamming."

Nihlus shook his head. "No, it's the reason we can't get through. I've seen it before." His turn to shrug and he tilted his head a little. That wasn't exactly true. "It was one of the biggest hurdles to Prothean communications once the war started. It blacked out whole systems, and they never found a way around it because it's a naturally occurring resonance."

Allowing Merol's memories to lead, he isolated the problem. "It doesn't behave like a normal jamming signal. It doesn't eat up bandwidth or override other signals. It cancels the signal using targeted destructive interference."

He sent a test signal toward the *Passchendaele*. "Watch." The foreign signal modulated along the same band, cancelling out the communication. "It's unbelievably elegant … acts intelligently."

"Wait," Anderson said. "If that signal blanks out whole systems, how did you get the message through to Garrus in the first place?" He stood and walked over, watching over Nihlus's arm. "Anyway, as fascinating as this is, it doesn't change the fact that Garrus walked into a trap."

"And the general thinks we are too," Kasumi agreed. "He warned you to take backup."

Nihlus nodded and turned away from the tempting mystery, Merol fighting him the whole way. "Miss Goto, head up to the bridge. Keep trying to get a message through to the *Passch*. We might luck out again." If his message getting through had been luck. Something whispered in the back of his head that it had been deliberate. Merol kept hammering away at there being an intelligence behind the signal.

Pushing that aside as well, and without waiting for Kasumi to reply, he set back to pacing, mind worrying through Garrus's message. Nihlus had brought along the *Banquan* and *Aesarus*, the frigates newly returned from batarian space. Archangel standard procedure required no fewer than three vessels to investigate a potentially hostile situation.

"He knew we'd have three ships," he mused out loud. "Still thought we'd need back up."

"The Suns boarded the *Passch,*" Anderson added. "There's only one way L'Tsai lets a ship get that close."
A vicious smile greeted that thought, the picture starting to form. "That's what they're doing with our ships." The rest fell into place. "They took over the Passch rather than destroying it. They wanted General Vakarian to become a war criminal. That's what Garrus meant about them setting Archangel up. They were going to use our ships, attack the krogan, set off the bomb." He stopped pacing and turned to the captain, and raised his hand back to his radio. "Massani, don't bother coming over to the Normandy. The Banquan is going to need you."

"Bloody hell. I was just about to …." The merc cursed again. "Fine. Massani returning to the Banquan. Fucking hell."

Anderson hit the intercom. "Alenko, all hands to general quarters." The captain lead the way from the comm room, striding quickly past the galaxy map. "It's brilliant. They set the general up for Tuchanka, and set us up for Freedom's Progress. Forget that Archangel couldn't possibly subdue a thousand people without them sending out a distress call let alone nine hundred and eighty thousand."

Nihlus jogged up the ramp a stride behind. "People are scared. They don't need a reason to grab hold of a villain, any villain." A grim, bitter chuckle rattled between his teeth. "I've never known reason to interfere with a good panic."

Anderson scoffed and glanced over his shoulder. "Or a good lynching. Archangel will be strung up and dangling before anyone even wonders how we managed to abduct millions of people."

Nihlus smiled at the 'we' in that sentence, the captain's allegiance to his dead daughter's cause warming the Spectre through. His hand drifted back to the outside of his thigh, patting the pouch attached to his armour. If it wasn't for the whole 'too pathetic to live with himself' factor, he'd just carry a water bottle or thermos. At least then he could pretend that everyone's glares and pitying glances were unfounded. His chuckle came out both a lot louder and a lot more bitter than he liked.

"Not to mention what the heck we're doing with them all," Joker called from his chair. "What? Are they thinking we have them stacked out back like cordwood?"

"That's what I do with my victims," Kasumi quipped. She glanced over her shoulder as Nihlus stepped up behind the co-pilot's chair and rested his hands on the back. "The Aralakh system isn't jammed any more," she continued, "but there's an insane amount of EM interference. Looks like you were cut off by the bomb detonating. I still can't reach the Passch. Looks like the Suns took out their comms when they boarded."

Nihlus acknowledged the thief with a quick nod. Garrus hadn't been caught in the explosion. He knew that with complete certainty. His fratrin possessed a great many admirable traits, intelligence and caution numbering amongst them. Well, and he'd consider getting Weaver killed the ultimate betrayal of Shepard's memory.

"I hope Garrus found Wrex before he had to bug out," Kaidan said. The lieutenant commander strode into the cockpit. "The Normandy is secure at general quarters, Captain." He greeted Nihlus with a nod. "There's a message for you at the QEC, Nihlus. It's Ash. She contacted me directly, says that it's an emergency. She tried to get through to Garrus, but …." He shrugged.

Nihlus looked out the starboard port. "How long to the relay?" he asked, barely able to see the device's glow as a pinprick in the distance. Just another star amidst the millions. Despite the fifty people sharing the Normandy, he suddenly felt very alone and chilled through. He turned up the heater in his armour as he pivoted to head back to the comm room.

"An hour. Two hours to the secondary relay, then four hours to Freedom's Progress," Joker
reported. "You've got time to take a shower, nap, chow down on some dextro-getti ... polish the stick up your ass."

Nihlus walked away as Anderson whacked the pilot in the back of the head and ordered Alenko to spell out the crew every two hours. His hand wandered back to his thigh, the heel resting on the pouch flap. Why would Ashley be calling him? Since she joined the scout flotilla, he hadn't heard a word. He knew Garrus spoke to her at regular intervals, but using message drops, never directly. It proved too dangerous to her cover.

He strode straight down to the QEC pad and opened the connection. Where was she calling from to have access to a QEC on the Archangel network? That question set off every alarm he possessed. Damn Garrus for being out of contact. He didn't know what to tell the soldier if she was in trouble. He didn't have access to her extraction details.

"Spectre Kryik," the Chief Operations Officer greeted him formally, saluting. "Sorry for bringing this to you, but I had to report in before my group gets their shit together." She shifted a little from foot to foot and glanced behind her as if she expected to be walked in on.

"Where are you calling from, Williams? Are you secure?" The alarms in his head shrieked and his hand twitched. He pulled it away from its obsession to lean on the console.

"You could say that. I'm at Archangel home base. I brought a group of evacuees to Mordin's hospital." She shook her head and raised her hands to stall his questions. "I don't have much time. As soon as my people are treated, I need to get them on transports to Cerberus's main station." She took a deep breath and shook her head a little. "I was assigned to a research station in the Terminus. My project was a prototype ship design, but there were hundreds of projects based out of the station. I've never seen security as paranoid as that place. I ran the security for a project so classified that I never laid eyes on it."

Nihlus's brow plates and mandibles dropped. Cerberus developing prototype ships didn't mean anything good. They might currently be aimed at the Reapers, but what about afterward? He shook that off and focused back on the chief. She wouldn't have called about that.

"Several hours ago ... ." She looked at her omnitool, then shook her head. "Hell, I don't even know exactly how long ago it was. Anyway, the base was attacked. We were already evacuating ... something to do with another project that had gone off the reservation ... but then everything went to hell. The whole comm network went dark, and we didn't even get out a distress call before swarms of biomechanical insect analogues about the size of my hand flooded the station." She held up her hand, cupped as if holding one of the swarm. "They overrode our security without even pausing and flooded the place in seconds."

"They froze their victims ... immobilized them?" Nihlus said, the picture appearing in his head. His stomach rolled over and slipped down to tangle in his guts as Merol's memory unfurled. He straightened and squared his shoulders. "Did the Collectors board?"

Deep wrinkles creased the woman's brow and one eyebrow cocked in a scowl that answered his question. She'd remember a Collector if she'd seen one. "Collectors, sir? I thought they were just myths." An impatient shake of her head dismissed it as unimportant.

Nihlus would have laughed if he hadn't been choking on the urge to vomit. Not much was more important. "They're all too real, but go ahead."

"While we were evacuating in the chaos, I swear ... ." She hesitated again and blushed, as if she was embarrassed or had thought better of bringing whatever it was to his attention. "Well, I swear I
saw Captain Shepard, sir."

Nihlus's heart leaped for a moment before reality crashed down on it. Staggering a little, he leaned into the console a little heavier. He'd watched Shepard die. "This was a research base?"

She nodded and stepped forward. "Yes, sir. It set off all my alarms, too. I wouldn't put an infiltration project past this group. Scuttlebutt says the Illusive Man has shut himself in his private floor of the main base. He doesn't meet with anyone in person any more. They say that his paranoia about the Reapers has him conducting all sorts of really horrible and questionable projects." She shuddered, then let out a weak chuckle. "I don't like to listen to rumours most of the time, sir, but this place." She glanced around, then relaxed a little as if realizing that she was no longer a fly tangled in a web. "Well, that place made the rumors all too plausible."

Ashley rolled her shoulders and set her jaw, buttoning herself down. "It could be a clone or someone made over to look like her. The likeness was remarkable. Right height and build ... ." She shrugged again, looking decidedly uncomfortable. "And ... um ... sir, Dr. T'Soni and a turian were with the group. I thought the general might want to look into it. It's weird as hell to see an alien anywhere near Cerberus." To give her credit, her expression twisted, as if she'd rather do just about anything other than report on Liara. "For it to be someone close to Archangel makes me nervous, especially if she's involved with this fake Shepard."

Nihlus nodded, agreeing completely. As far as he'd heard, Liara was on Thessia. She would need a hell of an explanation for being involved with some Cerberus cloning project. "And you saw a turian? Any ID there?"

Williams shook her head. "He wore a heavy cloak. I could tell he was turian by his general build, but that was all I saw. I was busy trying to get two hundred people into a lifeboat." She glanced behind her. "I've got to go, sir. If I can dig up any information on whatever nightmares Cerberus is cooking up, I'll send it on. Maybe now we're headed to Cerberus headquarters I won't be so isolated." She saluted. "Be careful, sir. I don't know what all this means, but ... ."

He straightened and nodded. "Take care, Williams, and thanks for the heads up." He closed down the QEC, then opened a channel to Thessia. He needed to discover Liara's location and what she was up to.

Shiala answered the call. "Nihlus. Hello."

A quick nod answered her greeting. "Shiala. I need to speak with Liara." He narrowed his eyes, the deep, churning ache in his gut deepening as the asari blanched. "Where is she?"

"She headed out on her own about a week ago." Shiala wriggled a little, her cheeks colouring. She'd make a terrible infiltrator ... or poker player. "She's kept in touch via comms, but the channels are always too heavily encrypted to trace back."

The fact that she'd tried said a great deal about the circumstances of Liara's departure. "Can you reach her?" When she indicated that she could, he continued, "Send me the frequency." He signaled its arrival with a curt nod. "Thank you, Shiala. Kryik out."

He changed frequencies, opening a channel to Liara. Mysterious didn't get a chance to fester into betrayal. Not with everything blowing up around Garrus lately.

"Nihlus." Liara's whispered voice came through with no image. "Ah ... hello. What can I do for you?"
Mysterious? Bullshit. She'd just sprinted all the way to suspicious.

"Liara. Where are you? Shiala says you took off a week ago, wouldn't say where you were going." He laced enough menace through his subvocals to drive home that he wouldn't tolerate any subterfuge.

"An old friend needed me. I'm hoping we'll be on our way to you soon. There's a lot to explain, but it really needs to be done in person." She went silent for a second, her voice barely audible when she spoke again. "Nihlus, I'm not exactly in friendly territory at the moment. Can you just trust me for a little while? It's nothing that is going to hurt Garrus or you or Archangel. I promise that."

Garrus? Or him? Personally? He wasn't Archangel hierarchy. "Ashley Williams saw you on a Cerberus base with someone she said looked exactly like Jane Shepard. What are they up to, Liara?" He leaned into the interface as if looming over her, even by proxy, would help impress his serious intent on her. He gave her thirty seconds to reply, then called, "Liara? Who is the look alike?"

"I really can't explain like this, Nihlus," the whisper came back. "I've got to go. She's waking up. I promise you, I'll get back to Archangel within a week, and bring all the answers with me." A voice called in the background … sounded like someone searching for the asari. "I've got to go. See you soon."

The channel went dead.

Nihlus's shoulders slumped, taking his breath with it. His flask cleared his pouch and poured a long draught into his mouth before he even realized he'd reached for it. Damn. He replaced the cap and slid it back into the pouch. Alcohol breath was all he needed when Anderson came at him with the inevitable questions.

The door chimed. Well, at least Anderson trusted him enough to ring rather than bursting in with demands.

Nihlus turned to face the door. "Come in."

The portal slid open to reveal the captain. A sardonic half-grin and a cocked eyebrow announced Anderson's opinion about having to ask permission to enter his own comm room. "Is Chief Williams all right?" he asked, walking in to take his usual seat. He leaned back and crossed an ankle over the opposite knee, his hands held relaxed in his lap.

Nihlus nodded and let out a long breath. No, not the compassionate discussion position. Shit. He perched on the edge of the closest chair. "Yeah, seems so. She came into some urgent intel. I followed up on it. We should have the answers on Omega in a week." He chuffed deep in his chest. "So, Captain, have we reached the 'explain yourself, Spectre' portion of the mission?"

Anderson mashed a shrug into a shake of his head. "You're a Spectre, you don't have to explain anything to anyone, but I would like to know what I'm flying my people into." He dropped his foot to the floor and leaned forward, forearms on his knees, fingers steepled. "I hope by now you know that I'm your ally, Nihlus. I won't betray your confidence."

Yeah, Nihlus knew that. Still, he didn't know if Anderson's crazy-tolerance levels could take the weird shit going on inside his head. Of course, the man had endured more than a decade of Shepard. How much weirder could a couple of dead Protheans, a rachni queen, and dreams of snow calling for help be, anyway? Okay, the last … way too crazy … for anyone.
Anderson raised his eyebrows, obviously expecting an answer, but didn't speak, leaving the pressure on.

Where to start? "You know that Shepard and I shared the beacon messages and the cipher?" Nihlus waited for the captain's nod before diving in. "Well, when the rachni queen helped us sort through some of the Prothean memories, she made herself a cozy little corner in the back of my head and moved in." He sighed and slumped in the chair, Joker's idea of a nap suddenly seeming very appealing. "Are you sure you want in on that mess?"

After meeting the captain's unflinching stare for twenty seconds, Nihlus relented. "All right. I received a message through a dream. I'm certain the rachni queen acted as its courier, but all I know about the source is Freedom's Progress." A lie, but close enough to the truth.

"Ashley's call clued me in to what we're dealing with out here … the colony disappearances, at least." He slipped in the change of subject, hoping Anderson just let it pass. "It's the Collectors. At least, that's what they're called now. They were Protheans. The Reapers saw utility in their biotics and the hardiness of their genetics, and so began a long process of subversion." He shuddered, remembering the first versions, still looking so much like lost friends and loved ones that people threw themselves into arms they thought would lead to reunion, but instead, led only to horror and death.

Nihlus cleared his throat and shifted in his seat, stretching his neck to ease the fist clamped around his windpipe. "Anyway, the command and control versions of these subverted Protheans deployed a weapon … swarms of insectile bio-machines that placed people into stasis." He closed his eyes, the image of Tashac and Merol's last evacuation vivid in his mind. He could still feel the tiny hands of Tashac's children clinging to him … the depth of his terror for them.

He shook it off. It wasn't him. It wasn't Nihlus who loved the children sired by that pompous, intractable idiot the Regulikar chose as Tashac's median vir. He never mourned those same children when they went to war and never returned. All of that was Merol. An ashen, wintery emptiness blew through, whispering to him how alone he remained.

Nihlus took a deep breath and forced himself back on track, the brandy settling in, easing that chill as it always did. A sigh of relief greeted the comforting burn that spread up his spine and along his bones. He looked up, meeting Anderson's stare. "The swarms were a weapon brought in near the end of the war. Fast and efficient, they allowed the engineered Prothean husks, of which there were millions by that point, to do a lot of the harvesting out in the more remote colonies."

Anderson straightened. "It makes sense. Take out the comms, send in the swarms to subdue the colony in minutes, then clean up. Quick, brutal, and over in hours, long before anyone can investigate let alone mount an offensive." He shoved himself up out of his chair. "You think this warning of yours will give us enough time to save this colony?"

The temptation to lie crawled over Nihlus's skin like a swarm of netichik. So many millions of humans just gone … would it hurt to allow for a little hope? He stood and followed Anderson to the door. Suddenly, he really needed a nap, maybe some food … and a drink.

Pausing at the threshold, Anderson turned back, waiting for Nihlus's answer.

The Spectre shook his head, the truth ugly … and heavy enough to splinter his bones beneath its weight. "No. Hopefully, we'll get there in time to collect evidence … something to help us fight them. The people are already lost."
So, my little surprise! I thought of doing an April's Fool chapter where everyone died. The End. But nah, much more fun to get this chapter ready to post. So, is it a good thing, bringing him in? With all three of the main characters taking on missions without the other two, I feared poor old Nihlus would get lost for long periods of time without bringing him in. :D

I got several awesome ideas for things I could do to celebrate 100 chapters. I'll be doing a separately posted drabble collection. Other suggestions were Niftu Cal making an appearance, which was already planned, an eating contest between Sassy and Wrex ... very doable, and the most exciting thing ... Curious Canvas who did the cover image of Shepard's memorial is doing up some sketches from the scene I think we've all wanted to see for a long time. :D And that's all I have to say about that. ;)

Thanks as always to those who comment. You keep my spirits bolstered when they lag.
Chapter Summary

The enemy have revealed themselves. Shepard starts to assemble what she'll need to fight the Collectors.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gasin - Prothean male the age of majority. (Dropped from 20 to 13 over the course of the war.)

Takun - Prothean female the age of majority. (Dropped from 20 to 13 over the course of the war.)

21 Days ASR

Shepard awoke facing something that looked a lot like a medbay ceiling. A glance to her left confirmed her suspicion. Medbay. A young blonde woman in a medical uniform stood behind a desk in front of a bank of windows. The captain's twitchy inner bitch took in the doctor's youthful turnout and clicked over to its instant snark setting. Seriously, who dedicated that much time and effort to their hair and makeup aboard a warship? She couldn't remember the last time she actually brushed her hair.

Shepard hoisted her head, wobbly and weighed down, from her pillow, looking past the medical debutante to the uncovered windows, suddenly feeling naked as hell.

"What is this? The sick and injured freak show?" she said or more accurately, barked, her throat dry and rough. Nervous eyes glanced under her blankets to make sure they'd been considerate enough to dress her in something. A gown. Better than nothing. Yanking the surprisingly soft, cotton coverings up around her neck, she wriggled around until she managed to get her feet off the side of the bed without exposing herself anywhere. "Hey! Doc, close the damned privacy shades. I possess a very low tolerance for being on display."

The woman slapped a control and metal shutters rumbled down over the large ports. "Apologies, Captain. You were unconscious when you were brought down here, and my concern lay in preserving your vital functions rather than your delicate sensibilities." Was that an eyeroll? Shepard narrowed her eyes into a laser glare. Had the doctor just eyerolled her CO? The woman strode over and activated her omnitool.

Shepard bit back an acidic grin. The doctor had pluck. Reminded her a little of Chakwas. Although, Chakwas would have never forgotten the shutters, those small considerations just ingrained over the years. She wondered how the doctor fared … if she remained aboard the Normandy … a bolt of pain shattered that line of thought. Damn Miranda and her memory blocks. She pressed the heel of one hand into her eye socket. Had the doctor asked her something? One eye opened a slit to find an even and professional, but enquiring blue-eyed stare levelled on her.

The doctor cocked an eyebrow, waiting. "How are you feeling, Captain?"

How was she feeling? Closing her eyes, she did an inventory. Body … aching at about an eight—
someone has stomped on my feet in pointy heeled shoes and slammed both hands in a door. Hmm, that felt like a slight improvement. Head … throbbing at about a fourteen. What was that again? Sepsis has caused so much pus that the axe blade is actually rusting in the wound? Yeah, that sounded about right.

"Thirsty," she said aloud after a good minute, her priorities asserting themselves. She opened one eye. "And I could use something for my head. Feels like it's going to crack open and my eyeballs are going to spill out, riding a massive wave of brain puke."

A cackling laugh drew her attention to the bed across from her. "Gross," a young woman said, a broad grin showing perfect teeth behind equally perfect, full lips.

Shepard scowled. Had she been resurrected by the society for the advancement of stunningly gorgeous people? Seriously? Why had they bothered with her? Shepard fought down the urge to hate the newcomers based on their beauty alone. Not easy with the axe twisting in her head. The revoltingly perfect set of large, brown eyes that returned her gaze just made the job that much harder. She was going to need to recruit some normal people.

The young woman leaned up a little, revealing that she had been handcuffed to the bed. "If your head splits open, someone needs to take vid. We'll make a fortune."

Shepard's mouth quirked a little at the corner. She really was doomed to be surrounded by smart asses with far too much attitude. "Use half the proceeds to reassemble me again so I can come back and kick ass, we have a deal." She pressed both eyes closed again, waiting for the vorcha to stop rooting through her brain cells. "You have a name over there?" she asked without looking up.

A decidedly vulgar snort and a choice curse answered her question before the prisoner thumped back down onto the bed. "Yeah, a few. Go by Jack most of the time." She lifted her shaved head from the pillow, eyes in constant motion. She felt caged, vulnerable, and judging by the way her jaw clenched, hated it every bit as much as Shepard did. Maybe more. Maybe enough to be dangerous.

"You one of their experiments too, Jack?" Shepard asked. She didn't doubt it, but felt that given the manic, violent energy coming off the girl, tried to defuse a little of the volatility in that stare. It didn't take any special psychic powers to see that a lot of people had taken a lot of decisions out of her hands and taken a lot of liberties with her person. She screamed with a 'screw the entire universe' vibe that rang all too familiar.

"Yeah, and they aren't the first. How about you? That uptight cheerleader said something about having brought you back from the dead." The handcuffs rattled. "You do have a zombie cyborg creepiness going, with the glowing cracks and shit."

Shepard grinned and nodded, still not looking up. "Yeah, had the back of my head blown out just over a year and a half ago. Apparently Miranda's boss fished my casket out of space after my funeral and then ... " She stuck her arms out, stiff, her fingers curled into claws. "... ZAAAP! Bride of Frankenstein." One eye opened, meeting Jack's. "Captain Jane Shepard. Pleased to meet you, Jack." Her hand migrated back to press against the eye as it closed.

The doctor pressed a cold bottle of water into Shepard's hand, then gave her two injections. "You should be feeling better in a few moments, Captain," the woman said. "Lie back—"

"Excellent." Shepard emptied the bottle in a single go, letting out a loud, satisfied 'ahhhh'. Then, setting her jaw and pressing her lips into a thin, determined line, she moved to hop down. She had no intention of spending the first day of her new command lying around and playing the invalid.
Crews needed to see activity, competence, and grit, not 'ow ... my tummy hurts, I need some Pepto and an aspirin'. "Do you have clothes here, or do I have to do the walk of the full moon to find some?"

The doctor blocked Shepard's path, crossing her arms and cocking a hip, the very soul of stubborn determination. "Captain Shepard, you can't get out of bed yet. I'm not finished with my scans, and your treatment is days from being complete."

Shepard threw back her blankets despite the fact that every centimetre of her body agreed with the doc. In fact, she was pretty sure that if she got out of bed right then, she'd carry right on down to land in a pile on the floor. Still, points had to be made ... lines drawn ... all that crap.

"How long have you been a doctor?" she asked. Stretching carefully, she paused to rub all the particularly vicious aches and pains.

The doc shifted, and straightened, pride giving her bearing. "Three years, but I don't see—"

Shepard chuckled, cutting her off. "Wow, that long. Well, let me educate you on dealing with me. There's no way in hell you can keep me in bed if I'm conscious. Jack me full of drugs ... " She glanced over at the tattooed beauty on the other bed ... how had she missed the tats? Must be the axe in her skull. "—Sorry, no trademark or copyright infringement intended—and turn me loose, because you'll have to tranq me to keep me."

"Tranquilize you to keep you in medbay?" Horror sharpened the young woman's pale features, making her seem even younger. "That's unethical in the extreme, Captain. I can't do that."

Shepard lifted an eyebrow. "Really? Unethical? I could have used this info a couple of years ago."

"As in get my license revoked unethical, yes." The doctor opened her omnitool and tapped at the interface. "At least allow me to complete your scans. These readings look like someone took a wand blender to your brain."

Shepard grinned. "Are there swirls? Soft or hard peaks? If so, can I see?"

"Hell, yeah," Jack said. "I want to see those too." She laughed, hard and pointed, and tugged at her restraints. "And let me out of these fucking cuffs. Where the hell am I going to go?" A deep rumbling curse met the doctor's lack of response.

"We'll deal with that in a minute," Shepard promised. "Back to my brain meringue." Letting out a long sigh when the doc just stared, the captain slumped on the bed. "I'm the CO of this damned vessel, the least you could do is laugh at my jokes." Nothing. Damn ... not even a twitch. "Fine, you have ten minutes to run your scans, but then I expect to get to work."

That settled, she turned her attention to the young woman with the tattoos and those huge, brown eyes. "So, what's your story, Jack? I take it you share a certain lack of love for our hosts?" She knew the answer even as she asked and a faint blue nimbus formed around the young woman.

"Hell, yeah. Bastards." Jack tugged at the cuffs again. "Let me loose, and I'll tell you." Her eyes tried for pleading and guileless, but so much rage poured through that it fell flat. As much as Shepard hated people trying to manipulate her, beneath the facade and the anger, she saw a sadness and a real vulnerability that Jack tried to keep locked away, even from herself.

"You want to get turned loose?" Shepard asked, dropping her voice to a 'no bullshit' register. "Play straight with me. I don't give a flying fig if you yell and throw things around. I don't care if you spend your days being an insufferable bitch, just don't try to play me." Her eyebrows lifted, her
brow creasing into earnest waves. "Understood? I'm not your enemy, Jack, and there are other people on this ship who aren't, so I want your word … your honour … that you won't do anything to put the vessel or it's occupants at risk."

Jack's stare narrowed, dropping the pretense. "What's your story, Captain Shepard?" She threw a lot of weight and attitude on the captain part. Despite the barely controlled fury simmering in the girl's glare, it reassured the captain. At least the fury was honest. She understood it, and the young woman's mistrust of authority figures, all too well.

Only honesty and following through on sincerity would have any real, lasting effect, so Shepard asked, "Did you hear about the attack on Eden Prime? The dreadnought that attacked the Citadel?"

Jack nodded. "Fuck yeah, who hasn't?" Her face froze. "No, fucking way? You're that Captain Shepard? But … ." Shepard saw her connect the pieces. "Some asshole blew you away in an alley the day they made you a Spectre." Craning her head, she tried to see around behind Shepard. "Bet getting your brain blown out leaves a hell of a scar."

A slow, soft chuckle greeted that, and Shepard turned to show the young woman the massive scar on the back of her head. "Apparently, they brought me back to keep fighting the Reapers." Her shoulders drew up to her ears and then dropped. "And now entire human colonies are disappearing." Her gaze slid to the floor, snow melting down a window. "I'm in for a fight against bad guys so big and scary that I sort of wish they'd left me dead."

Jack bristled. "So, I have the evil aliens to thank for being here instead of being tortured and pumped full of drugs?" A soft growl rolled from her throat. "I should find them, sign up."

Shepard smiled, a weary, bitter rictus seizing her lips even as she let the rest of her face slump. "Actually, that would be me. Miranda's bosses moved you to the ship because I was about to spring my 'escape and take all their experiments with me' plan. The bad guys just took advantage of the chaos." A hard shake made her head screech in protest but helped clear the image of all those frozen people out of her mind's eye.

Looking up, Shepard raised one eyebrow. "If I let you out of those cuffs, you'll find a hidey hole for the rest of the trip? No sabotage? No vengeance against any of the organization's employees?"

She stared into those eyes, discovering another layer … the desire to believe in something … someone. Then again, maybe she was just projecting. "Jack, I give you my word that no one on this ship will try to stop you from leaving when we make port." A wry grin twisted her lips. "If, by then, you haven't decided to stay and give me a hand taking on the biggest, scariest, most badass monsters in the universe."

Jack scoffed, but—and maybe it was wishful thinking again—Shepard liked the promising set of the young woman's shoulders and jaw. "Fine, but I have a condition, too, Shepard." Her eyebrows rose toward her shaved hairline, questioning … no, daring, Shepard to refuse.

"Hit me. If I can accommodate you, I will. Being the CO of this bird has to give me some ability to call the shots." She winked and let her head sag to one side a little … although the meds were starting to work, offering some relief. "What's your condition?"

"I was stolen from my home and raised in a Cerberus facility. They isolated me, tortured and experimented on me all in the name of creating a stronger biotic." Jack must have seen the flash of searing hatred that greeted her mention of Cerberus, because she leaned forward a little. "I eventually killed my guards, caused a riot, and escaped. I've spent my time trying to track down all the information I can find on that facility. I want to know what happened to it … to the bastards who did this to me … ." She tilted her head to reveal several scars along her scalp and neck, red
through the tats. "I haven't been anywhere with a computer like this baby has to have. I want computer access so I can do some digging."

Shepard nodded. "Not sure I can help with the access to everything Cerberus, although … ." She looked over at the doc and thought better of voicing her suspicions. Giving Jack a meaningful stare that the biotic met with a nod of understanding, she said, "But I'll give you unfettered access to the computers and you can go to town. Good enough?"

The door opened. "You have no authority to do that, Shepard," Miranda said even as she strode over the threshold. You can't just give anyone access to the computers and systems aboard this vessel. There are security concerns."

Shepard raised her eyebrows, a wicked grin sharpening to points. "Oh? Will Jack find all sorts of Cerberus information in the computers, Miranda?" After a few seconds of shooting dagger-edged glares at one another, Shepard shrugged. "Fine. If I'm not the captain of this ship, if my orders are not law, then let me out on … ." She frowned. "Where are we, anyway? Well, whatever. Jack, Al, and the rest of the lab rats will disembark at the nearest spaceport." She turned to the doctor. "I'm feeling better. Are you finished with your scans?"

"Yes, but … Captain … ."

Shaking her head, Shepard eased herself down off the bed. "Clothes, now." She met both women with steel. "I won't debate every last damned thing I say. Now, clothes and then Miranda will show me to the other lab rats." Two fingers stabbed toward Jack. "Uncuff her. She's not a prisoner."

"She's been responsible for more criminal activity over the years than most pirate gangs," Miranda protested, her voice moving into operative in charge mode and her face doing that … arrogant, 'I know what I'm doing, and you're just my patient' thing. "She's not—"

"Do you want to push this to where I have to do something unfortunate?" Shepard asked, shoving into Miranda's space. For a moment, she balled her fist, her entire limb trembling, muscles burning with the effort it took to remain at her side. "We had this discussion on the station. If you don't want to follow my lead, fine. I get off, but all your other victims go with me."

Miranda brought up her omnitool, opening the usual interface, but Shepard moved faster, grabbing her wrist. "Take all the fucking notes you want, but that's the way it is. I command this ship and its crew. I command my team. Or I leave." Squeezing hard enough to feel the bones in the operative's wrist grinding together, Shepard waited, keenly aware of the bright gaze watching them from the side. "I can fight the Reapers either way." Her brows knit together again, her shoulders pulling up, and she released Miranda. "Why do you want me anyway? It's not like my reputation for being a pain in the ass of universal proportions isn't well known."

Miranda took a deep breath and shut down her omnitool. "You put together a multi-billion credit portfolio, brought down the man behind one of the most powerful and covert private military companies in the terminus, brokered peace between the quarians and geth, started the krogan on a path to becoming a contributing member of the galactic community, rescued and apparently convinced the rachni to aid the fight, and brought down both a Spectre and a Reaper in the span of less than half a year."

"Well shit," Jack said, her expression almost respectful, if surprised. She whistled. "Aren't we the overachiever?"

"I do sound pretty awesome when you lay it all out like that." Shepard cast a quick wink and a grin at the biotic before dropping back to neutral and focusing on Miranda again. "Look, I can go far,
far away, and still take down the Collectors and the Reapers without you and I butting heads over everything."

Miranda nodded. After a moment, she turned on the balls of her feet and strode over to Jack. A second's hesitation betrayed the operative's ongoing battle, but then she unlocked the cuffs and turned back to face Shepard, almost defiant. "You command this vessel, Captain."

Shepard flushed a little as she cast a petty, victorious glance at the doctor. "Clothes. Please." Sometimes, she really did act like a child, but even the small, petty victories remained victories.

Jack leaped off the bed and stretched, but then reached behind her head to her empty amp port. "Where is it?" she asked, rage flashing up to erupt through the demand. Those big eyes turned cold and hard as they moved from the doctor, to Miranda, and then Shepard.

Shepard in turn, stayed fixed on Miranda. "Are the psychos in charge of Jack's project on board?" She winced even as she finished the sentence.

_Nice one, Janey. Let the slightly psychotic kid with the overclocked experimental biotic power know that the people who tortured her are present and ready for killing._

"No," Miranda replied, easing that concern. "She was slated to be one of your team members for the investigation into the missing colonies, so was turned over to me when you were activated." She sighed, a sound that came remarkably close to dread for Miranda. "As was one other project."

"I'm assuming you don't mean Al," Shepard turned to the doctor as the woman approached with an armload of clothing. "Thank you, Doctor." She set them on the bed, then began to dress, slipping underwear on beneath the gown. Glancing up, she cocked an eyebrow at the operative. "You don't expect Al to stay with us any more than I do, yes?"

Miranda nodded, and opened her mouth to respond but an indignant yelp of rage cut the woman off.

"Wait!" Jack threw herself between them, her face caught in a tug of war between panic, derision, and fury. "I'm supposed to answer to the uptight cheerleader in the rubber sex suit?" She laughed, but no trace of amusement ran through it. "No fucking way."

"While on board this ship," Shepard replied, slicing through the rant with a sharp cut of her hand and a bladed tone, "you answer to me." She lowered her head but raised her eyes. "And our deal stands. You're free to move around the ship and access the computer as long as you find somewhere out of the way and leave people alone. When we make port, if you want to leave, that's fine. If you stay, I'll find you an amp. You have my word on that."

Jack's head jerked in a single nod, her eyes sparking like a downed electrical line as she stared at Miranda. Then she straightened, still steel and fury, but easing as she looked at Shepard. "Deal. If you need me, I'll be somewhere down near the bottom where no one will stumble across me."

"Thank you, Jack." She watched after the biotic until the door closed behind her, then focused an open, speculative gaze back to Miranda. "Now, this other project?" Tugging on a set of ribbed leggings, she glanced down the room at the doctor, seeing that she wore them as well. What the hell was wrong with trousers? Her spindly little legs were going to look like plucked chicken parts dressed in those. Sweet baby Jesus.

The operative let out a short breath, actually managing to appear grateful. "Thank you for not making her any more dangerous, Shepard."
A short, sharp chortle greeted that and Shepard gave her head a quick shake. "I'm not an idiot, Dr. Frank, but I'll need that amp. I think Jack will end up sticking around." A wry, crooked grin followed that lasted until she stripped off the gown. "Okay, so the other lab rat?"

Miranda jutted her chin toward the door at the back of the room. "I had his project leaders put him in the server room for now. Honestly, I'm not sure we should activate him. He's far too volatile."

Shepard froze, not knowing where to start addressing all the things wrong with that statement. Volatility. Assess the risk first. "More volatile than Jack, Al, or me?"

The operative let out a very unprofessional grunt that answered the question. "He's a unique case, Shepard. I'm not sure we should take the chance."

Shepard tugged on the long tunic and fastened it across her chest. "We'll deal with his mood swings in a second." Dread coiled through her guts, copper and saline. Had this very discussion taken place at some point along her road back from the dead? Some detached, clinical assessment of her value versus her risk, as if she were a high-powered rifle with a tendency to backfire. Which, she freely admitted to being … part of her charm.

Anyway, Janey … .

Right, damn. Scatterbrained didn't even start to describe her since she came back. "What do you mean you aren't sure we should activate him?"

Then, after running her hands over her clothing, sorting everything more comfortably, she remembered the manners beaten into her by her mother. Meeting the doctor's gaze with a small, grateful smile, she tipped her head and said, "Thank you, Doctor."

The nod that answered her came off rusted and stiff. "I expect you back before you begin morning shift, Captain. Your implants and the damage from the indoctrination signal need constant monitoring." The woman drew herself up as if prepared to fight to the death over her medical supremacy, but relaxed when Shepard nodded.

The captain turned toward the server room door, the frown returning to pucker her forehead as she read the sign on the wall. "What the hell sort of system do you have in this boat that requires a server room? I thought the need for that sort of hardware went out with the twentieth century."

Miranda cleared her throat. "The SR2 has a very advanced cyber-warfare suite specifically designed to counter the Reapers' less overt attacks."

Mostly satisfied, Shepard walked to the door, rigid confidence keeping her strides strong until she reached the threshold. There, she hesitated, her head bowing as she closed her eyes, bracing herself. "Am I going to be horrified by what I see on the other side of this door?"

Miranda palmed the control. "It's a stasis pod, Shepard, and not one I or any of our people put him in." She shrugged and tilted her head a little, her expression very like she'd just bitten into rotten fruit. "The first time."

The door opened and Shepard understood.

"Liara's missing prothean from Eden Prime." She strode up to the pod, running her hands over the familiar lines. A small, hopeful smile blossomed that originated with Tashac. A living prothean. Shepard looked up, alarmed when she saw the dents and broken equipment on the casing. "It's been damaged. Was he all right in there when you opened it?"
Miranda lifted a datapad from the stand where the pod rested. Shepard left the operative to read, while she circled the pod, checking controls here, readouts there. The individual inside was in fair health considering that the pod had been opened with all the finesse of a crowbar each time.

"Who is it?" she asked, looking up as she bent over the control panel at the side. She popped it open, checking the date it was sealed originally, then the log of dates the scientists had opened it. "This was the end of the war. Literally months before the Reapers retreated back through the Citadel relay." She snapped straight, focusing on Miranda like a laser trying to burn through a tungsten-titanium alloy. "Is this—"

"It doesn't give any information about him," Miranda cut over her, tone blithe and professional. "He refuses to talk, although the researchers were convinced that he could understand them. Whenever they tried to touch him, he became violent and uncooperative." She let the datapad drop to hang at the end of a stiff arm. "Shepard, he killed two of his staff and injured another seven. We can't let him out of there."

Shepard nodded, a sardonic smile tweaking the corner of her mouth. "And you thought I was a problem child." As she spoke, the truth of her own suppositions registered. "It sounds like he was one of the last. They were all pretty brutal, and if he woke up to be tortured like Al … I can't blame him. He came from a terrible time … everything he knew was death and betrayal." She shrugged. "And he didn't want them to touch him because protheans have this sort of touch telepathy. They can read your electrical field."

Meeting Miranda's confused stare, she allowed a tiny flare of kindness to free some compassion from the icy dislike. "The beacons on Eden Prime and Virmire filled my head full of prothean data, memories, plans … a whole jumble of history and what they'd done to try to help us when the time for the harvest came around again." She closed her eyes against the nightmare images and Tashac's mourning cries, both tearing through her like a shuriken in a pinball machine until she slammed the wall back into place.

"Your head is filled with prothean data?" Miranda folded her arms. "This wasn't in your record, just that you can interacted with the beacon. Why?"

Shepard let out a couple of bitter chuckles, looking up from under heavily lidded eyes. "To keep the likes of you from slicing into my skull to get the data out. Anyway, a message came through the beacon system about a year before Tashac—the prothean in my head's—team activated the plan to seal the citadel and other key relays." Spreading her fingers she leaned against the pod, its metal cool and familiar. "It said that the last program had failed. She never knew exactly where or exactly what, but considering how badly they had lost everywhere, she suspected it was either a stasis or genetic seeding program."

Miranda paled and staggered back a little. "Shepard … this is vital intel. You didn't preserve it anywhere? It would have all died with you. Who knows how much of it has been compromised by the Lazarus project."

Shepard pressed a couple of controls. "Oh, I shared it. Not telling you who I shared it with, naturally." She looked up, giving the operative a kind, genuine smile. "Just accept that we're going to walk a long road before I trust you, Miranda. We'll do much better that way." Pressing one last control, she stepped back, her heart racing as the pod opened, pressure hissing, the atmosphere inside turning into clouds of vapour as it hit the warm air.

"Shepard!" The exclamation shot across the server room like a bullet propelled by dismay. "I just told you that he's killed."
Shepard nodded. "Yeah, but he won't kill me. Well, at least I hope not." Looking up, she tilted her head. "Don't happen to have a gun on you?"

The operative spun on her heel and strode back into medbay. "Doctor Eis, I need your sidearm."

Shepard laughed, a crooked smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "Too easy." Lifting onto her tiptoes, she peered over the side. Too much vapour and frostiness hung inside to see the occupant. She turned her attention to the readouts. Vitals rising nicely. Surprising how much trauma could be avoided doing things the right way.

"You can read Prothean?" Miranda asked, returning to stand at the end of the pod. A pistol hung at her side. Somehow that didn't make Shepard feel any better. If this prothean came out fighting, unless his biotics were off-line, a pistol wouldn't save them. Her muscles tensed as she saw his vitals reach the green zone and a soft groan and mutter drifted from the pod.

Then silence. Complete stillness. She considered sticking her face back over the edge, but then thought better of it. Best not to place any body parts that she wanted to keep within smashing, pulverizing, ripping, or shredding range.

An explosion of green energy exploded out of the pod. With as much effort as it would take for her to flick lint off her sleeve, the blast snatched her from the decking and flung her head first across the room. Her skull cracked into the poly-metal of a server bank, making a hollow, sort of dropped coconut sound. Hitting the floor in a jumble of half-assembled parts, she slumped, head ringing, vision blurry. She tried to sort her limbs enough to stand, but just tipped over onto her side when she tried to pull a foot under her.

A vague shape climbed from the pod, and stumbled, going down on one knee. A pale green nimbus of flickering energy snapped and sparked around him. He staggered to his feet and backed away, putting a few metres between them. "Lulonik lel nawoya?"

Tashac sent a whispered translation. He wanted to know where he was. Shepard gritted her teeth and gave her head a hard shake, trying to clear it. She needed to get up before he turned her into red paste. Gathering her feet under her, she shoved herself up, gripping the edge of the server to keep from sliding back onto her side.

The prothean closed on her with ridiculous speed. One large, three-fingered hand closed around her throat, lifting her feet a half-metre off the floor. Desperate, furious gold eyes glared into hers, his twin-pupils dilated, his respiration elevated and tight, every cell of his being set to kill.

Chapter End Notes

(A-N: This chapter got away from me. So much to do and get done, so I ended up splitting it in half. The other half will go up tomorrow for Sassy's Birthday.

Thanks to those who reviewed and of course, to the readers as well. I really do appreciate that you stop by to keep up with my story. See you tomorrow.)
Chapter Summary

Will Javik prove to be an asset or a liability? And Shepard starts to settle in to her new command. Rewritten massively 13/04/2015 to fix massive characterization issues!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Hitarul** - The stasis that Protheans enter during the 22 days of fertilization and implantation. Male and female remain joined for the entire period.

**Regulikar**: The Prothean central government.

**Kepala** - The ridges of carapace that cover the top of a Prothean’s head.

**Vir**: Male chosen by the Prothean Genetic Authority to sire a female's children.

**Gasin (Gasinu - pl)** - Prothean male the age of majority. (Dropped from 20 to 13 over the course of the war.)

**Takun (Takune - pl)** - Prothean female the age of majority. (Dropped from 20 to 13 over the course of the war.)

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**Trigger Warning**: There is a non-graphic and non-explicit depiction of two different arranged mating situations in this chapter. The first was pleasant, the second unpleasant. They are marked by a § for the pleasant one, and a §§ for the start and end of the unpleasant one, if you wish to skip them. Both are consensual, just sorta squicky for the whole 'thanks for choosing my perfect genetic match, oh great government' thing. Then, of course, Javik being just the perfect gentlemen. Yeah ... no.

---

**21 Days ASR**

Shepard sucked a thin, rasping breath past the hands around her throat. Just managing to get enough air to growl low and fierce, she let out the closest approximation to a prothean challenge her larynx could create. Black spots and bright sparks flashed across her vision in an impressive light show.

Those gold eyes—gold was rare and prized as a sign of genetic excellence in the empire—pressed in on her. "Ninik maovul kufonya kwal ajik yangul wakul huul, mapeluk?"

Again, Tashac whispered the translation. He was asking what the demons intended to do to him. Shepard blinked, something about the furious, sneering face pressed so close to hers familiar, and not just the 'yeah, sure, it's a prothean' sort of familiar.
"Javik?" Shepard gasped before she even realized she intended to. Squinting, trying to see him clearly, she just sort of flailed in his grasp. How could he be so strong despite the long stasis? A memory flashed through her head. She braced herself to be swept away into that other life, but Tashac held herself at a distance. The reason stabbed a queasy sliver of sadness through Shepard's heart. The memory hurt too much ... was too traumatic.

§

Her first fertile cycle, the Regulikar had paired her with Lulyak, an older, well-storied and honoured warrior. He'd been paired many times and quickly set her at ease with tales of his family and adventures. They'd spent a day just talking, meditating, and sharing meals ... becoming comfortable with one another. When they'd finally laid down and he'd moved against her back, she'd accepted the contact willingly. They both owed the empire a duty, and she'd opened to him, their physical bonding painless and easy.

The deeper bonding had proven both enjoyable and educational. He'd seen so much of the galaxy, and even having fought the Reapers for decades, he'd managed to keep his heart compassionate and filled with humour. Wise and learned in the ways of war, he taught her more in that bond than any of her trainers. When their time ended—the bond breaking—he'd embraced her, run the ridge of his kepala along hers and promised to return when their offspring were ready to depart her body. Neither of his young outlived him, but both cherished him as a father as much as they did Merol. Lulyak had taken them from her body and helped her lay them out in death. When the Reapers cut him down, she'd mourned him terribly.

§§

Her second cycle, her government assigned her a warrior of no less might, but young, hot-blooded and fresh from a frontline he had not left since his fourteenth summer. He entered the room and looked her up and down, his expression a mask of cool indifference. "For more than ten cycles I have served the empire in battle, and now they tell me I must ... ." His face twisted into a grimace of frustration and anger. "How much ground will be lost, how many lives wasted while I take part in this pointless exercise?" Taking a deep breath, he turned away and began to change into his robe.

She almost told him that she had nothing to do with his choosing and would rather be fighting alongside her company as well, but she did not. She simply dressed in the robe and waited. He did not say another word for the entire twenty two days, simply settling into position. Her body refused to relax, and the coupling ached. Not the fault of carelessness or enmity on his part. They knew nothing about and cared nothing for the other. Duty could hardly take the place of caring, even in its smallest measure. Luckily for the empire, comfort was not vital to success of the hitarul.

Still, it wasn't until the deeper bond formed, the inevitable sharing of selves and memory, that Tashac truly wished to be anywhere else. Endless visions of slaughter and death assailed her, filling her with a horror and a despair that had little to do with the intent of the gasin at her back. No ... the true pain came from the knowledge that this avatar of the perfect warrior exemplified what her people had become. Antecessors, so much hatred and contempt for life! So much lust to crush and kill. Even his people were merely tools or weapons to be used and discarded.

Her median vir formed the opposite of everything she cherished ... so far from her beloved Merol that she didn't even consider them of the same race. And so, the long weeks of hitarul became an agony to endure. How could she bring children into an empire that wished only to turn them into machines of war—empty and soulless, lacking joy or love? Tears leaked from her eyes even in stasis as her heart longed for Merol's arms ... to touch a soul that still saw light instead of a million shades of ebony despair, that smelled and tasted more than death.
When the hitarul broke, Javik stood, composed himself and walked out the door. Tashac curled into a ball, hugging her knees until Merol came looking for her. She never heard from Javik again, not when their children entered the galaxy, nor when they left it all too soon. Well, they were never truly his children. Their father had adored them, held them, sang to them, and mourned them.

§§

In a wave of exquisite sorrow, the memory drew back, allowing Shepard to focus on the prothean gripping her throat. Hatred … thick, flowing sewage … fouled her to the core as she stared into those eyes. After everything she sacrificed for her people … for her empire … they sent that soulless husk forward to create the anathema to the empire she remembered and loved?

"Javik." That time the name came out as a low, raspy growl, the sound grinding from her crushed throat. The shock on his face, the widening of his eyes, made her smile and poured strength into her. Stabbing her arms up between his, she exploded from his hold. "Why did it have to be you?" she demanded, shoving him. "Of all the noble exemplars of what it meant to be Prothean ... why you?"

She saw that he'd read enough of her nervous system while he choked her to understand her words. He retreated, slamming back into his pod. Shepard lunged at him, hands clawing for his kepala, her thumbs digging in a few centimetres to either side of the front, pinching off both a nerve and an artery. She grinned down into his eyes, wading happily in the shock she saw there. "Why you, Javik? Why preserve the empty, black heart of our race when Mahart eclipsed you as leader and Diagul as a warrior?"

Mouth open, gasping, but teeth bared, he asked, his voice a low but almost musical snarl, "Ungal zelaphik huul?"

"How do I know you, Avatar of Vengeance ... cold, dessicated corpse of the Prothean Empire?" An ugly grin twisted her face and she dug her thumbs in, emotional manure making her gag so hard she almost threw up.

Tashac's memories whispered a gentle warning that if Shepard pressed much harder, she'd crush the vital arteries.

Heeding it, she loosened her grip. "Look deep, Commander Javik." Shepard jerked her head a little, beckoning for him to read her. "Go ahead, I won't kill. Not yet anyway. Read me."

Blue-fingered hands closed around her forearms, and she saw flashes of his life, his memories and knowledge passing through the bond. Surprise sent a shock through her when he reached deeper and found the beacon memories. After a moment, the prothean went limp in her hands. The decades between Tashac's joining and his internment had proven educational but not kind.

"Tashac, junkil ganik huul? Jek, wenginl kuna kuhik diwal kaw njla huul?" he asked, then after a moment, repeated the questions in human common. Handy as hell, the ability to learn things in seconds. "Tashac? How can this be? Are there others who survived in this way?"

"Shepard?" Miranda staggered to her feet, her eyes looking unfocused and hazy, her face slack. Standing at the end of the pod, she'd obviously taken a much stronger hit than Shepard. "What ... ?" The operative stumbled forward a couple of steps, hands coming up a second too late to brace her against the pod and she fell forward into it. A thin line of blood trickled down her forehead from a small wound, no doubt from her head bashing into the door frame. She opened her omnitool, her pistol held far too loosely for Shepard's liking. "I'm calling for help."
Shepard turned back to the prothean, to discover Javik's eyes still fixed on her. Shepard let him go and stepped away, moving sideways to ease the pistol from the operative's hand before their guest recovered enough to make a grab for it. Shooting a glare at the prothean that crackled with warning, she said. "You. Don't move. We've got some talking to do."

When he tilted his head to the left, the prothean equivalent of a nod, she slipped an arm around Miranda's shoulders and eased the stunned woman toward the door. "It's okay, Miranda. I've got this in hand. Have the doctor check you out." She palmed the control. "Doctor! Miranda took a blow to the head. Could you take a look at her, please?" Levelling a firm glare on the operative, Shepard made it clear that she intended to brook no argument. She and Javik had a few things to work out, and Miranda could only complicate matters. "Get checked out. By the time you're finished, I'll have Javik sorted."

Miranda tried to argue, but could barely focus on Shepard's face let alone get the words out in the right order, allowing the captain to transfer her to the doctor's assistance without resistance.

Shepard watched the two women for a second, taking some deep breaths as she tried to wall up Tashac and her extremely virulent feelings about the father of her median children. Regardless of how the takun felt about him, he remained the last living prothean, and the only living being in the galaxy with any experience fighting the full might of the Reapers. They needed him.

That idea finally broke through the anger and distress. Shepard set her face to impassive and nodded as she turned to walk back through the door. Stopping just far enough inside to let it close behind her, she stared down the long room at the prothean. "Who are you?" Javik demanded, some of his composure returning. "How do you possess the memories of Tashac Jacar and Merol Natil?" He bristled, arrogance settling around him like a mantle. "Are you with these primitives? These barbarians with their scalpels and syringes?"

Shepard shook her head. "My name is Captain Shepard." She stepped around the pod, removing the barrier between them. "Tashac lives in my head because I used a couple of the beacons left behind by your people. They warned us about the Reapers … showed us what had been done to help us fight back. I died just after defeating Nazara … the Vanguard." Crossing her arms, she leaned back on one hip, relaxed but ready. "This organization brought me back from the dead to keep fighting."

He stared at her for long seconds, then leaned back, mimicking her posture.

Shepard smiled, a cold, hard grimace that pressed her lips paper-thin. "But you knew all that." A laugh even colder and harder fell out after the words. "Don't play with me, Javik. I'm not an idiot, and I don't like being yanked around." She shifted hips and let her head tip off to one side. Two could play at snarky arrogance. "Here's the score. Tashac hates you. I mean, with the sort of burning passion that would see me removing every tender, squishy bit of your anatomy with pliers."

_Sweet baby Jesus, Tashac. Down girl._

Pulling back from Tashac's gallery of pointy, horrible torture, she shrugged as if helpless in the face of so much violent ugliness. "She considers you every sad, empty, broken, wretched thing your people turned into during the war."

Javik straightened, drawing his head back on his neck. Good. She needed to set him back a little. Despite needing every bit of intel and cunning inside that massive, flat skull, the Milky Way would
"Now, you're the last … the only living being to have fought the Reapers en masse." She let her eyebrows pop up a bit for that, pouring a little earnest into the mix. He'd read her, he'd be able to interpret her facial expressions. "We need to know what strategies worked and what didn't. We need to know any weaknesses you discovered." She leaned toward him a little more with each word. One hand buttressing against the pod, she did her best to loom over him. Embarrassment flashed as she imagined a Chihuahua trying to intimidate a varren.

Throwing it off before it could set her face aflame, she focused. "We need your help in this fight, so I'm offering you a chance to do what you were sent here to do … exact revenge for your people." Pushing away from the pod, she closed the metres between them.

"Are you offering me a choice, Captain?" he said, his voice soft and musical. "Or am I to be a prisoner?"

Tashac warmed a little, not toward the *gasin*, but … oh how she missed the lyrical rhythms and complex tones of her people's language. A smile softened Shepard's face before she could police it back to neutral.

"Of course, you have a choice," Shepard replied. "And no, you are not a prisoner." She let out a long sigh, her shoulders and face relaxing. "Work with me, obey my orders, get along with our allies. That's option one. Option two: you can go back in the pod. I'll freeze you and find somewhere nice and safe away from the organization." She shrugged as his lips lifted into a snarl at that idea. "Or, when we reach a spaceport … go your own way." She offered her hands palms down in the prothean gesture of trust. "You can check if you think I'm lying, or if you doubt that fucking with me ends up with you back in the freezer section."

The door opened. "Shepard, I … ." Liara's voice ended in a sort of high-pitched, up-turned squeak. "I … uh … . Um, Shepard?"

Shepard waited for Javik to step away, then turned a little to include Liara without turning her back on the prothean. "Liara, this is Commander Javik. He's your missing prothean from Eden Prime." Shepard nodded her head to call the asari over. "I was just asking him if he wanted to assist us in preparing for the Reapers." Looking back at Javik, she waited for a moment before offering her hands again.

"I will assist you, human." He made a rough, warbling sound deep in his throat. "You will need it. The last I heard of your species, they made weapons out of sharpened stone and lived in caves."

"As did the Protheans once a very long time ago." She held his stare with an earnest one. "This cycle came early. Perhaps you can help us figure out why."

"Why does not matter. Defeating them does." He stepped back and turned away from her hands, the sign of respect at odds with his words. "Why is for old *takune* sitting on fat cushions."

Liara blanched a little and looked to Shepard, her eyes leaving the prothean for the first time. "Captain?"

"Liara, can you help settle our guest on board? Please, find him somewhere out of the way to bunk." Her gaze slid from Liara to Javik. His presence chafed against her like coarse sandpaper, and she wanted … needed … him gone. "He'll let you know what he needs."
"Of course, Captain, I'd be honoured." Liara held out a hand to usher him from the space. "I'm very excited to meet you, Commander. As an archaeologist, I've dedicated my career to studying your people." She strode to the door, then stopped, waiting.

Javik took a step forward. "You are asari?"

Liara smiled and nodded, straightening a little. "Yes."

Shepard turned her back to the asari and leaned into the prothean before he could follow. "She's studied prothean ruins, Javik. She holds a very generous view of your people. You might think it naive and silly, but it's generous. Be kind to her." The last four words dropped like stones in deep, black water. She stiffened all the plains of her face, meeting him with granite. "She's young."

He leaned in as well, his voice growling roughly as he asked, "Was that ever an excuse in the empire?" Those gold, double-pupiled eyes bored straight through her, a stare she met with a stiff smile.

"Yes, well … the empire died, Javik, and it died for a reason. You're one gasin, alone in a really big, new galaxy. If nothing else, we're allies in the same battle. Just be kind." She stepped back and turned away, holding out her arm. Time for both she and Tashac to get a little space. "Oh, and you're going to have guards. Be kind to them as well. If you behave yourself, I'll call them off."

He stared at her so long, her hand drifted to her weapon, but then he nodded, one single, sharp tilt of his head.

Shepard returned the nod, moved to open her omnitool, then sighed and walked over to the comm panel. She needed a functional omnitool first off. "Miranda? Our guest is ready to move into his quarters and requires an escort."

"Understood, Captain. They'll be right there."

"Roger that." Shepard closed the channel.

"I did not return when our offspring departed Tashac's body because I was ashamed," Javik said from behind her, his voice too soft to carry beyond them. "War was all I knew when I entered our bond. It hurt her. What I was hurt her." He stepped up beside Shepard, but didn't look at her. "I was ashamed."

Tashac remained silent, content behind the walls as Shepard watched the last prothean passed Liara, walking into medbay. Well, how about that? She crooked a finger at the asari. "Liara? A second?"

"Captain?" The asari strode back, walking a little sideways, as if afraid that the prothean would disappear.

"Be careful," Shepard warned her, earnest and firm. "He was provoked, but he's killed two people and injured a bunch more." She passed the asari the sidearm. "Keep a hand on it, and keep the biotics ready. He's a very strong biotic."

Liara's expression settled. "Understood, Captain." She stared at Shepard, mouth half-open, as if she had more to say, then just shook her head a little. "I'll stay sharp."

The medbay door opened, three armed and seasoned-looking soldiers stepping through. One stepped forward. "Dr. T'Soni ... sir, if you'd follow me." With great precision and steady hands on their weapons, they surrounded the prothean and led him from the room.
Letting out a long breath of relief, Shepard let her head hang, the tension finally rolling out of her shoulders and neck. As she closed her eyes, she felt a pair of large, warm hands knead the muscles. She smiled, content to savor what her brain gave her rather than enduring the pain it would take to draw more of the memory forward.

She was free. The smile spread as the cell doors cracked open, the galaxy and her life creeping through like a cool breeze on a hot day. Yes, the pain drained her and being in unknown territory with uncertain allies terrified her, but she was ... well, maybe not free, but moving in the right direction.

That thought spurred her forward. Casting one last look over the ridiculous amount of computing power, she strode to the door. Time to get to it. She stepped out into the bright lights of medbay and looked around. "Hey, Doc. Where's Miranda?"

The doctor chuckled, but it came off more exasperated than amused. "As soon as I scanned her head, gave her an analgesic, and applied some medigel, she left." The young woman leaned back as Shepard approached. Drawing her lab coat closed, she laced her fingers over her stomach. "I'm going to be tranquilizing the lot of you within the month, aren't I?"

Grinning, Shepard shook her head, feeling renewed admiration for the doctor's adaptability and guts. "I give it a week if we see action." She wiggled her eyebrows and strode past. "It's a thankless job, and the only real option is to become terrifying. Thanks for the drugs, Doc. Much appreciated."

She stepped through the door into a common area. The galley and a couple of tables stood to her right, a balding gentleman preparing something on the stove. She turned and took a couple of steps toward him. "Hi." Smiling, she lifted her hand in a short wave. "Captain Jane Shepard. I'm looking for Operative Lawson."

"Operative Lawson is in the Briefing Room," a pleasant female voice answered before the other fellow could.

"Thank you." Shepard gave the cook a nod before turning her attention to the voice. "Would I have the pleasure of speaking to the ship's AI?"

"Captain?"

Shepard swore that the voice sounded surprised. She shook her head and headed toward the center mass of the ship. No doubt that was where she'd find the elevator or stairs, like on the Normandy. "I'm an engineer," she continued. "I saw that computing power in the server room. No way that's just running some cyberwarfare program." Shrugging, she corrected herself. "Well, not an ordinary one, anyway."

Rounding the corner, she let out a victorious little hum. Elevator. "So, quantum blue-box? Come on, you can tell me, I'm your captain." Her good mood spread through her body like the tingle of Hallex or a strong drink.

"Yes, Captain. The crew call me EDI," the voice replied. "I am the Enhanced Defense Intelligence."

Shepard palmed the control to summon the elevator. Part of her insisted that she should be more concerned about an AI created by the same people who'd brought her back to life. But then, the other part said that she'd known good AIs, and she'd defeated the bad ones. Whatever this one proved to be, she'd deal.
Meanwhile … . "Do you fly the ship along with Lt. Cortez?"

"I do not have access to most ship systems as a precautionary measure."

The elevator arrived, the door opening. Shepard half glanced up at the ceiling. "Where am I going, EDI?" She stepped inside and turned, her hand hovering over the controls.

"The briefing room is situated on deck two, aft corridor, the combat information center."

"Thank you." After pressing the control, Shepard collapsed back against the wall. Her head still rang at about a nine, her body at a four despite the drugs. Oh well, maybe she could get some real sleep in a real bed as soon as they sorted out their destination.

Damn, the elevator was as slow as the one on the Normandy. "So, EDI, if you don't manage ship systems, or fly … what's your deal? You defend against cyber attacks during battle? Perform your own? What else? Analysis? Data mining?"

"That is correct, Captain. I provide data and situational analysis during missions. Beyond that, I cannot interface with the ship's systems."

The elevator began to slow. "So, they're worried you're going to lose your artificial mind and kill us all if you can control the ship?" She lifted her eyebrows, her expression teasing despite her audience. "You aren't planning on that, are you?"

"I am not currently formulating any plans to kill the crew."

Shepard grinned. "Excellent, that's my favourite thing about you so far, EDI." She stepped up to the door and then through when it opened. "And don't worry, it's not personal. They expect me to go nuts and kill everyone, too."

A bright laugh greeted that, a familiar head of red hair turning away from a console to the right of the galaxy map. "That's not entirely true, Shepard," Kelly said, a wide smile forming beneath teasing eyes. "We don't expect it." She shrugged. "We just consider it a possibility."

"Kelly," Shepard took a deep breath and slipped on her captain uniform before greeting the young woman. "Sneaking in personal email on company time?" Turning to look over the rest of the CIC, Shepard's eyes widened, and her brow lifted. She took a few steps toward the stairs up to the hologram of the vessel and placed her hands on the cool metal of the railing. The warm tingle from earlier spread out from her bones to heat her muscles, security settling in, strong and steady despite the whisper in her head that warned her against trusting it.

"It's almost like home," she whispered, eyes following the familiar lines and curves. "They really did just grab the Normandy's blueprints and go to town, didn't they?" She pivoted toward Kelly. "Anderson's going to be jealous. This ship is … amazing."

Kelly gripped Shepard's hand when the captain stopped next to her, but Shepard gently removed herself from the contact. "How are you feeling? Whatever the hell that was in the docking bay … ." She shuddered. "I've never seen anything like it. It was like … " She fumbled for words. "... like it was trying to possess you … like some sort of demon."

Shepard's eyebrows rose as she pursed her lips and wagged her head a little side to side. "That's about right, but Harbinger is going to be something we are prepared to deal with. It looks frightening, but it's similar to a remote operator fighting using a mech." The expression transformed easily into a grin. "So, what are you doing here?" She peered over Kelly's shoulder. "Crew reports?" She read a couple of lines. "Have you already sent them to the terminal in my quarters?"
"Yes, ma'am. I am your yeoman, after all." Kelly gave her a jaunty salute. The skin between her brows crinkled as she dropped the hand. "Actually, once we land somewhere, can we sit down and go over the crew roster and the team dossiers that Miranda sent, Captain? There are a few colourful personalities who concern me."

Shepard nodded. "Of course, Yeoman. I just introduced myself to Jack and the prothean, Commander Javik." Taking another breath, she squared her shoulders. "They're both strong biotics, and Javik was fighting Collectors and Reapers for decades before he went into stasis. They should prove to be valuable assets if we can keep them on an even keel." A tight-lipped smile and quirked eyebrow accompanied her words. "That's going to be your department. Keep an eye on them and let me know if anything sets off your alarms."

"Assets, Shepard? You sound like Miranda." The redhead's brow furrowed, her eyes confused when Shepard stepped away from a friendly shoulder butt.

A soft sigh preceded Shepard's words. Time to head into the adjustment phase. "I'm Captain Shepard now, Kelly. Unless we're in private, it's business as usual. These people may eventually become family as the Normandy crew did, but for now, I'll settle for respect. Okay? It's time for Shepard the crazy lady to go in a drawer."

Kelly nodded, a warm smile signalling her understanding. "Yes, ma'am." She saluted. "Miranda is in the briefing room, and may I suggest that you go through the armory to talk to Vincent? What happened on the station has him pretty upset."

Shepard let out a long sigh, as she turned slowly, taking in her new home. A sad smile accompanied the memory of Joker yelling snarky bad jokes down the length of the CIC, and Sparky giving fitness reports over his shoulder as his Marines jogged circuits around the galaxy map. It wouldn't be the same without them, but it wasn't like she could ask Anderson to give up his entire crew. The smile melted away as she turned to look for the armoury door.

"So, professionally, then … Captain, are you really on board with this mission? Leading this crew?" Kelly asked, her voice too low to carry. "You're not just telling us what we want to hear so you can jump ship?"

"I'm here to work, Yeoman. Miranda might be a lot of things, but I've never doubted her dedication to the mission. Hell, she took the worst I could throw at her and never gave in to the temptation to put me back under." Shepard glanced over her shoulder. "She's earned some conditional trust. I wouldn't have lasted two days before I threw me out an airlock and went with plan B."

Kelly's face dropped, comical in her surprise. "All that … ." She closed her mouth, jaw clacking shut. "It was all an act?"

"Not all of it, Miss Chambers." One hand lifted in a small wave, and Shepard headed for the door, her knees starting to tremble again. She needed to move quickly before she collapsed and the crew had to watch her carried back to medbay. That would throw far too much grist into the rumour mill.

"Vincent," she called as she stepped through the door. "What's going on? Gun rehab?" She stopped and looked around, letting out a low whistle. "Wow, I think they bought every gun in the universe." Turning a slow circle, she admired the wide array of weapons of every sort. "Is that a Widow?" She strode over and ran reverent fingers over the gun before moving to lift it.

"Careful, Shepard," the physiotherapist said, "that thing weighs almost as much as you do." He walked over and held out a hand, but didn't move to help.
Lifting the large gun, Shepard shrugged. "It's heavy, but I could carry it through a mission. I wonder if it would shatter my arm if I fired it." Meeting his eyes, she frowned, her head shaking a little. "What am I, Vincent?" she asked, her tone serious rather than despairing, seeking a straight answer. "What did they turn me into?" The gun sagged toward the tabletop. "Before they brought me back, I was strong, but this is something else entirely. I need to know what I can expect from this body."

He lifted it from her hands and laid it back amidst the others. "You have tech all the way through you, Shepard. They laced your muscles with filaments to enhance your strength and carry medigel more effectively. They wove special carbon webs around your bones to make them harder to break. Your heart has servo assisted valves, and even your lungs process oxygen more efficiently." He shrugged and turned, lifting a hip to sit on the edge of the table. "You're you, just a little stronger, a little faster, a little quicker to heal."

She filed that information away. Hopefully, she could find Chakwas and get a rundown from someone she trusted to let her in on all the warts. "Six million dollar man," she whispered, then shook her head, dismissing it.

She hopped up next to him and looked over, schooling her face into the professional mask of command. "Kelly said you weren't doing very well with what happened on the station." How anyone could be, she didn't know, but the obvious statement gave him an opening.

"You shitting me? Of course I'm not okay with it." He looked down and shook his head. "All those people. More people … gone … just like … ." He lapsed into silence, but she let him keep it, knowing he had more to say. It took a few seconds, but then he let out a long sigh. "I wasn't always a physiotherapist, Shepard. I worked for the Alliance. Gro-Po at first, but then I got noticed by the right people, and they recommended me for ICT. Never got there, though. My team were sent out to guard a colony. Everything went to hell."

Her lips pressed together. Yeah, he'd shot far too well for a physiotherapist. Still, she left it to him to talk.

"Saw some really terrible shit, you know? Lost good people. Decided I wanted a different life. Miranda recruited me on Arcturus. I had field medic training, and had been working in the Alliance hospital, so she offered to help me get the training to do this." He looked up, those dark brown eyes filled with … determination and fear … and strength … a lot of strength, but something else as well. Thick walls kept her from it. It was either a terrible pain or a big secret. Maybe both.

She braced the heels of her hands against the edge of the table and leaned forward. "Do you want to get out when we make landfall?" she asked, keeping her voice pitched low and neutral. Suddenly, she wanted him to stay, but she didn't want to influence him at all. He needed to decide to be there as much as she did. Especially if things got as bad as she anticipated.

He looked over at her, staring into her eyes for a second. "You as good as they say you are?"

Shepard chuckled and shook her head. "I'm good, and I'm smart, but I'm reckless … well, let's call it unconventional. The key to my success has always been the people around me. Every time I screw up, they help me figure out a way through." She bumped her shoulder against his arm, then rubbed the joint. "Ow, you're just one massive slab of muscle, aren't you?"

"Hell, yeah." He chuckled, a warm, throaty sound and hopped down. "Work damned hard to be one." Once standing next to her, he nodded. "Give me a couple of days to think about it?"

Shepard hopped down, warmth spreading through her. She might not have the old team, but she
was gathering some hopeful prospects. "Sure, take all the time you want. Just, in the meantime, if we end up deep in the shit, you pitch in and carry your weight. Deal?"

The large man reached up to rub the back of his neck, then nodded and gave her a crooked grin. "Deal." He turned and walked away a few steps before turning back. "You really aren't as nuts as you pretend to be, are you?"

Shepard just shrugged and pointed to the side door. "Is the briefing room through here?"

"Yeah. First door on the right. The one with the big writing next to it that says, Briefing Room." He chuckled and went back to his work.

Shepard heard voices as soon as she stepped through the door. Miranda, and she didn't sound pleased. The operative would never stoop to shouting, but the tightness in her voice rang familiar. She was arguing with someone.

Before Shepard even had time to react, EDI spoke up, startling Shepard enough that she jumped. "Operative Lawson. Captain Shepard is at the door."

Shepard let out a quick puff of air and glanced up. "I see how it is, EDI."

Shepard palmed the door control, the portal opening just in time for her to see the large conference table lift the last hand width or so into place. A galaxy map blinked on above it, and then Miranda turned from a small control panel to face Shepard. "The guards and Dr. T'Soni report that the prothean, Javik, is settling into his quarters in the Port Cargo hold. Dr. T'Soni sent me a requisition for a few things to make him more comfortable."

"Who were you talking to?" the captain asked, walking into the room. She kept her face and body relaxed despite the doubt that sank sharp teeth into her guts.

Miranda shook her head. "No one, Shepard. I was simply consulting EDI to plan our destination. We have several civilians aboard and need supplies." She turned back to the galaxy map. "The closest spaceport is this colony." She zoomed in on a system in the Terminus. "Freedom's Progress."

"But, you know, that old Grinch was so smart and so slick," Shepard muttered, stepping up beside the operative. "He thought up a lie, and he thought it up quick!"¹

"Excuse me, Captain?" Miranda asked, her brow furrowing and eyes narrowing in a way that left Shepard no doubt at all that she'd heard every word.

"Nothing, just muttering." A sick feeling rolling around in her gut again, she turned to the galaxy map. Had she read everything wrong? Could Miranda be trusted? Shepard had been so sure she could, and yet . . . . Squaring her shoulders, she took a deep breath and focused on the road forward. If Miranda intended to betray her, it would happen one way or another, and a lot of colonists still needed the Collectors shut down.

"So, Freedom's Progress, you said?"

¹ How the Grinch Stole Christmas, Dr. Seuss. Published in the United States by Random House. November 24, 1957 renewed 1985
A-N: Okay, so rewrites are a thing. Never post a first draft, because you inevitably go ... what was the character thinking? So, yeah. Newer, cleaner ... bionic chapter with Shepard acting as she should be. I think she got into the happy sauce or something. And we are on a collision course for Freedom's Progress.

To those who are still here and still enjoying the trials and tribulations. Thanks. Thanks so much, and I'm glad you're still enjoying Shepard's adventures. Now, on to Freedom's Progress! I'm getting so excited, it's nuts.
Mass Effect - Future Complex Chapter Thirty Five

Chapter Summary

Nihlus arrives to investigate Freedom's Progress.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nihlus held Shepard cradled in his arms. She slept ... finally. He let out a long, soft sigh. After so many days of driving herself relentlessly, refusing to give in to her fear and the grief, he worried she'd self-destruct if she didn't get at least a little rest. Blinking slowly, his eyelids begged him to join her. The days since the disappearance dragged on so long ... so painfully long and filled with the horrible emptiness. He touched his brow to Shepard's and closed his eyes. He would sleep ... in a minute or two, but right then, he just wanted to savour the feel of his mate in his arms—

"Hey, Nihlus!" Joker's voice shot through the peace. "Nihlus Kryik! Answer me or I start blasting alarms."

Shepard vanished. What the ... ? Damn him. The Spectre forced his eyes open, feeling as if someone had attached weights to his eyelids as he slept. Damn, he hadn't meant to fall asleep at all.

"Five ... four ... three ... ."

"I'm awake, Joker. Shut up." He closed his eyes, covering them with his arm, allowing the memory of the dream to drift back, rich and rare and so very real. He dreamed about Shepard far less than Garrus did. Where his fratrin had lived a double life, escaping to his dreams, Nihlus got infrequent glimpses into moments gone by, particularly standing by helplessly as she died. He woke from those both grateful and thirsty.

Behind his closed eyelids, he tried to reclaim the sensation of her slight weight in his arms ... the warmth of her. The dream had been different than his usual ... real, and both beautiful and painful in a way that ached deep behind his keel and at the base of his skull. They'd lost something ... no, someone ... and yet, they still had one another. The fact she needed him present and strong ... it kept him from drowning in brandy. He could stay strong for her ... his mate.

Enough of that. He dropped his arm and swung off his cot, the movement both sudden and violent. Altogether too keen-edged, the feeling of empty sorrow from the dream sliced at him leaving him bleeding. He needed to leave it behind before his boots hit Freedom's Progress so he stayed focused. Stretching his neck, he reached up to rub just below his fringe. Someone needed to find the frigate that hit him, see how many of his body parts remained stuck to it.

"General quarters," Joker called over the comms. "All hands at general quarters. We'll be hitting the relay in ten minutes. Take a handful of aspirin and pour yourself a huge cup of coffee."

One day, Nihlus foresaw breaking every bone in the mouthy pilot's body and feeling only passing remorse. He shoved himself up off his cot, hung his assault rifle and shotgun from his back, and then headed out. A quick cup of amarceru and a couple of meal bars, then he'd face what awaited them on the other side of the relay. Their only real advantage lie in the fact that they'd managed to
make that broken contact with Garrus. Without that, they'd have probably ended up blown to hell.

The galley stood predictably empty. Although … someone had already made a kettle of his strong, bitter drink, leaving a thermos and the container of rylamia honey on the counter next to it. He glared at the thoughtful but 'pretty sure you'll be hung over and will need this' gesture. They respected his skills and his accomplishments, but they all looked at him like Garrus's pathetic little brother despite the age difference the other way. For a long time, he told himself that he didn't care. They didn't need to admire him … hell, they didn't even need to like him … they just needed to obey orders.

He almost believed it … almost convinced himself that the pity in their eyes didn't burn. Almost. Being drunk helped with that conviction. Once upon a time—as the humans said—he'd been a stone cold bad ass. As he picked up the kettle, a sharp, bitter laugh tumbled out, all glass shards and rusted nails. Then he threw Shepard's name into the hunt for new Spectres. What in the name of buratrum happened to that driven, ambitious torin? Another laugh, that one softer and sadder, rumbled deep in his throat.

Shepard. Shepard happened.

Shaking that off, he filled the thermos, dumped in half the container of honey, and stowed the kettle and container, his movements abrupt and efficient. Loose items turned into missiles when space combat went badly. Picking up his thermos, he capped it, and then shook it as he made his way to the bridge.

Anderson stood by the galaxy map talking to Alenko. The captain broke off and fell in step next to Nihlus as he passed. The Spectre lifted his thermos a little and nodded his thanks to the lieutenant commander before turning his attention to the Normandy's captain.

"Anything new to report?" he asked.

A heavy scowl creased the captain's face as he glanced over at Nihlus. "According to Instructor Kandros, all of the merc organizations on Omega have had an influx of new personnel in the last few days. She's updating and beefing security, just in case they've come gunning for Archangel."

Nihlus shook his head and took a deep breath. "Has she been able to get through to Garrus? And is it the big three, or the smaller bands as well?" A block of ice dropped into his gut. The leadership called away into traps, the fleet and almost all trained personnel scattered around the galaxy. Of course the mercs were there for Archangel.

Anderson jogged up the ramp. "All of them, even some private organizations that she says have never traditionally had a presence on Omega." He shrugged. "We're out here. Garrus is on Tuchanka. They're hoping to raze the ground clean before we can get back."

The Spectre nodded, agreeing. Thank the spirits for Kandros's gang connections and their intel. Nihlus followed Anderson without really paying attention to where he was going. Nyreen possessed the tactical knowledge and brains to prepare, and most of the inner circle remained on Omega. Add to that, the fact that the base could be turned into a fortress at a moment's notice … they had a shot of holding out until reinforcements got there.

"Is she recalling Archangel forces?" When Anderson shook his head, Nihlus let out a long breath. "When we're done here, I'll contact her, tell her to pull back the ships on colony patrol. The council isn't just playing at trying to bring us down. They must be planning something big and soon."

A thoughtful, worried scowl creased the captain's brow. "I'll let Hackett know what's going on. He
can't help out on Omega, but he can keep an eye out for whatever the council is up to. Maybe we can finally get some traction on what the Reapers are doing out here."

"Abducting thousands of colonists is what they're doing." Nihlus's mandibles dropped, giving a small, sharp flick as he shook his head. "They're replacing the Vanguard. Somewhere, they're building themselves a new Reaper."

"Hitting the relay in two minutes, Captain," Joker reported. He shot a snarky glare at Nihlus. "Have a good sleep?"

Nihlus just flicked his mandibles and looked away.

Anderson clipped the pilot across the back of the head without any force. "Enough, Lieutenant. Have the Banquan and Aesarus reported in?"

"Yes, sir." Joker's hands flew over the controls. "They're at general quarters and loaded for bear.

As much as Nihlus hoped they wouldn't need to be battle ready, he knew that the way their luck ran lately, a greeting of thanix cannons and missiles awaited them on the other end. He belted back a long draught of amarceru and gripped the back of the gunnery station's chair.

"Captain. Nihlus." Alenko nodded to them both as he slipped into his seat, armoured up and ready to drop as soon as they fought their way to Freedom's Progress. Activating the station, he brought up several screens. "Long range telemetry from the relay showing nothing from the system, Captain," he reported, but his posture shifted, his hands working quickly, flipping screens for a moment before he glanced over his shoulder at Anderson. "We're not getting anything at all from the other end. I asked the relay for the weather conditions and then tried to route a transmission through the relay … the entire system is dark, sir."

Anderson nodded and reached around Joker to hit the comms. "All hands, prepare for battle. Helmets and safety harnesses on. We're going in hot."

"They boarded the Passch," Nihlus said. "If they want to set us up for Freedom's Progress, they'll probably try the same trick. If we jump through alone, we could draw them in." He waited for Anderson to show positive signs before turning his attention to Joker. "Can you out maneuver the Stinger long enough to draw them in?"

The pilot just scoffed. "Relay in twenty seconds."

Nihlus sent orders to the Banquan and Aesarus to give the Normandy a five minute head start. Taking drift into consideration, he didn't dare bring them in any later. As fine a pilot as Joker was, three or four ships tilted the odds too far in the enemy's favour.

The Spectre grounded his stance and gripped the back of Alenko's chair as the relay grabbed them and shot the little frigate through space, not for the jump itself, but in anticipation of the stunt flying that awaited at the other end.

Joker did not disappoint.

Nihlus saw the incoming fire long before he spotted the ships. Stepping back, he just kept out of the way, leaving it to Anderson to direct his vessel through the engagement.

"Pull them away from the relay and toward the planet," Anderson ordered. "Let's give our ships the best shot to come in on their flanks."
"The Stinger's closing," Kaidan called. "It'll be in firing range in one hundred and four seconds."

"Don't get your shorts in a knot," Joker grumbled. "I can keep us out of the line of fire."

Nihlus straightened to look over Alenko's shoulder at the tactical screen. The Stinger came at them aggressively, the other two hanging back. No doubt they awaited a more helpless target. He glanced over at Anderson. "We might be able to use the Stinger to our advantage. If Joker can keep it dogging us, keep them off balance, we might be able to use them to tear down a good chunk of that cruiser's shields."

Anderson nodded. "Joker?"

He snorted. "You're doubting my ability to piss people off so badly they're willing to blow up everything in sight just to kill me?" He sent the Normandy into a roll, bringing it around for Alenko to strafe the stolen frigate with fire before darting off. "Nihlus, give the man a reference. Pretty sure you've imagined killing me a dozen times already today."

"Sixteen. All different, all using just one hand." Although, as Nihlus watched the pilot maneuver, he could see why no one had killed the snarky pain in the ass. He and the Normandy formed a single organism, the little ship appearing at the Stinger's flank just long enough to pound the broadside with the main gun before diving away out of range of its main weapon.

Five times the Normandy harried the bigger ship before it fell within range of the Stinger's main weapon. "Oh no," Joker gasped, his voice dripping sarcasm. "No! God! What have I done? I've killed us all."

"Stinger is ready to fire," Alenko reported, a wide grin showing his appreciation for the pilot's little melodrama.

"I wish I'd had a chance to tell my nana I loved her," Joker gasped, pulling the frigate hard to port, then into a dive.

"Stinger firing!"

Nihlus grinned as the nimble Normandy rolled out of the path of the blast, the cruiser directly ahead taking the hit.

"Didn't see that coming, did you?" Joker crowed.

Alenko chuckled. "Cruiser's shields are down to thirty percent. Banquan and Aesarus incoming." He tried to contact the other two ships. "Comms jammed, Captain. Coordinating the attack through running light protocols."

"Good work, Joker." Anderson clapped the pilot on the shoulder, then gave Nihlus an appreciative nod.

Nihlus kept his attention on the tactical display. The Banquan acquitted itself admirably, separating off the cruiser and whittling it down while leading it on a merry chase. The Aesarus, however came out of its relay jump between the Stinger and the heavy frigate.

The Spectre stepped up between the seats, a plan forming in his mind … the pieces just lining up and falling into place. "Joker, can you bring us in on the Stinger's flank?" he asked, bringing the tactical up on his omnitool. "If you come in on it from this heading, you should be able to get some solid hits in on the emitters." He sent the course information to the pilot.
"We're going to be a sitting duck if it fires." Still, Joker input the course.

Nihlus nodded, a slight smile answering the pilot's trust. "That's all right. I know you can get us out of the way." Trust given, trust returned. "Alenko, send this message to the Aesarus and Banquan. As soon as the Stinger fires on us, they need to strike the emitters near the bow." He leaned forward, every muscle tense, expectant, and moving with the Normandy as if he could help the ship through the maneuvers it needed to pull off. His heart beat hard but steady, adrenaline fueling his muscles in a slow burn.

Heady and powerful, the Spectre settled back into Nihlus's body, taking hold for what felt like the first time since Saren tried to shoot him in the back of the head. Drawing in long, full breaths, he watched the battle play out on his omnitool. The Aesarus was going down faster than they could respond.

"Alenko. Have the Banquan draw that damned cruiser in, place it between the Normandy and the Stinger. Shove it right up their ass. Then tell the Aesarus to pull back, we'll give it some cover with our shields." He stepped over behind Kaidan, pointing out the positions on the screen.

"Two birds, one stone," Kaidan said. He nodded and grinned as he relayed the message via the ship's running lights.

Space battles made Nihlus crazy. Far too many drawn out minutes of maneuvering followed by too few seconds of frantic fire and evasion. Not to mention having to just stand there and let others fight. That never sat well. However, running the battle, being able to see the pieces on the board and knowing where to move them … how to use them … that pulled at something deep inside him. He suspected he had Tashac to thank.

"Aesarus is pulling back," Kaidan reported. "Enemy cruiser has hull breaches on all decks. We're twenty seconds from position on the Stinger. It's retreating."

Joker laughed. "They finally figured out what we're doing. Too late, suckers. You're already dead."

The Normandy fired, and the next second, the Stinger's shield emitters went up in a shower of short-lived sparks.

"Excellent work. Blow that thing to hell." Nihlus punched his hand down on the back of the seat, barely suppressing the urge to crow as the Stinger went up, the blast from it tearing apart the cruiser as well. "All right, the last frigate. Alenko, order the Aesarus to Freedom's Progress. Have her run silent. We can handle these bastards."

He felt Anderson's hand, heavy and welcome, slap him on the shoulder as explosions tore through the heavy frigate, the Normandy's ports bright as the core blew, then darkness.

"Not bad for a Spectre," Joker said, tossing a grin over one shoulder.

Nihlus took a deep, sharp breath and nodded to himself. Not bad at all. He looked over Joker's shoulder. "Time to shuttle departure?"

"Four hours." A pregnant pause just begging for a punchline followed. "Not enough time for a nap."

"Alenko, I'll see you and the rest of the team at the shuttle in three hours." Nihlus nodded to Anderson, then strode from the bridge, his mandibles fluttering. Maybe, just maybe, he could find his way back. Well, most of the way. The thought of going back to his life before boarding the Normandy sent an arid wind blowing through him. No, hopefully that particular Nihlus died
along with Saren.

§

Humans needed to stop settling every frozen rock in the galaxy. Frozen wastelands didn't make for a very self-sustaining colony nor a very welcoming place to visit. Nihlus shivered as he sealed the faceplate on his helmet. When that didn't help, he cranked up his armour's heater. He cracked his neck, then pulled his shotgun and headed out, his team falling into formation behind him. Well, except for Kasumi. The moment she cloaked, he suspected that she'd taken off, eager to explore and check the empty homes for valuables.

Icy fingers walked up his spine, grabbing hold of it at the base of his skull. The silence felt almost alive, the air trembling with the ghosts of whatever had happened there. He rolled his shoulders, trying to shake it off. Superstitious nonsense wouldn't help them figure out how to respond to what happened. The colonists hadn't been spirited away by ghosts or evil spirits. The responsibility lie on very real, very mortal beings, and he needed to keep his wits about him to figure out where the Collectors were taking their captives.

He motioned for his team to take cover before he palmed the door control on the first prefab. Gun and gaze swept the room. "Clear." Relaxing his weapon down to low ready, Nihlus stepped inside, the grip on his spine tightening. Dishes still covered in food sat on the table, and the elements on the stove a few metres further in, glowed red.

Kaidan let out a slight hiss of breath that clouded the air in front of his face. Nihlus envied the human his tolerance for the cold. "Taken in the middle of dinner," Alenko said, his voice hushed. The lieutenant commander walked over to the table. "On Earth we have legends about disappearances like this." Turning away, he looked into Nihlus's eyes. "I used to read every one I could get my hands on." He winced. "Thought they were exciting."

Nihlus nodded, understanding what Alenko was feeling. Gesturing toward the far door with his shotgun, he said, "Let's move. Keep your eyes open for anything out of the ordinary." He glanced around. "Miss Goto, if you're still here, stay in visual range unless comms are restored."

"It never changes with you cops, always trying to cramp my style." The far door opened. "Don't worry, if there's something to find, I'll find it, Mr. Spectre Bossman."

Suppressing a grumbled response, Nihlus exited onto a metal walkway that rattled and banged under their boots. If anyone, friendly or not, remained, they knew company had arrived.

A set of stairs led down into a small open area. Nihlus headed out, staying close to cover until he swept the area. Nothing ... not even trash blowing in the wind. The silence and the wind reminded him of Noveria, particularly with his inner voice echoing the way Shepard had sounded—paranoid and skittish, expecting attack from everywhere despite seeing no enemies anywhere.

"No damage, no bodies, no blast marks … ." One of the Marines stopped in the middle of the courtyard and spun in a small circle, his assault rifle jumping up to his shoulder. "This place is so fucking wrong."

"Stow the chatter," Nihlus said, despite agreeing. His back muscles tightened as he looked over the day's work sitting abandoned, crates and building materials left where the colonists dropped them. He approached a loader, reaching in to check the ignition: still in the on position despite having run out of fuel. The leaden sky pressed down on him, each drifting snowflake piling up like boulders.

"Stop it," he grumbled to himself and pressed on. He paused at the top of a short ramp leading
down to the large gate bisecting the massive stone wall at the far end. A second prefab stood off to his right. He turned to Alenko, the Marine already watching him, anticipating orders. Two quick hand signals sent the lieutenant commander and the twitchy gropo to check it out while the rest of them headed down to the gate.

Pain struck like lightning. Nihlus stumbled, almost going down on one knee, but caught himself against a pile of crates. Agonizing electricity spiked straight down through the top of his head to sizzle along his spine. A low moan spooled from his throat as he pressed a hand against his helmet and squeezed his eyes shut against the excruciating pressure. His brain felt as if the jolt had flash cooked it to a rapid boil.

"You okay, Mr. Bossman?" Kasumi's voice asked from off to his right.

He nodded, waving her off as he felt her close in on him. "I'm fine." Forcing his hand back to his side, he straightened.

_Pain. So much pain for so long. Years beyond count spent hiding, separated. Not meant to be this way. Never meant to be this way._

Nihlus spun around, searching for the source of the voice … no, not one voice … or at least not one mind … but rather, a chorus of tiny minds, each adding a note, combining to form a single voice that bounced around the inside of his skull. The source of the pain? No. No, there needed to be a rational explanation. He turned to his team. They'd spread out, waiting for him to open the gate. None of them looked at him let alone spoke. So much for an easily explained, sane reason for hearing voices. Fuck, excellent bloody time to lose his damned mind.

The same flash he'd seen in the dream that told him Freedom's Progress had been attacked—a wall of snow glistening against the side of a mountain—raced through his mind, quick and sharp … almost like a _preteril_ dashing from burrow to burrow under the predatory gaze of a _circling maraquil_. The pain retreated, chased away by the sinking in his belly. Great, he was back to snow calling for help. Amalair really needed to figure out a way to communicate that made sense. Not to mention finding a method that didn't feel like it tore his brain from his skull.

A thought chased the vision through, too quick to hold onto, but it felt like recognition … as if whomever spoke in his head realized that he could hear them. He shook his head and forced his focus back on the mission as Alenko and Peterson exited the prefab. Nihlus stepped forward, a sudden gust of wind swirling the snow around his feet. What Shepard had called a wind devil centered around him, lifting the frozen crystals in a column that whirled around him for the span of five or six heartbeats before settling back to the ground.

Strange.

"Clear and empty," Alenko reported, pulling the Spectre's attention back where it belonged. "No sign of struggle and no evidence."

"There won't be." Nihlus gestured for everyone to take cover while he opened the gate. The moment the barrier fell bullets peppered his shields. Damn. He caught a glimpse of vaguely humanoid shapes. Mechs. He raced forward, diving into cover behind a stack of crates. At least that meant that someone managed to trigger security. He switched out the shotgun for his assault rifle. As he opened fire on the two _LOKI_ mechs on a balcony opposite, he spotted K-rails set up in positions that looked as though they'd been used as cover. Had the colonists managed to mount a defense? Maybe the last few had tried to pull back to the spaceport.

The two _LOKI_ 's went down, but three more had already opened fire from another balcony on his
right. Sprinting forward, he took cover behind the K-rails. The rest of his squad followed him in, Alenko lifting a FENRIS as it charged down the stairs. Damn. Nihlus opened fire on a second. He'd rather face down a pack of angry varren than a couple of FENRIS. Alenko's lift wore off, and as the mech dropped, Nihlus tossed a grenade at it.

"Overkill much?" Kasumi's voice asked from beside him, followed by a teasing chuckle.

"No such thing as overkill with those things," he replied as he lifted up, bringing one of the LOKI's down. Two of the mechs closed, pinning a pair of Marines behind cover. "Make yourself useful, and take one of those out," he ordered.

"Already on it." A second later, she appeared behind the far one, taking it down in a single blow.

Nihlus waited for her to vanish before opening fire on the last one, drawing it off the two pinned soldiers long enough for them to take it out.

'You see! You hear!' the strange choral voice rang over Nihlus's thoughts, bringing with it dizziness that time … almost euphoria … rather than pain. 'The black thrall rises. They hunger for power lost so long ago that even they forget, but you fight it.'

"Clear," Alenko called, pulling Nihlus away from the voice in his head.

The Spectre stood and strode around the K-rail. They needed to get through the damned colony and get out before he lost his mind completely. Moving with purpose, he ran up the stairs and into the next prefab.

He glanced back once he saw the building was clear. "Alenko, see if you can find out exactly what this colony's compliment of mechs was. I want to know what we've got waiting ahead of us." The prefab had been a bunk house, just rows of neatly made bunk beds lined along the one wall. A pair of lockers stood between each, but everything remained in place, untouched, right down to the weapons still locked up in the safes.

"Most of the computers on this network are a mess," Kaidan reported. "It's like someone went in and scrambled the hell out of them." He glanced up, his eyebrows raising as he shrugged. "Maybe to keep the Collectors from finding something?" He grumbled and pecked away at his omnitool. "Defenses took the heaviest hit from my saboteur, but it looks like at least twenty YMIR mechs … One of the other Marines cursed. "… fifty or so FENRIS, at least one hundred LOKI, and that number of drones."

"Bloody hell," Peterson grumbled, "why does a colony the size of this one need that sort of firepower?" The human spun to face the entrance, his jumpiness making Nihlus nervous. One twitchy member could bring down the entire squad.

"This is the Terminus," Kaidan answered. "The colonies out here rejected Alliance security forces. Considering there were nearly a million people here … that's not a lot. Takes a lot of mechs, even the big ones, to equal a single human soldier's ability to plan and adapt." The lieutenant commander looked over at Nihlus. "We've seen what? Three FENRIS and ten LOKI? That's a lot of resistance waiting ahead of us."

Nihlus took cover next to the door, hearing the sound of servos drifting on the wind as mechs closed in on them. "They'll be spread out through the colony, so we might run into a third of that number, but we need to stay sharp and quiet. Hand signals and a lot less chatter." He signaled for the others to take cover as he heard treads on the stairs outside the door.
"Alenko," he whispered, his voice a low hiss. When Kaidan looked at him, Nihlus signaled for him to keep an eye on Peterson. When Kaidan answered with a nod, the Spectre hit the door control.

The room dissolved into the chaos of battle, Alenko trying to keep the enemy out of the door with lifts and throws while the rest of them pounded the mechs with bullets. Knowing that a great many YMIRs awaited them, Nihlus held onto his remaining grenades in case he couldn't find more.

Alenko triggered his barrier, the action sparking an unexpected nostalgia. The crackle and tingle of the man's biotics took Nihlus back to fighting side by side with Saren. That sensation along his hide had once been as much a part of battle as the feel of his shotgun bucking in his hands.

Peterson and one of the other Marines, Wenslar, took wounds, the second requiring they pause for Alenko to close the wound and bind it in addition to medigel. Nihlus tried to send the woman back to the shuttle, but she refused, claiming that she was fine to continue on.

For the next half hour, they fought a constant, moving battle against the smaller mechs and drones. Moving far slower than Nihlus would have liked, they cleared home after home, scans revealing nothing to aid them. Not that Nihlus needed proof to know who was responsible or how they did it. Ashley locked that down for him. What he needed was proof he could show the galaxy to get them on board, and some means of tracking the Collectors down. Some samples of the damned insect-drones couldn't hurt either. They'd need a means of defending against them if they wanted to avoid being turned into Reaper paste after their first encounter.

They descended a long flight of stairs into an open area, filled with construction materials and crates. Only two routes led in or out: the stairs and a large gate at the far end. No mechs in sight, although he moved his people forward from cover to cover, leaving the wounded at the top of the stairs to cover them from above.

"Drones, incoming," Peterson whispered down. "A lot of them."

Twenty five assorted rocket and assault drones swooped down on the squad, some of them darting around above them like a flock of maraquil, some planting themselves on walls and pilings. Nihlus took cover on the lower balcony, keenly aware of the thin barrier of metal between him and the drones, particularly as rounds punched dents in the railing a hand's span from his head. It wouldn't stop them forever. The fight dragged on, he and Alenko using overload to bring down their shields, the rest of them whittling away with assault rifles.

"We need more people with biotic and tech combat training on the Normandy," Kaidan gasped as he lifted a hand to the back of his head. "I think I set my hair on fire throwing those last few."

Nihlus stood and leaned against the balcony railing. "We can't all dive into a drive core to get biotics, but we should have overload and sabotage on our omnitools." He made a note to bring that up to Garrus. Taking a deep breath, he looked over his squad. Exhausted, but resolute, they all nodded their readiness to move on. Peterson seemed to have calmed down, and Wenslar appeared to be moving well. He returned their nod and set out for the large gate. Without needing to be told, the squad spread out in pairs, taking cover.

Once they were all settled, Nihlus moved into cover on the right side of the gate then signalled Alenko to override the controls. The longer they stayed on that frozen rock, the heavier that dead sky pressed down, tightening the twist in his gut. He'd spent far too much time on dead worlds, battered by the screams of the terrified dead. No. Nihlus hadn't. He let out a bitter sigh as Merol's memories hung over him like a guillotine blade. Shaking his head, he pulled himself back to the present. His hand twitched, fighting the gravity of the flask on his thigh.
That was the last thing he needed. He leaned into the wall at his back, watching the gate drop into the ground.

"Hey, Mr. Bossman." Nihlus jumped and spun around to level his assault rifle on what looked like empty space but for the slight shimmer of Miss Goto's cloak. The thief chuckled. "You're jumpy for a Spectre." Her cloak reset, revealing her slight form for less than a second. "I scouted off to the west end of the colony. I didn't find anything other than a few mechs."

Nihlus grunted a vague acknowledgement and turned back. Footprints in the snow crossed the gate's threshold ahead of them, but then another freak gust of wind set the snow swirling, erasing them.

_They wait! Empty places with guns. So much death costing so little._

Nihlus shook his head as if that could clear away the voice and concentrated his senses on the other side of the gate. They still hadn't run across a single YMIR, a fact that tugged at his plates. He closed his eyes, straining to hear or sense anything out of the ordinary. Nothing. He activated his omnitool and scanned the area ahead.

Still nothing. Not that twenty mechs couldn't be standing a few metres away, powered down and waiting. He glanced out to discover a large, empty space surrounded by prefabs. Cautious, every sense extended and keenly sharpened, he swung through the gate and stepped over the threshold, his assault rifle sweeping the area. Nothing. Not a mech or drone in sight.

His inner alarm began to shriek, but with nothing to blame it on, all he could do was keep moving forward. If something appeared, they'd deal with it. Taking position where he could cover the entire yard, he sent his people forward, moving them from cover to cover and then sending them in pairs to check out the buildings.

He and one of the Marines—Mendez, if he recalled correctly—headed toward the building at the far end of the little enclave. Transmission and reception towers covered the roof. Hope bloomed, hot and fierce in his chest. They might be able to shut the mechs down from there. And maybe, just maybe, the colony's security cameras managed to capture footage of what happened.

Two steps from the door, Mendez stopped and turned to look up into the low clouds and darkness. She pointed to a set of lights swooping down from orbit. "Incoming shuttle."

He watched for a second, then jerked his head toward their destination. "Keep moving." Even if the shuttle had markings to identify it, he'd never make them out in the dark. Best thing they could do was keep moving. No doubt they would meet up with their visitors at some point. If they proved friendly, it would make getting past the mechs a lot easier. That thought lifted the oppressive cloud of doom for the first time since they landed.

The lightness lasted until he put his foot on the first stair up to the building. The sound of mechs whirring to life filled the courtyard, swelling and echoing off the walls until it deafened him. Grabbing Mendez, he pulled her out of her stunned paralysis and shoved her up the stairs.

"Everyone inside!" he shouted then ran to obey his own command. A rocket ripped through the stairs behind him and sent him tumbling in the door. "Close it!" he called, scrambling on all fours to the window. Crouching, he lifted up just far enough to peer out. Three YMIRs stomped into a line down the front of the building and opened fire. Nihlus threw himself to the floor as the window above him exploded from its frame and flew across the room. Mendez hit the deck a fraction of a second before losing the top half of her head.
Nihlus's heartbeat slammed in his ears and at the base of his throat. Too fucking close. The sound of the machines' mass accelerator cannons began to wind down, which meant two things. He scooted across the floor, grabbed Mendez again and shoved her toward the door. The two of them didn't stand a chance against three of those monsters. He flattened out on the floor and covered both their heads as the inside of the building exploded. Shrapnel pelted their shields, then silence fell for a half second while the mechs changed back to their cannons.

Letting out his breath with a hearty grunt, Nihlus scrambled up into a crouch. He leaned close to Mendez's ear, keeping his voice to a barely audible whisper. "The next time they change to missiles, we hit the door, go straight down the ramp and across to the next building. Understood?"

"Nihlus, do you read?"

It took the Spectre a second to make out the call through the ringing in his ears. Comms, thank the spirits. He raised his hand to his radio. "Alenko. Sitrep."

"Petersen and I are pinned down behind crates along the back wall. There has to be a dozen of those damned things out there. We're going to get shredded unless we can get into some decent cover." The lieutenant commander's voice sounded understandably tense, but calm. Not that Nihlus expected anything less.

"They're fucking everywhere, man," Petersen hollered in the background.

"Hey, Bossman," Kasumi said, joining the channel, "your building isn't going to take much more punishment. The supports to the top section are about to go. You need to move. The building closest to the gate is the most heavily fortified. I can cover you with flashbangs, draw them toward the gate for a minute or so. You'll have to move fast."

"Understood." Nihlus reached up for the door control as the mechs wound down, preparing to launch their missiles. "Alenko, you copy that?"

"Affirmative. We'll be ready to move."

Nihlus hit the control a second before he heard Kasumi start taunting the mechs. "Head straight for the crates, move from cover to cover," he told Mendez as he sprinted over the threshold. Keeping the Marine in front of him, he leaped down the stairs, racing for a large stack of crates. The far end of the yard exploded in a series of bright flashes and concussive blasts that left his head ringing, but the mechs turned toward the disruption.

They made it to the stairs and, pushing Alenko and Petersen ahead of them, in the door.

Guyliev waved them over. "Help us push these bunks in front of the windows. Once they figure out that we're all in here, they'll tear it apart."

The damned bunks weighed a lot more than it looked like they should, taking all six of them pulling and pushing to scrape it across the floor.

"I'm out," Kasumi called in Nihlus's ear. "Going—"

The door on the left hand side of the building exploded in, the metal tearing like tin foil as the blast ripped Nihlus off his feet and slammed him into the end of a bunk. His right arm bashed into one
of the metal supports a second before his helmet hit and blinding light exploded inside his head. He impacted the side of the bed and slumped to the floor. After a few seconds of lying there, stunned into immobility, he tried to push himself up, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't harangue any of his body parts into obeying.

"Nihlus!" Kaidan crouched next to him. "Kasumi, Mendez, Peterson, watch that door." The bright orange of Alenko's omnitool registered through the thick, vibrating haze that covered Nihlus's vision. "Damn, that's a skull fracture." The lieutenant commander pinned Nihlus to the floor with a knee on his shoulder. "Stay still."

Groaning, Nihlus pushed at the Marine. He needed to get up. They needed to pull back, regroup.

"Don't move," Kaidan repeated. "I've got to check on Guyliev."

As soon as Alenko moved away, Nihlus tried to haul himself up off the floor, but his arm collapsed, the armour and bone shattering like porcelain beneath a heavy boot. Pain blossomed in slow motion, fighting its way through the fog that bogged down his thoughts. Then movement outside the door pushed everything else aside, and frantic talons scrabbled for his rifle, the gun lying a metre or so away. Damned mechs were punching through. Dragging himself across the floor, he managed to wrap his talons around the weapon. Then people leaped in the hole where the door had been, taking positions in the window to fire out

The shuttle they'd seen coming in. He let out a faint sigh of relief; they seemed friendly.

"Start pulling these people out," a female voice yelled over the roar of guns. As Nihlus lifted his head from the floor, he saw her hit the deck, a rocket streaking over her head to blow a bunk bed into shrapnel. "Sweet baby Jesus … too close." Sheclambered back into cover and leaned out, tossing grenades into the cluster of mechs. Grabbing at her belt, her hand came away empty.

Quick, head darting almost bird-like, she scanned the room, locking on the grenades still attached to his armour. Scrambling over, she plucked them from his belt, muttering, "Sorry about this."

Returning to the window, she tossed the grenades out.

"Miranda, bypass that weapon locker," she hollered over her shoulder. "We need rocket or grenade launchers." She pulled a large weapon off her back. "Everyone, heavy cover. Now! Get the wounded back. I have no fucking idea what this thing will do."

"Shepard?" Alenko called. "What the hell? Shepard?"

"See to your wounded, Sparky," was all she said as she stood to fire the big, awkward looking gun. "Damned thing needs a shorter priming time," she yelled as bullets impacted her shields, but then lightning arced from the end. She ducked back into cover. "All hail the blessed Enkindlers and just call me Zeus. This baby is a keeper!" She stood, firing lightning at the mechs again.

"Al," the small woman—Shepard?—shouted when she took cover again, "grab the big guy. I'll give you a hand in a second."

Nihlus stared, trying to see through the haze of vibration and flashing lights. She moved quick and rough, limping heavily, but not letting it impede her as she ducked into cover next to the huge hole in the prefab's wall. She and two others provided cover while the rest of her team helped the Alliance personnel past the distracted mechs and toward the gate.

Rough hands grabbed Nihlus, hauling him up off the floor. "Move it, Spectre," a raspy, dual-toned voice grumbled, "unless you want to become a permanent addition to this frozen hell."
Nihlus leaned heavily on the other turian, still not quite registering anything happening around him. Voices and movement all seemed to slur into one another and it took all his concentration just to keep one foot moving then the other.

Then the snowy ground flew up, slamming him straight in the face. He groaned and tried to pull his broken arm out from under him, the pain returning full force.

"Al! You okay?"

"Yeah, fine," the turian grumbled. "I just took a couple rounds on the leg. Keep moving."

The woman ran past Nihlus. "Come on, Sparky, get these people pulled back!" The small shape grabbed Nihlus by the wrist and dragged him toward the gate. "Stop gawking at me and move your ass, soldier ... before we all end up as casualties."

"We need assistance!" A deep, musical male voice shouted.

"More of the big ones coming in from the far end, Shepard!" a woman shouted, sticking her head in the end door. Her long, black hair whipped around her head in the wind. "Leave the wounded. We can take care of them once we get these mechs shut down."

Shepard shook her head. "No, we get the wounded back behind the gate. If we move fast, you can dig in at this end, and I'll make a run for the security building, shut the rest of them down."

The Spectre tried to concentrate on the fast talking, fast moving soldier, but even as she pulled him toward safety, her other hand waved across his vision, directing her people.

"Jack, pick up that rocket launcher and get inside." Nihlus's saviour dropped him behind the gate and ran back in. He pushed himself up, wobbling as he leaned on one elbow, his vision still blurred and shaky.

The soldier … Shepard … her clone or imitation … whatever … popped out of cover and tossed two grenades at the closest YMIR. "Miranda, you go with her. Every time that bastard shifts from bullets to rockets, overload it and then hit it hard and fast with the rockets. Javik. Liara. Al. Stay in cover, try to pull the rest of them to the other end of the yard."

She glanced his way, then looked over at Alenko. "You got this? You can get them out of here?"

The lieutenant commander nodded, looking as dumbstruck as Nihlus felt.

"Good luck." The fake Shepard ran to the gate control. "Vincent, give me cover while I fry this bitch. We need to give Sparky's people a chance to evac." The gate closed, a shower of sparks erupting from the control panel, and she was gone.

Alenko crouched next to Nihlus. "Can you walk with help?" He injected medigel, the shot slowly pushing back the pain and cloudiness. The orange glow appeared above Nihlus again.

"Was that Shepard?" Nihlus asked, wincing at the slur in his voice.

Kaidan shook his head, a helpless sort of shrug answering the Spectre's question. "She's beat to hell, but it looked like her, and she called me Sparky ... but hell ... Shepard's dead." He shook his head again, then gave Nihlus another shot. "Okay, come on. We need to get everyone back to the shuttle."

"I've got the bossman," Kasumi said, appearing a couple of metres away. "You help the others."
Nihlus let Alenko help him to his feet, then wrapped an arm around Kasumi's shoulders for the hobbling retreat to the shuttle. As they headed back up the ramp, he kept his eyes on the gate, the emotions and sensations of his dream rising up around him, thick and heady and sweet. He closed his eyes for a moment, just listening to the sounds of battle, that voice calling out orders replete with sweet baby Jesuses and Enkindlers' glowing backsides. Common sense told him clone or duplicate, but somewhere deep in his gut, hope kindled.

Shepard?

Chapter End Notes

A-N: So, the Dragon Age and Mass Effect Big Bangs have eaten up my time far more than I anticipated. However, the good news is that although I didn't get chosen by an artist in the MEBB, I did get the first five chapters of the Third Act written, so they will be ready to go up when the time comes. So … yeah, finally, a chapter. And it's Chapter 99. Thank you to those who have read and supported me for the past 98 chapters. :D
Chapter Summary

Shepard on Freedom's Progress ... mechs! mechs! everywhere! And what is with the talking snow?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Novio - Boyfriend in Spanish

Shepard stared at the closed gate for the space of five heartbeats, a wistful grin spreading across her face. Damn, Sparky looked good, the years had done well by him. Barbed and howling, exile scraped through her, a desolate wind clawing for purchase. 'You belong with him and Anderson,' it demanded. 'Go after them!' But then a set of twin mass accelerator cannons pelted her position, shattering any chance of a reunion. She bolted for the nearest crate, her ass plowing the light snow as she hit the ground and slid the last two meters. Flashbangs detonated within every canyon carved into her skin, the pain blinding and deafening her for a handful of seconds.

"Sweet baby Jesus, Vincent, I thought I said cover me!" she hollered into her comms.

"To give you time to close the gate, not daydream about your Alliance novio," came the reply from over behind a pile of crates. "And I could use some back up over here."

Shepard scrambled up off the ground, feeling like a gopher as she popped up to look over her crate, the three mechs closing on his position confirming his peril. Damn. They needed to throw the mechs off for a few seconds, let him get to better cover.

"We've got about five minutes before these metal fucks mash us into paste," Jack shouted. The tattooed beauty's head appeared above the bottom of the window. A second later a shockwave pounded through the YMIR line, staggering two of them enough to give Shepard a chance to move.

Shepard bolted past the closest mechs and dove in behind new cover. She glanced up at the comm shed, judging how long she needed to cover the distance. Damn, the prefab had already taken a hell of a pounding, and the second level hung precariously, supported by only one pillar … not exactly stable. It wouldn't take much more punishment. She needed to keep the mechs' fire directed elsewhere for a couple of minutes.

"Miranda," she called into her radio, "set your overload for max area. You and I'll fry the mechs closing on Vincent." She popped up to assess the ever-changing conditions. "When we do that, Javik, and Liara, heavy warp. Vincent, hit them with your carnage and then run for their shed. Jack, once the armour is compromised, bounce those fuckers to the blessed Enkindlers' light."

Jack whooped, a deep throaty celebration of mayhem. "Fuck yeah!"

"It'll make for one hell of a boom!" Vincent crowed.

Shepard cued up her overload, setting it to arc between enemies. "Roger that. On three … one … two … three." After discharging her overload, Shepard leaped up and ran for the communications
shed, not sparing a glance for the Vesuvius of combined powers erupting behind her. At least one of the mechs exploded, Jack's raw, glorious bray of fury soaring above the explosions.

Crumpling all her broken bits into a tight coil, Shepard launched herself over the twisted remains of stairs. Mid-leap, terror flared as a brilliant firework ripped through the darkness, ravenous for the taste of charred and shredded flesh. The rocket scorched the air so close to her neck that the skin erupted into blisters. Then fire ... whirling and churning, limbs flailing through smoke and flame ... tumbling amidst a maelstrom of stone and metal. The blast slammed her through the melted pretzel of the railing and into the doorframe. The first impact drove the air from her lungs and rattled everything inside her head loose. The last tumbled her through the door and sent her sliding across the floor on her belly. Three blissful seconds of ringing, stunned oblivion exploded, every cell of her being shrieking with the cries of the flayed and damned.

A high, shrill howl of pain sliced between clenched teeth as she forced herself up onto her hands and knees. As her scream exhausted itself, a death wail of tearing metal ripped through the prefab, the building convulsing and crumbling around her. Shepard tipped over onto one hip, looking up to watch a massive tear open across the ceiling, revealing the dark, cloudy sky. Mesmerized by the kaleidoscope of falling snow, black lightning, and silver sparks streaking across her vision, Shepard stared, oblivious to her peril until another wail of rending metal kicked her survival instinct in the ass.

This whole place is going to come down on your head in about thirty seconds, Janey. Get up. You can push through it.

Blinded by pain, Shepard relied on muscle memory to slap her medigel. She waited until it deployed, then hit the control again before heaving herself up off the floor and looking for her goal. There. The computer station at the far end of the shed. It remained intact, at least what she could see of it seemed to be. Keeping low, Shepard hobbled toward the computer. The entire building swung back and forth with her pulse, the world silent but for a low ringing. Dizzy, blind, and nearly deaf, she tripped over something, instinctively sticking out her arms to break her fall. Both wrists and hands screamed as she landed. Glancing back, she saw a small white blob. A med kit?

Sweet baby Jesus, let it be a medkit.

Greedy for some … any … relief from the igneous torture … she snatched at the patch of white, missing a couple of times when it ducked away at the last second. On the fourth whack she managed to grab hold.

Please, please, let this be a med kit.

She dragged it onto her lap and opened it, fumbling with the clasp. Hands shaking so hard she could barely hang onto the damned thing, she wrenched it open. Pain roared like the surf, a hurricane smashing her entire body against the rocks. It was a medkit. Praise the blessed Enkindlers. Rooting through, tossing aside bandages and other unnecessaries, she pocketed the medigel … then … at the bottom … syringes. She pulled one out and shoved the rest of the kit off her legs.

Janey, you know what this means.

Shepard scowled, her right arm snapping out to keep her from tipping over. Obsidian splinters, sharper and more cruel than glass sliced into her arm. Either the rocket, or the impact afterward had torn open her wounds … all of them. She sagged over onto one elbow to steady herself enough
to take the cap off.

Taking painkillers didn't mean anything, except being functional.

*Janey, you've worked way too hard to slide back down that hole. Just clench your teeth and bull through it.*

"Shepard, come in. Where the hell are you? We're getting fucking shredded out here!"

Jack's cry pulled the cap and shoved the syringe into the port on her armour.

*It means saving my people.*

"Miranda!" Vincent hollered. "Al, can you get to her? I'm pinned."

"I'm trying. There's two between … ."

Vincent and Al hit the plunger together.

Relief spread through her veins, blissful and cool, ice water over fevered skin. As the agony calmed, Shepard took her first full breath and clenched her fists a couple of times to help steady their shaking. Her vision cleared, and she eyed the rest of the syringes. It'd be a few minutes before she knew if she'd taken enough to solve the problem. She reached over for the kit and grabbed the rest, shoving them into her belt pouch.

Just in case. Who knew how much of a fight lay ahead.

An explosion near the door collapsed the last pillar. The shed let out a piercing, metallic death scream, the far end tearing and buckling under the weight of the second floor. Shepard scrambled toward the computer station on all fours, and crawled up into the chair. She blinked a couple of times, then rubbed her eyes, trying to clear her vision enough to deal with electronics.

Okay. Power. She needed power. Frantic hands moved over the controls. One hand leaped up to scratch the deep line around her mouth with the pad of her thumb.

Damn it. No power. She just needed enough to send a single command.

Shoving the chair back, she slithered off to lie beneath the console. She fabricated a screwdriver on her omnitool and used it to pry open the panel. A mess of shorts and mangled wires greeted her.

"Well, at least the console still has power," she muttered, diving in. "Of course, that means probably electrocuting myself." As she started jury-rigging power to the vital systems, she saw that the wires had been cut rather than torn apart by destructive force. Sabotage. Someone had tried to make sure no one could access the computer. She rubbed her eyes again, trying to get them to focus on the myriad of tiny building blocks. At least the meds pushed the pain back enough that the fog lifted, her pulse no longer making everything throb to its beat.

She clenched her fists a couple more times, then dove back in. Just needed to take the power from the backups, reroute it through … damn, the saboteur thought of that. Okay, so through the secondary … good, that one remained intact. Three minutes and two slight electrical burns later, Shepard scrambled up, a grim smile of satisfaction greeting the booting system.

She dove into the security systems … dammit, all security protocols had been locked down. A low, frustrated growl rumbled from her throat as she clenched her teeth and started a bypass. Whoever set the mechs loose really didn't want anyone getting into the computer or shutting down
"Shepard! What the hell are you doing in there?" Vincent yelled. "We're pinned and this damned building is coming down. Whatever you're doing, get it done!"

Finished the bypass, Shepard sent the shutdown command to the mechs throughout the colony, and was rewarded by a sudden silence in the yard. A wave of concern followed a sharp wash of relief, and Shepard lifted her hand to her radio. "How's everyone doing out there?" She held her breath.

"All present and accounted for," Al answered. "A few of us have more holes in us than we started with, but nothing critical." Shepard heard muttering and then Miranda's voice, strident and insistent, before he spoke again. "Miranda took the worst hit, but she's up and thrashing everyone who tries to help her."

"I am not thrashing anyone. Just let me get up, the ground is freezing. Give me back my armour."

Shepard grinned as she heard the operative's voice. Miranda couldn't be that badly hurt. Satisfied that her people would be all right, she pulled the chair over to the computer and started sorting through what amounted to an impressively thorough muck up job on the security systems. What was her saboteur trying to hide? The surveillance camera archives took the worst hit. Hope sparked and flared. Some evidence, maybe?

She reached up to her radio. "Miranda? In the other attacks, the surveillance camera footage was all wiped, right?"

The operative answered, but from the doorway on Shepard's right. "Yes, no evidence was found." She hobbled over the threshold to stand just behind Shepard's shoulder. "This building is coming down, Shepard. We need to move."

The captain shook her head. "This computer was disabled, and someone did a hatchet job on the camera files." She pointed to the monitor. "There are just tiny pieces left in a few hundred file locations." Opening her omnitool, she started keying in commands, then glanced up at the operative, bludgeoning her with annoyance. "If this is what passes for state of the art in your organization, I'll need to go market for my omnitool." She winced as she continued working. "This is sad. I want my baby back, and you probably tossed it."

Miranda shook her head. "No omnitool was recovered with your body, Shep—"

Letting out a heavy, grinding screech the whole building bucked hard enough to send Shepard's chair rolled across the floor. The far end collapsed another meter or so, ripping the ceiling open like tin foil.

Miranda pressed closer, either seeking shelter or believing that the looming pressure could speed Shepard up. "What are you doing?" she asked, her tone hard and clipped, clinging to the professional edge of panic.

"Writing an elegant and complex little piece of code to try to assemble these fragments into something useful, so shut it, and let me work." As Shepard's fingers flew over the interface with all of her old skill and confidence, a smile crept up on her, spreading across her face until the sharp sting of her wounds halted its progress. She had to hand it to Miranda and the rest of the Frankenstein team … they'd brought her back damned near functional. If she'd slept until healed, she probably never would have known she died.

She finished and hit the control to compile her nifty little program. When that finished, she
downloaded it into the console then sat back. "Shouldn't take too long. Depends on how she fragmented the data." Seeing the way the operative kept eye balling the far end of the prefab, Shepard nodded toward the door. "Go, help the others search the rest of the colony. I'll catch up as soon as I'm done here."

Miranda hesitated for a half second, but then gave Shepard a starched nod and limped back out the door.

At the two minute mark, video footage appeared on one of the secondary monitors. Shepard pushed out of the chair and braced against the console, leaning into the computer as the chilling, but not unexpected last minutes of the colony played out. Insectile stasis drones flitted across the screen like dead leaves, tumbling and swirling through the air. Beyond that, Collectors carried frozen colonists to pods and sealed them inside. A steady line of the pods floated on zero g fields out of frame. A million colonists … a million pods. That meant one hell of a huge ship, maybe two. So … tally on Collector cruisers … three, possibly four.

Shepard folded back into her chair, a heavy scowl weighing down her brow as Tashac's memories stepped forward. Millions of Collectors spread across the galaxy by the end of the war. Obviously, they'd survived through the millennia, but where? Shepard had heard stories about them … that they traded tech for people … one that seemed all too plausible given current events. They came from and disappeared to parts unknown. Rumours said they used the Omega IV relay, another plausible stretch.

"I'm going to try to capture one of the little drones."

Shepard bolted upright in her chair as a face appeared in the secondary monitor. A middle aged woman held up a tool box.

"From what I've seen, they're the key to whatever is happening to people. Wish me luck."

The camera followed her to the door, zooming in to maintain focus. Shepard stood, her fingers pressed against the edge of the console, heart pounding. The woman hesitated at the door, listening. Shepard held her breath, straining to hear what was going on outside the shed. The door at the end opened, the woman stuck the box outside, snapped it shut and then closed the big door. She held the box to her ear then let out a faint cry of victory and fried the lock with her omnitool.

"I caught one or two," she said, looking at the camera. The air left Shepard's lungs in a long whoosh, her shoulders collapsing as the muscles relaxed. After a second of looking around, the woman turned to her left. "I'm going to hide them. I hope whoever comes here … that you find this recording. We aren't the first taken, and we're certainly not going to be the last." She crouched down next to a set of cupboards, dragged out all the contents, then shoved the box in to the back. When she placed everything back inside the cupboard, she ran to the console. "I can hear them outside, trying to get in the door." Glancing back, she whined, a soft mewl low in her throat. "They're going to get in." Shepard reached up, shaking fingers extended toward the monitor.

The woman turned to look at the camera. "They're taking us alive. What do they want with us?"

The recording fragmented and disappeared.

Shepard stared at the monitor where that terrified, helpless face had appeared moments before. Her fingers drifted back to the top of the console, a slow, aching sorrow lighting a fire deep in her belly. The next second, panic bloomed sharp and jagged, squelching it. It was all too damned huge and terrifying. Why had Miranda's people brought her back? Why hadn't they just left her in peace? She
didn't need to be the one to fight the monsters. She really didn't. What was so fucking special about her? The galaxy needed someone braver, someone stronger ... anyone ... anyone other than Jane Gwendolyn Shepard and her circus of fears and nightmares.

"Rest of the colony is just more of the same, Shepard," Al said in her ear, his raspy voice throwing a crash barrier in front of Shepard's runaway mako. "Just mechs and ... nothing."

Shoving the pity party out of her head, Shepard straightened, one hand lifting to her ear as she turned to look for the cupboard. "Roger that. I think I've got something here. Rendezvous back at the shed, we'll head for the shuttle. Shepard out."

Taking a deep breath, she crossed the few metres of floor. Her fears spoke the truth. It didn't need to be her to face the Reapers. Any number of people could do it ... some of who would fight at her side. However, for whatever reason, that fight had chosen her, and no matter how hard she shook in her boots or her much her hands trembled, she'd see it through. She would ... for all the terrified, helpless people who found the courage to spend their last seconds fighting back.

The fire returned, burning away the panic as she caught sight of the cupboard, half-crushed under the collapsing ceiling. Shepard crouched, shuffling under the wreckage, one hand braced against a pretzeled beam, the other stretching in to grab the door handle. The front of the cabinet broke free with just a tug, but everything had shifted toward the crushed end, out of reach.

"Oh, I don't want to go under there," she groaned, a wary glare examining the fragile house of metal cards stacked above her head. Taking a deep breath, she edged forward, stretching as long as she could manage. "I'm going to end up a red splat under all this crap," she bitched, her voice tight with the strain of her reach. Edging forward, she managed to grab a blanket, then another couple of centimetres, she caught another medkit and sent it spinning across the floor. Then two more medkits ... then the toolbox. Shepard scrawled at the plastic case with her fingertips, managing to inch it up the cupboard floor.

"Just about ... ." All the muscles along her left side seized in one massive charlie horse. Letting out a yelp, Shepard lunged after the damned tool kit, then threw herself backward, away from the rubble, clutching her prize to her chest.

The odd vibration from inside the box told her everything she needed to know about whether the little drones were still viable. "Excellent." She laid down on her side and stretched out until the muscle spasms eased. Sitting up, she set the toolbox to one side and picked up the scattered medkits. Just in case. She took the medigel and painkillers from each, stuffing them into her belt pouch.

"Shepard?" Al looked in the door, one brow plate rising when he saw her lying on the floor. "Taking a nap?"

"Yep." She climbed to her feet, slow and stiff. "I feel like a rocket slammed me through a railing and into a doorway," she said, groaning and stretching a little. "I hurt everywhere." After bending over to retrieve the toolbox, she limped back to the console. "Here," she said, holding out the box. "Hold this, but don't open it. Someone caught a drone or two." She sagged against the console for a moment before thumping down into the chair. "She recorded the abductions too."

The orange glow of her omnitool hurt her eyes as she activated it, then winced away, squinting as she keyed in the download. Having some proof of what was happening to all those people certainly couldn't hurt when facing down the Alliance and the council. A shudder rumbled down her spine like a carriage on a rollercoaster. The Alliance ... the council ... she'd have to convince them that she was alive again ... then back to the political bullshit of trying to get them ready for the
"You fall asleep over there?" Al called, edging toward the door, the box held out in front of him like he thought it would bite.

Shepard grinned, his expression pulling her straight out of that dark quagmire. "Sort of … I started thinking about the council and trying to imagine how … 'Hi! I'm alive!' is going to go." Her omnitool chimed to let her know that the download was complete. Relief settled all the twitchy, aching bits of her. Time to get the hell out of Dodge. She walked to the door and took the box from his hands. "Let's go."

The rest of the squad were waiting at the back gate, apparently not wanting to return to the courtyard for fear the mechs might suddenly wake up. Moving slowly to accommodate Miranda's unwillingness to let anyone help her, they returned to the space port via a residential district. The empty, lit windows felt haunted, as though all the occupants remained at home, staring out those blanks windows, pounding and screaming for someone, anyone to see or hear them.

Shepard hadn't thought that a Kodiak could look welcoming until she spotted it, and warm, heady relief flooded through her. "Suppose it says something for how creepy a place is when the thought of going back to a new ship where you know only a couple of people and trust none of them is a welcoming option." Shepard looked over at her small gaggle of strange misfits. Liara was trying to convince Miranda to get in the shuttle, while the operative struggled to get everyone else in first.

"Shepard, let's go," Miranda called, waving the captain in. "I know that one of those Marines was a friend, but I don't want to risk all of us being arrested before we even get this mission off the ground."

Shepard let out a long breath. Yeah, Sparky might just arrest her. As far as he knew, Jane Shepard died almost two years ago. She could be anyone, and he was Mr. Straight and Narrow. Still, she waved Miranda off and turned to look for Al. He was walking the other way, confirming her suspicion that his time with her had come to an end. That made her inexplicably sad, all things considered. He'd been an ally in a place where she'd trusted precious little.

Before she followed him, she waved Liara over and passed her the toolbox. "There are samples of the drones in here," she warned the asari. "Don't open it."

Liara shook her head, her eyes getting big. "If we had a safe on the shuttle, I'd lock them in it." Her hands clamped around the small box. "Trust me, after I'm done hanging on to this thing, they might never get it open."

Shepard chuckled and squeezed the asari's shoulder. At least one trusted friend remained. Although, who knew how long Liara would stay. She had a life and an empire to get back to. Pushing that aside to worry about later, Shepard turned to follow Al, her feet dragging. The pain meds kept the agony down to a dull roar, but they intensified her exhaustion.

The turian walked up to the edge of the canal, talons poised right along the edge, and looked up at the sky. "This is where I take my leave of you, Shepard," he said, no doubt hearing her footsteps crunch through the snow. His hood glanced around as she stepped up to his side.

Shepard nodded. An odd combination of relief and regret tickled the back of her throat. At least the strength and purpose in his voice gave her hope for his future out in the galaxy on his own. She looked down into the black water, the fat snowflakes so very white as they drifted down to disappear at its surface. After a couple of minutes, she shivered despite the heater in her armour pumping out plenty of warmth. Of course, the chill had nothing to do with the cold.
"It's the damned silence, Janey. Unnatural.

No … it wasn't the silence, either. It was that feeling of being watched … of voices crying out to be heard. She closed her eyes, stretching out … trying to hear them. Maybe she wasn't just being superstitious, maybe somewhere survivors found a hiding place? Some strange sixth sense telling her not to leave them?

A sharp, disproving voice drew her attention back to Miranda, the operative trying to convince Jack and Javik to head back to the ship. Jack wanted to keep searching, almost frantic in her need to find someone alive. That, more than anything, convinced Shepard she needed the volatile biotic on her team. The fight against the Collectors and Reapers require that sort of fire. Javik … Shepard sighed … Javik just wanted to find something to kill. She fought down a broad, unkind grin. Mechs must have proven such a disappointing enemy to the avatar of jackassery.

"Down girl," she muttered to Tashac as the vitriol threatened to escalate. "You did have three children with the gasin." She caught Al watching her and shrugged off her odd behaviour. Shivering again, she wrapped her arms around herself, rubbing her armour as if it actually affected the chill.

She turned to look over the deserted settlement and nudged him with her elbow. "Well, if you're leaving me, I guess we need to find you some transport off this rock." She nodded toward the spaceport where the shuttle waited to return her to her brand new ship. She didn't know how she felt about that yet. The SR2 still needed a name; bad luck to sail a boat with no name.

She strode toward the line of now ownerless ships, her limp heavy. No need to act when she felt as though she lurched across a field of javelins, crashing through and impaling herself with every step.

"It felt good to be fighting again," the torin said, his voice low but filled with rediscovery. "No implants, no ridiculous, overpowered strength or reflexes, just my muscle, bone, and biotics." He chuckled. "And my gun." He glanced over at her, his rheumy eyes brighter than she'd seen them, the broken and shadowed planes of his face far less hollow-looking. He'd be okay.

"Pain … so many in pain … separated … alone. The many never meant to be alone."

Shepard stopped and turned a small circle. "Did you hear that?" she whispered, one hand drifting up to press against her temple. A sharp splinter of pain stabbed into both temples and the base of her skull. Wincing away from the agony that made it through her shot of painkillers, she sent thanks to the makers of the miraculous meds. Without them, it would have driven her to her knees.

Al's mandibles fluttered, distressed, and he nodded as he blinked rapidly. "I heard something. Couldn't make it out."

"The black thrall rises," the many voices spoke in one voice. "It's touched you … the pain … so much pain, but you fought it!" The joy in the last burst within Shepard's chest, the ferocity of it nearly as painful as the icepicks in the brain. "You broke free."

She turned toward the canal, and beyond that the cliffs of stone. "It's … I think it's coming from … ." Shepard walked toward the canal, the snow swirling around her, pulling in tighter and thicker with each step until she had to squint, an arm held in front of her eyes. The snow impacted like tiny rocks rather than ice, cold, but they didn't melt upon touching her skin.

"What's going on?" She stopped, and stumbling back a couple of steps as the world ahead of her shifted … changed into another location entirely. She held a hand out behind her. "Al?" His fingers closed around hers, and she felt him stiffen, his grip tightening until her knuckles ground together.
Shepard blinked a couple of times, but the view didn't change. Instead of the sheer grey-black walls of the quarry she saw snow banked against rock cliffs, glittering like a pile of diamonds.

"Help ... please." The voice seemed to come from the snow, but she didn't hear it, it appeared in her mind.

"Come out. Let me see you," she called, wincing as the wind picked up, pelting her with the impossibly hard flakes.

"We are here. Come, please."

Al's hand pulled at her, leading her on, his wonder as palpable as the dread curling through her gut. Far too many different forces, none of them kind, had played around in her head. Shepard followed, hesitant and slow, unable to see outside the squall that swirled around her. Images flashed through her mind …

… Banks of snow glistening on a hundred planets …

… salt mines, abandoned for longer than the human race had existed …

… caves filled with crystal glistening in a thousand hues ….

All of them whispered softly, hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of tiny voices … voices so small that alone they didn't even form thought.

Shepard stopped and pulled back hard against Al's hand, pressing the other over her eyes to block out the dizzying swirl of glinting madness. Frustration and sadness welled up as she covered her vision. It wasn't hers, and she shoved it away. No! No one and nothing was allowed to possess her … not anymore.

"I don't understand," she shouted. "What are you trying to tell me?" She could feel the crystalline storm pick up fury at her inability to understand. What she knew could not be snowflakes pelted her with enough force to pierce the sealant over her wounds, embedding themselves into her flesh.

"Stop!" she screamed out loud, yanking free of Al to cover her face with both arms. And then he wrapped around her, using his cloak to shelter her. She leaned into him, dizzy and weak … her face feeling as though it were on fire.

"You must help! You broke the darkness. You defeated the old masters." The voices moaned softly as if trying to find a way to answer her question. "Picture. Reach," they said at last. "Please. Reach across."

The image of her omnitool formed in her mind as she reached, trying to do as they asked. After all, its translation program was what made communicating with most members of the other races possible. The voices sang with joy and a sense of purpose, as if she'd finally given them a way to breach the gap. The tempest died away, leaving her breathless and deaf. After a few seconds, Al eased back to reveal that the whirlwind of snow had stopped as well.

Shepard let her arms drop, her right feeling heavier than before. Looking down, she let out a soft, startled gasp. "Al?"

"Shepard," he answered, his voice high and tight. "Look down." He backed away from her a little, his entire physicality changing from careful, pained swagger to tightrope walker on a windy day.

His sudden alarm snapped her attention away from her arm to look at the ground … there was no
ground beneath their feet. Instead, they both stood on a clear, crystalline walkway halfway over the canal. He turned, his arms reaching out for balance on the narrow ramp. "They were taking us to the mountains," he said, pointing. "Maybe they were trying to show us where they are?"

"Shepard!" Miranda's shout sounded as though it should be followed by, 'Are you getting into trouble, young lady? Just you wait until I tell your father what you've been up to'.

Shepard ignored the operative and held up her arm. "It gets weirder. When it told me to reach across … to understand them, I thought of my omnitool … of how it allows me to communicate." She stared at the wide, thick band of the same clear, crystalline material that made up the walkway. "Look at this." Without waiting for him to turn back, she reached up with her other hand to touch it. It was as smooth and solid as diamond.

"Shepard, we have incoming Alliance ships," Steve called on her comms. "Good news is, we have comms back. Bad news is, we've got a very short window to get out of town before the law moves in."

Shepard cursed and then raised her hand to her radio. Too many mysteries remained unsolved. What had created the ramp and the thing on her arm? And how? Damn it, and now she had to run. She hated running. Opening the channel, she grumbled, "Understood, LT. We're on our way back."

She looked up at Al, but before she could speak, his hand closed on her shoulder. "Go," he said, his eyes locking on hers. "I'm going to follow the leads in those visions we saw. I know that salt mine. Maybe I can figure out what the voices want. I'll keep in touch."

Shepard reached out to take his hand. "Thank you for everything." She backed away a step. "Take care of yourself. No more dying and being captured by renegade organizations." A teasing grin accompanied the warning.

His mandibles flicked. "Same goes for you." He nodded toward Miranda. "Better go before Dr. Frankenstein loses her temper."

Shepard turned away and limped along the few metres of the ramp, hurrying into an uneven jog once she hit solid ground. The rest of the squad were already belted into their seats when she stepped up and turned back, raising a hand to wave good-bye.

Al just nodded and headed down the length of the spaceport toward a small personal yacht.

"What's that on your arm?" Miranda asked, her omnitool flaring to life.

Shepard sat next to Jack and shrugged. "I have no idea. It just appeared there when the snow squall died down."

"Fuck, what happened to your face?" Jack asked, reaching over to poke at Shepard's cheek. "It's hard, and sorta cool. Looks like you've got diamond cybernetics or something."

Shepard pulled away. "Don't poke my face." She softened the words with a grin. "You just want to pick them out and sell them."

Jack chuckled and relaxed back into her seat. "Hell, yeah."

"I'm going to need to run full scans before I can let that onto the ship," Miranda said. "It could be a serious quarantine issue." She leaned forward, her scans already running.

Shepard slouched into her seat and leaned her head back to rest along the ledge. "I'm okay with
that. I feel beat to hell and intend to sleep all the way back to the ship." She closed her eyes, pain, fatigue, and a vague sort of loneliness working their way through her body, termites, eroding even her concern about the band of crystal wrapped around her arm. Unlike the pieces embedded in her face, the arm didn't hurt, so that pushed it down the priority list considerably.

Jack nudged Shepard awake when they touched down in the shuttle bay. "Up and at 'em, Sleeping Beauty," the biotic called. She grinned as she unbuckled her harness. "Thanks for the amp, by the way."

Shepard nodded, but didn't stand. "You going to stick around, help me kick some Collector ass?" She watched the volatile young woman through narrow eyes. "I could use someone with your skills."

"There were what … a million people living there? Moms and dads and kids?" Jack clenched her teeth, her jaw standing out. "Hell, yeah, I'll help you kill every damned one of those bastards." She hopped down off the shuttle then twisted to look back. "But just so we're all clear … I'm here for you, Shepard, not the cheerleader princess over there." The biotic met Shepard's nod of agreement with one of her own, then strode, loose and lazy, toward the elevator. "Oh, by the way, Barbie … I like the armour. I almost forgot you were a corporate whore."

Shepard held up a hand, asking Miranda for forbearance. "Just let it go, although I have to agree, it's good to see you dressed in the uniform." Again, she softened the words, but that time with a starched nod. "As loathe as I am to restrict your personal freedoms, I'd appreciate your sticking to the uniform code while on board. As my XO, you need to set the example for the crew."

Miranda nodded. "Understood, Captain." She let out a long breath and deactivated her omnitool. "As for the material on your face and arm … it reads inert. Crystallized carbon and free of contaminants. We'll still need to examine it further."

Raising her arm, Shepard poked at the band. "What I want to know is how I'm going to get it off."

"Captain," Liara said, drawing Shepard's attention for the first time since the surface. The asari held out the box, her face drawn into a squeamish scowl. "It's buzzing." Pushing the box into Shepard's chest, she waited until Shepard's hands closed around it, then hurried off the shuttle.

"We need a scientist," Shepard sighed, pushing herself up. "And a damned good one … if not a whole team of them." Every joint in her body felt as though someone had filled them with ground up glass. Stretching eased the aches a little, but she still clung to the side of the shuttle as she eased herself down to the deck.

"We had a dossier on a brilliant salarian scientist." Miranda stepped down, taking the same amount of care. "His name was Mordin Solus, but … ."

A heavy scowl pulled Shepard's brow down low over her eyes. "I know that name. Runs a clinic on Omega." The scowl deepened as she searched for context and found none. "I can't remember how I know him." An image of girls posed like statues amidst flowers and foliage drew the connection. "Oh! He helped Dr. Chakwas triage and treat Donovan Hock's victims." She nodded. "Oh yeah, he's good." She started toward the lift up to the crew deck. "Is he still on Omega?"

Miranda's expression twitched just a little, but enough that Shepard read complications there. "He's been recruited by Archangel, that organization Dr. T'Soni mentioned. I doubt he's available to assist us."

Shepard shrugged. "Liara said Archangel is working to prepare for the Reapers." Holding out her
hands, she turned a small circle. "I don't know if you noticed, Miranda, but we're a small crew on a
frigate, and we're up against some pretty damned tough enemies. We're going to need allies." She
pressed the elevator control, keeping a surreptitious eye on Miranda as they waited. The idea of a
large force … one not attached to the council … how could she pass that up? A warm, solid feeling
spread through her, soothing her earlier panic. Even the name of the organization struck something
inside her.

Yeah, they'd head to Omega and introduce themselves to Archangel and see if they couldn't find
some allies for the long, dark battle ahead.

After nearly a minute, the operative nodded, but she needn't have. Shepard had already plotted their
course.

Chapter End Notes

So here it is … the 100th chapter. Curious Canvas made me some lovely art, but it will be a spoiler, so I am going to hold it back for a couple of chapters. The big celebration will be posted tomorrow … it's a little crazy, but was a lot of fun to write. It is a cast reunion, everyone and me gathered together to talk about the first 100 chapters. So, if you have any questions for the characters, send them on and I'll include them.

I hate asking to hear from people, but since it is the 100th chapter, and I know a lot of you have been here for a long time, following this story, I really would love to hear from you. Doesn't need to be anything huge … even just a hi!

And thank you. Really … thank you all so much for sticking with me and these characters for the past 18 months (well not quite that long here on A03). *raises a glass* Here's to all of you … and here's to finishing the adventure! *hugs*
Chapter Summary

Garrus digs out and starts putting some pieces together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

22 Days ASR

Metal banged against metal, five quick knocks … for the tenth time in just over an hour. "Hey! You up there! Are you done digging us out?"

Garrus looked down from the roof of the shuttle and leveled a glare of death on Martin's grinning insolence. "Shut it, and if you're finished repairing those power couplings, get your ass up here." Try as he did to keep his demeanour stern, his mandibles kept trying to flick into a grin.

The kid's grin just widened. "I have finished the power couplings. While I was at it, I repaired three shorts as well. We're ready to check the engine and thrusters as soon as you clear the rubble away, so … " The grin took on a wicked edge. "... get moving, will you?"

A giant hand punched down from the top of the shuttle, grabbed the back of Martin's frame armour, and yanked the kid straight up off the ground. Martin's face froze into a comical mask of combined terror and surprise, his mouth opening, but his squawk didn't escape until his feet touched the shuttle roof.

"Wrex!" he screeched even before he turned around to identify his attacker. "You … you … ."

The krogan laughed, just two harsh, deep coughs of sound. "Get to work, Pyjak. You're the one with the fancy armour." That same massive fist shoved the kid toward the pile of debris covering the shuttle's back end and half the roof.

"Fine." Martin stalked over and lifted a massive chunk of wall. "You're an old bastard, you know that?" The kid tossed the rubble with an ease that made Garrus's back ache just watching.

"Proud of it." Wrex gave Martin another shove and dug back in.

"General," Nyreen called over the radio.

Garrus paused halfway through rolling a concrete boulder off the side, straining to hear over the echoing racket. Not an easy task with twenty krogan bellowing and throwing debris around. "Go ahead."

"Comm channels are heavy with static from the ambient radiation, but open." She paused. "You've got a call from Captain Anderson."

Thank the spirits, the Normandy must have gotten through okay. Garrus heaved the chunk of concrete over the side, his hand leaping up to open the channel. "Thank you." He strode to the front of the shuttle, waiting for the call to clear.
"General Vakarian?" Anderson's voice called through the static. "SSV Normandy to General Garrus Vakarian, do you read?"

A scowl drew Garrus's brow plates and mandibles in tight as he strained to hear the faint transmission. Pressing both hands over his aural canals, he replied, "Anderson? I can barely hear you. Give me a second." He strode to the side of the shuttle, easing himself off the edge and down to the ground. Despite his care, pain seared along all the healing seams, knocking the breath out of him in a single cough as his feet impacted the ground.

Gasping, he limped into the back of the shuttle and closed the hatch, sealing the krogan cacophony on the other side. "Anderson? Do you read?"

"I read you." The relief in Anderson's voice came through loud and clear despite the interference. "Are you and the kid okay?"

"Yes, we reached relatively safe shelter before the bomb went off. We're digging out now and should be headed for the evac site within an hour or two." As he spoke, he paced the hold, looking down at his feet as he concentrated. "Freedom's Progress … was it a trap?"

"It was, but thanks to your warning, we took out their ambush. The Aesarus took some damage, twelve injured, one killed." Anderson disappeared into the static for a few seconds. "... was gone. The ground team ran into trouble with the colony's mechs. They'd been set to attack. Nihlus and a few of the Marines were injured, but they'll recover."

"So, the colonists were all just gone like in the other attacks?" Garrus sat on the edge of one of the seats. "Was the team able to find anything?"

Anderson paused a long time. What was it? Bad news? Good news? No … that long a pause never meant good news. Just before Garrus asked, Anderson said, "Another team, not Alliance … maybe mercs … came in, saved Nihlus and the Marines, but the team injuries cut the mission short. There's no sign of the merc vessel, so it has to have stealth technology. The Alliance is on the ground now, so I assume it's safe to say whoever the mercs were, they're gone."

Garrus frowned. Anderson was holding something back. He could just feel the unspoken words under everything the captain said. "No ID's?" he asked.

"We're checking faces from the hardsuit recordings against Alliance and council records, but we have more pressing issues." Anderson cleared his throat. "We received news from Omega. Instructor Kandros's people sent word that unprecedented numbers of mercs are massing on the station, and their last recon reports indicate that they are setting up staging areas around Archangel headquarters."

Garrus's heart fell into his belly, landing with a sickening splash. Frost crackled down his limbs. "They drew us away from base, set traps to take us out, and now they're going in for the kill." He drew in a long breath, pushing aside the pain and forcing himself to focus. "Are you and Nihlus on your way back?" Shaking his hands, he tried to jostle some feeling back into his chill, numb digits.

"Yes, but there's more, Garrus. Nyreen Kandros is missing from the base. She may—"

"Instructor Kandros is with me," Garrus said, sharpened steel slicing off the captain's suspicion. "She stowed away on the Passch because she thought I was the target. She saved my life and saved Archangel from being blamed for the bomb." He cracked his neck, letting go of the knee jerk defensiveness. "Keep a wary eye out when you get back to Omega; Kandros believes we have traitors in our midst. I'm inclined to agree." The poison of those words sunk claws down into his
Garrus's mind whirled, trying to plan the base's defense. They had maybe three hundred of the rawest recruits left, a hundred and eighty hands aboard Normandy and the other two ships, a handful of instructors … some of their ships could be pulled in, but that still left Archangel's other assets at risk. Of any of the facilities, the base was the most easily defended. If they sealed the tunnels and dropped the blast shutters, they could force the mercs to come at them on only a few fronts. Shepard had liked that location for that very reason. No, he wouldn't leave the rest of the facilities helpless. Whoever was pulling the merc's strings had orchestrated one hell of a massive, intricate plan.

"Send word to all Archangel facilities," he said at last. "Tell them about home base and to go to general quarters. This whole operation has been nothing but feints and misdirection. They may come at us anywhere." He paused, one last detail appearing in his mind. "If Nihlus is medically fit, he has command of Archangel until I get back. If not …" He shook his head. No one else had that sort of command experience. Except …. "Can I count on you to hold the line?"

"You can, General." Anderson paused. Garrus left the silence unfilled, hoping the captain would finally spit out whatever it was he'd been trying to decide how to say. Instead, Anderson cleared his throat. "We'll be putting boots on Omega in just under twenty-four hours and will keep you informed."

"Roger that. Thanks for bringing me up to speed. Is there anything else?" he asked, giving Anderson one last opening.

"No. If we get positive ID's on any of the mercs from Freedom's Progress, we'll let you know. Safe trip back, General. Anderson out."

Garrus closed the channel. They needed to get out of there and back to Omega. The damned Reapers and their puppets would not tear Archangel apart. Not while he still drew breath. He'd made a goddamned promise, and he'd bloody well keep it.

*Spending too much time around Massani, Vakarian.*

Anderson bringing up the mercs again sent Garrus's suspicion meter straight into the red. Did Anderson think their traitor had been there? Might he or she also be involved in the colony disappearances? He couldn't think of another reason it would matter, but he didn't have the time to puzzle it through. Trusting Anderson to keep his word and let him know if it became important, he pushed himself up and turned to lean through the access into the cockpit.

Nyreen turned to level a curious, but controlled stare on him.

"Contact a few of your most trusted people on Omega. Anderson said that mercs are moving in on the base. I need to know how many and where." He pulled back. They needed more and varied sources of information. Once he was away from the planet and comms cleared up, he'd call Aria. She'd probably lie, but even that would tell him something.

In order to coordinate a plan so huge, the Reapers' forces needed access to Archangel. He let out a long breath and turned to open the hatch. Traitors in his inner circle or not, he couldn't do anything until he got off that ruined rock and on his way back home.

§§§
"Garrus!" Herros strode over to shuttle, gripping Garrus tightly by the shoulders. "When we didn't hear from you after the bomb … ."

The general returned his father's embrace. "We managed to take shelter in a missile silo. Came through the explosion okay, but had to do a bit of digging out." Pulling away, Garrus turned to the torin walking up behind his father. He held out a hand. "General Victus. Thank you for your assistance."

The turian general gripped Garrus's wrist. "Thank you for getting my son and his men out of there, General."

"The least I could do." When he released the general, Garrus turned back to his father. Damn, Herros looked good, strong and fit … every ounce the turian officer in command. Getting back into action suited him and tweaked memories decades old. A rumbling sigh rolled through his second larynx. No time for sentimentality.

"Pari, I heard from Anderson. The Normandy and their escort ships came under attack on their way to investigate another Alliance colony disappearance. An ambush of Archangel ships, like what met the Passch at the relay here. They destroyed the enemy."

"The two that attacked your flagship are nothing but scrap as well," Victus reported. "The Passchendaele should limp into orbit in a few hours. They're trying to patch together repairs as they go."

Garrus tipped a nod of thanks and acknowledgement to the general before looking back to his father. "Anderson contacted me a couple of hours ago. Mercs are converging on Omega, moving into staging areas around the base. They've pulled almost all of our people away, tried to take out the leadership … they're setting up to wipe Archangel out."

Wrex lumbered over to stand at Garrus's side. "The council came after me … after my clan because they wanted to use one weapon that Shepard built to destroy another." He squinted at Herros then Victus. "You prevented that." He rumbled, sounding like a volcano building to eruption, then spat out, "Thank you."

Garrus hid a grin. The thank you sounded as though it hurt, but he'd never thought he'd ever hear Wrex say anything like it. Warm and bright, like the sun coming out from behind clouds, he felt Shepard's smile on the back of his neck.

You would have loved this moment, Kahri. Especially the irony of the council's attempt to destroy and isolate the krogan, bringing us together.

Herros passed Wrex a datapad. "The Hierarchy sent the locations of the rest of the bombs so that you can salvage and disarm them. You have our most sincere apologies that we allowed these travesties of a bygone era to fall into the hands of terrorists." He dropped his head in a sharp nod. "And I'm prepared to support you in any way I can politically. At the very least, we should be able to get a diplomatic representative on the Citadel."

Wrex took the datapad. "Good. I'll be ten days dead and a pile of varren shit before I let those Reaper loving council bastards get away with this." He turned, one wrecking ball of a fist slamming into Garrus's shoulder, sending him staggering. "But speaking of varren shit, first we get our asses to Omega, crush this attack on every front."

Before Garrus could counter him, Wrex waved his men over. "Have the female shaman, Chief Sentry, and the Chief Scout from all the allied clans meet me here immediately," the clan chief
ordered. He turned back to Garrus. "I'll have fifty guns ready to board your shuttles in an hour."

Garrus opened his mouth to argue, but it took only one look at Wrex's huge, scowling mug to see that he might as well save his breath. After a second, he just nodded. "Thank you, Wrex."

Victus stepped up between Herros and Garrus. "You were both hip deep in Shepard's mess while chasing Saren and that dreadnought?" When they answered to the affirmative, Victus nodded toward a shaded spot where some crates had been set up around a water cooler. "I want you to fill me in as much as you can, send everything you've got on the Reapers, Saren, Sovereign, the council's involvement to my ship. Then, Hierarch … General, if you would do me the honour of allowing me to return you to Omega? If the council is behind this … ." Victus looked toward the cloud of dust and ash still billowing above the bomb site.

"We'd be glad to, General," Herros spoke up, ushering the general toward the seating area. "I've been making some inroads into the Hierarchy and military, but it's difficult to convince … ."

Garrus let the other two torini go ahead while he surveyed the evac site. Females, males, and the elderly worked, setting up places for the evacuees to sleep, stepping patiently around little krogan. The children played, chasing and rough housing like children galaxy wide. He'd never seen krogan young before. The little ones ran around without clothes, covered in dust and mud, beautifully free. Even with their narrowly-escaped destruction still rolling through the air over their heads, they seemed completely unphased.

The older children helped when called on, then returned to what Garrus realized was taking out Blue Suns, while the juveniles worked alongside their elders. The closeness between the females and the youngsters spawned a yearning deep in the general's gut that he didn't even realize he could feel.

"Do you have any of your own, General?" a soft voice asked from behind him.

He shoved the vague ache aside and shook his head, turning to face Nyreen. "No. I'll leave that to my sister." Like he needed to spend more time focusing on everything he could never have. He looked past her and lifted a hand to wave Martin over from the shuttle. "General Victus wants my pari and I to return to Omega aboard his ship, but I'll shuttle back and forth. I need access to the QEC." He let out a long breath. "Looks like we might end up with another ally out of all this."

Nyreen's brow plates rose. "The general wants to return to Omega with us? The hierarchy won't like that." She bumped Martin with her shoulder as the kid stepped up beside her. "Looks like you won't get to be the big hero, kid."

Martin shrugged, his face uncharacteristically hard. "We'll need all the help we can get, because it's not going to end with the mercs." He cursed as he met Garrus's gaze. "You know that, right? If the council's after Archangel, they aren't going to just give up. They're going to keep coming after you and Nihlus, and what if it is a fleet of council ships and soldiers they send? Killing mercs is one thing. Killing the good guys … the people we're going to need when the war starts?"

Garrus nodded. Certainty set like cement down his spine. "We got complacent." He chuckled, the sound like grinding glass. "Not even a month ago, I was lecturing Wrex on getting too big too fast, drawing notice."

"You've got to hate that irony," Nyreen spoke up, "but what's the choice, General? Do nothing? Wait for the Reapers?" She shook her head and crossed her arms. "No. We're just going to have to get stealthy where we can and get ready to start fighting back where we can't. General Victus isn't the most popular torin with the hierarchy, but he's incredibly popular with the troops. Where he
leads, they'll follow."

Garrus nodded, but held up a hand to forestall the rest of that conversation. It could wait. He wanted to get off the planet and on the way back to Omega as soon as Wrex was ready. "Instructor Kandros, I would like you to see to the shuttle loading. Get everyone back aboard the carriers within the hour. Leave five shuttles. Wrex is coming with us as well and bringing fifty of his fighters. They can ride back on the Trimeri. The Passch is going to be a few days making it back, so the three of us will stay on the Istal'an except when I'm ferrying back and forth."

He jerked his head toward the virtual parking lot of shuttles. "Go help our krogan friends get organized. We need to get home."

They both saluted and strode off, poking at one another. He watched them for a moment, before his gaze slipped over to a krogan female sitting three little ones down to drink cups of water. He needed to keep Archangel alive for them … for all of them. All the families who deserved a shot at growing up and doing better. The female looked up, and seeing him watching, smiled. He smiled back, one hand lifting in a half wave before he turned and strode over to join his father and the general.

Victus listened while Garrus and Herros took him back to the beginning, starting with Eden Prime. By the time Wrex and the krogan were ready to go, he'd reached the point when they returned to Eden Prime and came back with the basketful of what Nihlus said were Prothean memory drives, and Legion. As they moved to Victus's shuttle, Garrus followed, taking the opportunity to rest his voice and settle the faint dizziness that accompanied laying it all out. He knew how nuts it all sounded. The crazy burned under his plates and pricked along his belly, sweat trickling over his hide despite his armour's cooling system.

The moment Shepard stepped into Chloe Michel's clinic, his life devolved into a combination of situational chaos and insanity.

And you wouldn't trade it for anything.

No, he wouldn't, but he also wouldn't have blamed Victus for shutting him down, threatening to have him locked up, and reporting him as a clearly mad terrorist. Instead, the turian general just listened. He asked the occasional question to clarify details, but for the most part he took it in, watching what vid footage they could give him.

By the time they reached Victus's cruiser, the Impavidir, Herros had joined in, filling in what he'd been able to unearth before and after leaving C-Sec. Garrus used the time to puzzle over something that hadn't occurred to him at the time or since, but while he listened to Shepard's conversation with Legion and Rael'Zorah, it leaped out and hard-docked at the base of his skull.

Thirteen times since the end of the Morning War the geth have been contacted by an unknown race offering us advanced technology, weaponry, and resources to assist in building our megastructure if the geth were to instigate aggressive activities against the creator's flotilla. Each time geth have rejected their offer."

Rael'Zorah slumped a little into his seat.

"Rael'Zorah? Have the quarians been contacted?" Shepard asked.

"Thirteen times since the end of the war, the flotilla has been contacted with much the same offer."

Damn it. Someone had been working damned hard to stir that pot. The rachni … the krogan … .
His blood turned to the black sludge that had covered that floor on Haestrom. Invisible hands moving pieces on some galactic board? Extinctions every fifty thousand cycles? Through it all, the Citadel and the relays remained, silent sentinels carried forward through the eons.

He leaned his head in his hand, elbow braced on his knee. The orbs … where did they come in? The eyes, ears, and hands of this invisible foe? A gear locking into place, that idea solidified. Shepard said the black spiders used her eyes and ears to see … that they said she would show them who and what she was.

"General?"

Garrus jumped and straightened, looking around. The shuttle hatch stood open, his father and the general both staring at him expectantly from the shuttle bay deck on the other side of the threshold. He shook off his musings and the fear that crept along on their back.

"Sorry." He pushed himself up, his entire body creaking like an old door. Every step crushed glass inside his joints as he limped the couple of metres to the hatch and eased himself down, clinging to the door frame. When he saw the concern in his pari's eyes, he just shook his head. It truly was nothing that some medigel and a long sleep wouldn't cure. Well, that and enough time between firefights to actually heal.

Victus stepped up and rested a hand on Garrus's shoulder. "Go back to your ship, General. You can continue in twelve hours."

Garrus stared into the other torin's amber eyes for a long moment then nodded. A hell of a fight awaited them on the other end of their journey. Sieges always proved long, bloody, and exhausting. The moment he agreed, his entire body let out a collective sigh of relief, aching to lie down, stretch out and stay very, very still for a long time.

Victus gripped his elbow, helping him back up the step into the shuttle. "Rest well, General."

Garrus took a step, then turned back. "Are you sure you want to do this, General? As far as the galaxy knows, we're a rogue merc organization at best and terrorists at worst." He let out a short huff of air and shrugged.

"If this Reaper threat is real, you're the only people I know of who are working to meet it. I saw what Sovereign did to the Citadel Fleet. It took the Alliance, the quarians, the geth, and everything the Citadel could throw at that machine, and in the end … it didn't come down because of firepower. It came down because Shepard and Kryik exploited a feedback weakness." Victus lifted a foot to rest on the shuttle floor. "If more of those are coming, we haven't got a hope without some serious weapon dev."

His mandibles swept out wide then dropped and settled back. The fact that he felt the same uncertainty Garrus felt … it helped. The general turned his head to include Herros as he continued, "If you're wrong about the Reapers, you're still the only reason that Tuchanka's innocent civilian population didn't get halved today. And you're the only ones looking into the human disappearances. Those two reasons alone are good enough." He stepped back and lifted his hand to pull down the hatch. "Until tomorrow, General."

Garrus nodded, his mind going blank in the face of Victus's respect as the torin emphasized his title. After so many dead ends with the military establishment and governments … even someone just being willing to hear them out and keep an open mind felt like a gift of massive proportions. He sat in the closest seat and leaned back, head resting against the bulkhead.
"I'll give you a smooth ride home, General," the pilot said, glancing back through the access.

"Thank you." He let his eyes drift shut. A million things pressed at the back of his mind, demanding that he worry over them, but his exhaustion gave them all numbers and sent them to the back of the line. Disaster and destruction would arrive more than soon enough.

Chapter End Notes

A-N: Thank you everyone who checked in last chapter. It was brilliant to hear from, and be able to thank, some people I hadn't before. The cast special is still coming. Looking forward to that. And getting back to Omega. As always, thank you so much for reading.
Chapter Summary

Archangel comes under attack.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Preteril** - A small, spiny ground burrowing marsupial analogue found in high meadow and forest lands on Palaven.

**Netichik**: Insect analogues native to Palven that have been exported to many colony worlds.

**Soluvermus** - A small (average size 8-12 cms/1-2 cms diameter), heavily armoured earthworm native to Palaven's most northern and southern regions. It is considered a delicacy.

**Quiritus** - Applies to both genders equally. Equivalent to addressing a group as 'people' or 'ladies and gentlemen'.

23.5 Days ASR

"General?"

Garrus cracked open a single eye to find Nyreen Kandros staring down at him. Alarm slithered through the foggy haze of interrupted sleep, pointed and scaled. Waging a battle akin to wrestling open a hydraulic door by hand, he managed to get both eyes all the way open. "How long have I been asleep? And please don't tell me we've been boarded again."

She shook her head and straightened, then turned and strode for the door. "No, sir. We haven't, but it's begun. Archangel is under attack. Everyone is checking in on the QEC." She took a long breath and glanced back. "And I think they gave you three full hours this time. See you up there."

Before she even stepped through the open portal, Garrus hit the light, threw back the blankets and swung straight out of bed, landing on his feet. Two, unsteady strides carried him to his armour. He snatched the underlayer off the top and shook it out.

Knuckles rapped at the door. "General?"

He didn't pause or glance up. "Get your ass in here, Weaver." When the door opened, he shot an impatient glance at the kid. "Any word from Omega other than that they're under attack?" He slipped the polymer suit up his legs and settled it over the points of his hips.

Martin shook his head. "They didn't hit Omega. It was the Zaherin weapon testing facility. Three large, unknown cruisers showed up and just annihilated the entire facility and the ships guarding it. Took them less than an hour. We only found out because the ship you ordered to stay hidden escaped."

Garrus's hands froze, going so completely numb that the underlayer slipped from his talons. "The entire facility? In under an hour?" Dear spirits, that meant more than a thousand dead, two years
and almost all of the material salvaged from Sovereign … gone. How? How could they have been taken down so completely?

Martin stepped forward. "General?"

Garrus clenched his fists a couple of times, then finished shrugging into the suit. "How did they take out our most heavily defended base in under an hour?"

Martin paled, his entire manner slumping before Garrus's eyes. "The transmission from Nihlus said that the data shows the shields and defense systems were all deactivated from the inside." His shock quickly morphed into rage. "Looks like Kandros is right. Traitors."

"Nihlus is on the QEC?" Garrus stepped into one boot then the other and bent down, sealing the fasteners before he started locking himself into his second skin.

"Yeah, he will be by now." Martin paced to the door and back. "The *Normandy* arrived back at Omega about eight hours ago. He, Anderson, and a few others are going through the footage and data sent back. Sidonis and the *Bacall Cliffs* are headed back to base."

"What's their ETA?" Garrus paused, buttoning down his reactions before reaching down to grab his torso armour. He needed to be the solid, unshakeable center of a world being torn apart around his people's cowls.

"They should get back a couple hours before we do," the kid replied, keeping up a pacing circuit along the lower end of the cabin. "It shouldn't be possible to just knock us out of the sky like that. Nihlus said the cruisers were using particle beams." He paused and turned to give Garrus an expression so confused and pained that it showed plainly despite his implants. "If something already out here can do that … what are the Reapers going to do? We've got the most advanced ships in the galaxy."

"Apparently we don't," Garrus replied. He finished sealing his pauldrons in place then froze. If the traitors didn't die on that base … . "Martin, contact Chakwas. Encrypt the channel and make sure no one is listening." Brow plates raised, he waited for Martin to confirm before continuing. "When the *Bacall Cliffs* returns to base, the entire crew needs to be sequestered and scanned for signs of indoctrination. I want all logs locked down and that ship scoured for the black orbs. Need to know only. Got it?"

Martin nodded and headed for the door. "Roger that. See you up there."

Garrus pulled on his gauntlets, then ran a quick check to make sure he'd sealed everything up properly, before grabbing his helmet. "Now to find out what happened."

Crew packed the galley, gathered into small groups discussing the attack and the threat to home base in hushed, tight voices. When Garrus stepped into the space, they all fell silent, every eye in the room looking to him. He hefted his armour further up his shoulders and squared up, making himself as general-like as he could.

"All hands return to stations, or if you are rotated off, get some sleep. We'll be back on Omega tomorrow evening, and I need you all rested and ready to kick these bastards so hard that the last thing that goes through their minds are their asses." He nodded, staying stern at the nervous laugh that fluttered through. "Get moving. We've got a hell of a fight ahead of us, and this is just the beginning. Dismissed."

When they broke up, most heading for the crew quarters, he continued on to the elevator, just
missing the doors as they closed on Martin. "Damn, be faster to climb through the ducts," he grumbled. He slapped the control then leaned against the bulkhead, letting his eyes sag shut. He'd spent the entire day with Victus and his father, going over the vids and other evidence collected during the months following Eden Prime. Despite being fairly sure that they'd managed to convince the turian general of the very real and looming threat, reliving all of that … listening to his father recount Shepard's words and concerns when she'd approached him … the fact she knew her time was short … talking about the day she died … he found it more draining than a day of battle.

Once he had everyone sorted over the base attacks, he could get some more sleep. When they reached Omega, he'd be lucky to get a couple of hours at a time, especially once the siege started. The elevator opened, and he pushed off the wall to step inside, hitting the control for the CIC.

Needing to sharpen up and focus on the problems at hand, he reached up, giving his face a brisk rub. Archangel's enemies thought him a soft target. They thought the same of everything he'd built. From that moment forward, he needed to be everything Shepard thought he was … and more. Closing his eyes, he slumped back against the railing.

_I could really use your strength right now, Kahri. I was wrong … we were both wrong. I can't do this on my own. I'm so tired, and I miss you. When am I going to stop missing you? Am I ever going to stop missing you?_

The elevator chimed, and he pushed off, straightening. He cracked his neck and took a deep breath, shoving his shoulders back. General Garrus Vakarian, reporting for duty. When the doors opened, he strode out, head held high, mandibles tight against his face, hopefully the very picture of determination and strength.

As Kandros had said, everyone who could check in via QEC had assembled, their holograms shimmering on the thirteen different emitters. Chairs circled the rest of the room. Just as he wondered if his father and Wrex were shuttling over, a message flashed on his omnitool. Herros: Did Garrus mind if Victus came along? He shook his head even as he typed his reply. No. If Victus intended to be be an ally, he might as well see all the cracks in Archangel's plates.

Garrus bypassed them, striding straight for the image of Lantar Sidonis. "What in the pits of _buratrum_ happened out there?"

The turian deflated, a reed bowing before the storm. "Three heavy cruisers of an unknown configuration appeared at the relay." Sidonis straightened a little, but his face still hung slack. "The station tried to hail them, but the only reply they got was some sort of beam weapon that just cut right through the station's shields. Before the station's defenses could respond, someone shut everything down from inside." He paced a little, two steps in either direction. His hands wrung, agitated, almost panicked. Garrus frowned. The turian looked trapped, but he'd always been a little high strung and emotional. Sidonis stopped and looked into the imager after a few seconds. "Our ships attacked and fought hard, but they were just outclassed by several degrees. In under an hour, there wasn't enough left to fill a shuttle hold."

Garrus nodded, wishing he could get a better read than the hologram allowed for. Oh well, he needed to push ahead. "Any ID on the enemy vessels?" he asked.

"The particle beams suggest Collectors," Nihlus spoke up from where he shared a pad with Anderson. His voice slurred, betraying the head injury. He probably shouldn't even be out of medbay. "Merol couldn't ID the ships, but the particle beam appeared to be an advanced version on the weapons on Prothean vessels." He leaned against the console, his head listing to the side with the bandage. "The geth are taking apart the footage now. Hopefully what they learn can help us
develop defenses and weapons to meet these bastards head to head, because from what I see … ."

Garrus frowned, waiting for his fratrin to continue, walking toward that emitter when he didn't. "Nihlus?"

Nihlus just shook his head. "We're preteril in the open, Garrus. The best we can do against these ships right now is get our people out of the way, salvage anything not nailed down, pull it all in."

Anderson activated his omnitool and the footage of the attack appeared in the space where he and Nihlus stood the moment before. Garrus watched as the three, massive vessels carved up Archangel's most valuable remote asset. He stepped toward the display, head cocking as he tried to discern the ships' design. They looked cylindrical, but huge portions of them were covered in something that looked like the nests that netichik built around tree trunks.

The entire thing made him uncomfortable. Not in the same way that Sovereign had terrified him, but uncomfortable nonetheless … like spiked soluvermus wriggling under his plates. The beam weapon … he hadn't seen anything that powerful since Sovereign. "Are you sure about these being Collectors?" he asked.

"As sure as I can be," Nihlus replied. "The ship design isn't Prothean, but the Reapers have had fifty thousand years to warp the Collectors and all their tech from the original."

"Then that confirms Reaper involvement in both the attacks against Archangel and the human disappearances." He watched his base and ships fall for another minute before he turned away. "All right, I've seen enough," he said, waving a dismissive hand at the vid. All they could do about those ships was get out of their way and develop ways to kick their asses the next time. "We need to evac the bases. The ones that can be pulled in, we'll tow to Omega. The larger ones we'll strip and pull off the staff."

Nihlus and Anderson reappeared, the Spectre standing unsupported. He chuckled. "I'm glad you agree, because I gave that order an hour ago."

Garrus nodded. "Good." Turning a slow circle, he looked over his people, trying to judge how they were dealing with the oncoming crisis. For the most part, what he saw reassured him. "Okay, we've got the wheels in motion for the outer facilities. Now for homebase."

Staring down the ex-Bloodpack battlemaster, Garrus said, "Grundan, I want you and Mieran to seal the tunnels in the sub-levels at their far ends. Set the explosives as far out as you can without endangering nearby buildings. Set cover every ten metres, and make sure it spans the entire tunnel. I want us to be able to perform an organized retreat, and I want them to be as exposed as possible while trying to follow us. Make sure the doors at the near ends of the tunnels can be sealed in seconds." Garrus paced across the main pad. He spun to greet the door opening, then nodded to his father, Wrex, and Victus. Martin slipped in behind them, taking a seat next to the door.

Garrus held a hand out to the turian general. "Everyone, this is General Adrien Victus, Turian External Forces. He assisted with the Urdnot evacuation." He gestured toward the empty chairs. "Please, sit."

"Garrus … ." Nihlus turned away from the imager and reached out, turning back a second later with a datapad in his hand. His mandibles spread and flicked, telling Garrus the nature of the news even before he spoke. "The Haestrom shipyard has been destroyed, and the entire structure where we were found has been bombarded from orbit. It's just a crater."

"What?" Martin asked. His voice rose and tightened as he continued, "We haven't reopened it yet. 
It's powered down." He braced his hands against the arms of his chair, his head and shoulders thrust forward.

Garrus walked over and pressed a heavy hand on the kid's shoulder, easing him back into the chair. He squeezed, staring down into the cybernetics over Martin's eyes until the kid gave him a nod, then returned it. "That attack was just clean up. Taking out any evidence that might have been left behind."

He turned back to his inner circle. "Seal up our dock and building two completely. No way in." When they acknowledged that order, he continued, "Melanis … Butler … get the civilians setting up the gymnasiums as shelters. Enough food and water to last six hundred people at least three weeks. Have the farmers in the basements bring in everything they can. Move their animals into the labs. Move the cars off site; see if Aria has somewhere we can store them. Leave as little behind to be destroyed as possible. Then get the civilians into the shelters."

"We've got a lot of that done already, Boss," Butler spoke up for the first time. "The geth are setting all the electronics to scrambled frequencies and storing backups on the twenty-first floor. Apparently the entire floor is a giant Faraday cage."

Garrus took a deep breath, his mandibles relaxing a little. Homebase would hold until he got there. What else? "With the order given to evacuate the outer facilities, we need to find those people somewhere to go until we get homebase secured and the third building open," he said. "How close are they to being on the move?"

"Some of the smaller facilities are already secured, their computer drives uploaded to base and wiped. They're loading as we speak. If the ships have propulsion, the geth are bringing them in. Aria is renting us the next docking bay over. For a premium, of course." Nihlus let out a long breath, his expression preoccupied, his mandibles giving away the speed at which his mind worked by their twitching.

"That's thousands of refugees. Where do we send them, General?" Vortash asked, drawing all eyes to his corner. "We can't bring them in here, and they don't have supplies on their ships for more than a couple of days."

Anderson cleared his throat. "Give me a few minutes. I'll see if I can find somewhere for them to take shelter for a couple of weeks if necessary."

Garrus stepped forward, gratitude settling the rolling in his gut. "Let the colonial authorities know that we'll pay fair market value for any supplies needed." Damn, the vault was going to be empty by the time the siege ended, and Martin had been right, it wouldn't end with the current attacks. The Reapers knew Archangel amounted to the only resistance they faced in the galaxy. They intended to obliterate it and scour the ground clean.

"Understood." Anderson stepped off the pad.

"General Vakarian," Victus stood and strode over to face Garrus. "I can't land troops on Omega. It would be the equivalent of the hierarchy declaring war on the Terminus, but I can extend shore leave to any of my people who want it. If they choose to stand guard over your civilians …" His mandibles flicked as he shrugged. "... well, what they do on their time off is none of the hierarchy's business."

Garrus extended his hand. "Thank you, General."

Victus clasped Garrus's wrist. "Just make sure they get back to me. I have a war to prepare them
Garrus gripped the other torin's wrist for an extra few seconds, conveying his gratitude silently before turning back to the rest of his people. "I'm assuming weapon maintenance stations are being set up, the blast shields are down over the windows, and Mordin is organizing medical stations?" When they answered to the affirmative, he nodded. "Lock down and seal all but the first, fifth, and tenth floors. We'll use their balconies as sniper perches to cover street access. Set up a hell of a barricade at the end of all three bridges. The more exposed the mercs are coming in, the better."

Running over the preparations again, he couldn't think of anything else he could do prior to strapping Ingrid on and setting up on one of those sniper perches. He gave them all his most bad ass, confident smile. "We will come through this, people, so let's try to minimize repairs and replacement."

He stepped up to face the QEC pads, meeting each set of eyes there. "Over the next few days, we're going to show the council, the Collectors, the Reapers … and any-bloody-one else who thinks they can tear Archangel down … that we aren't a few buildings, or facilities, or ships. We aren't even soldiers. We're a force … a body formed around a belief that while the enemies set against us might be overwhelming, they can be defeated by courage, and honour, and plain old stubborn refusal to quit. They can knock us down, but when the dust settles, we'll have risen higher than we ever fell, and we'll have ended every, single one of them."

When they all saluted, his father and Wrex included, Garrus returned the gesture. "I'll expect reports by the hour unless there is word of another attack." He held Nihlus's gaze. "Stay connected?" When the Spectre nodded, Garrus turned to the rest. "Dismissed."

Garrus pulled his chair over, needing to sit while he talked to his fratrin. He'd actually managed five hours of sleep the night before, but then a nightmare slapped him awake. He couldn't recall it with any sort of clarity, as usual … and as usual, darkness wrapped him in a tight, frigid blanket of blindness while endless enemies climbed over each other, berserk with bloodlust.

"You look like crap." Nihlus's blunt remark knocked Garrus out of his thoughts.

He nodded. "Yeah, I know. Don't feel much better than I look, either." Eyes narrowing, he studied the Spectre, looking for cracks and chinks in the armour. "How about you? Heard you took a beating on Freedom's Progress."

The Spectre leaned against the console, as if Garrus acknowledging his injuries gave him permission to feel them. "Skull fracture and broken arm. Both of them because they were already weakened. Dr. Chakwas has me just about back to one hundred percent." He laughed, a bitter desert wind. "Do you ever feel like you should just be put in a body cast for a couple of months?"

"Oh yeah." He let out a long breath. "So, what did Anderson leave out of his report on Freedom's Progress?" Before Nihlus could blow him off, he added, "He kept pausing like there was something he didn't know how to tell me. What is it?"

Nihlus dropped his head, bowing like a branch overladen with snow. "Before we reached Freedom's Progress, Ashley Williams contacted me. She said the base where Cerberus had her stationed was attacked by the Collectors." He looked up, his eyes dull with exhaustion. "During the evacuation, she thought she saw Liara T'Soni. It looked like she was working for Cerberus."

Garrus sat up, a deep scowl pulling his plates down and his mandibles in. "Liara? Working for Cerberus? That doesn't make any sense."
Nihlus shrugged. "It doesn't, but on Freedom's Progress, an unusual assortment of soldiers saved my squad's ass … pulled us out when most of us were hurt and then shut down the mechs. Liara and a turian were teamed up with a handful of humans. They seemed to be the same ones Chief Williams spoke of."

Garrus gnawed at the oddity for a moment. Were they scavengers? No, Liara wouldn't stoop to that. Anyway, guessing got him nowhere fast, so he looked up. "But they pulled you out?"

"Yeah, and at significant risk to themselves. And they arrived after we did, so my guess is that Cerberus is investigating the disappearances." He shrugged and then pushed off the console and straightened. "After I talked to the Chief, I spoke to Liara for a few seconds. She said she wasn't in friendly territory, but an old friend had needed her help and that she'd show up at the base within the week to explain herself. Hopefully, she'll do just that."

Garrus nodded, but his mind ran tallies, adding everything up to see if maybe Liara could be their leak, but … no. She just didn't have the inside information needed. "So, that was what Anderson was holding back? Liara?" That didn't really make sense. Why bother? She'd be an unfortunate asset to lose, but he wouldn't call her exactly vital.

Nihlus let out a long sigh. "You have enough to worry about right now. We can deal with what Anderson is or isn't holding back when you get here." The Spectre glanced behind him. "I think Anderson has some answers for you on somewhere for the refugees to go. I'll check in with you in six hours unless something else blows up. Try to get a little more sleep. Once you arrive back here, you won't be getting any."

Garrus stood. "And you ... back to medbay. Heal. You're no good to us like that."

Nihlus laughed, soft and genuine. "What was it Jane always said? That's the pot calling the kettle hot?"

"Black. It's the pot calling the kettle black," Anderson said, stepping up. "You both look like crap and need to rest until called upon to deliver bullets with great prejudice." He nodded toward the door. "The doctor is looking for you."

Nihlus lifted a hand to Garrus, then turned and walked out of range of the imager.

"Amaterasu has agreed to take your refugees," Anderson informed him, standing at parade rest, as shuttered as Garrus had ever seen him. Damn it, they were still holding something back. Oh well, he'd ferret it out once he set boots on Omega. The Normandy's captain settled to lean on one hip. "They're setting up shelters just outside the capital. I'll send the facility managers and ship captains the information as soon as I sign off here."

Garrus walked up to the main console and leaned his hip against it. "Excellent, thank you, Anderson. Can you continue to organize that? Just let me know what funds you need approved, and I'll get it done."

"I will. Get some rest." As Anderson moved to sign off, Garrus realized that he hadn't filled the captain in on what he discovered on the Citadel.

"Anderson, just a second." He straightened, then leaned forward, arms braced against the edge of the console. "I found Lucille Shepard." Greeting the man's surprise with a smile and a nod, he continued, "She was the art appraiser brought in to look over the items we put up for sale. She's a slave, but she managed to slip me the locations of where she and several other groups of slaves are housed."
"She's alive?" Anderson slumped a little, a slow smile creeping across his face. "I never imagined." The smile evaporated. "Does she know … ?"

"Yes." Garrus pushed off the console. "After we get this stupidity wrapped up, we'll go get her. I've got some people I trust in C-Sec's sapient trafficking squad researching the bases and her owner." He yawned, then chuckled. "I'd better get back to bed while I can. See you in a little less than a day, Anderson."

"Roger that. See you then."

When the captain's image disappeared, Garrus shut down the QEC and turned toward the door, jumping a little when he saw Adrien Victus standing at the threshold. "General. Sorry about that. Didn't know you were there."

Victus smiled and stepped forward. "Sorry for startling you." He reached up and rubbed the back of his neck. "They're holding the shuttle for me. I wanted to get a chance to talk to you." Nodding toward the chairs, he asked, "May I?"

Garrus held out a hand. "Please." Something about Victus calmed the heavy seas rolling through the general's gut. It didn't take much examination to see why the other torin inspired such loyalty and love from his people. A warmth radiated from him, an aura of concern and a focus when he spoke that made Garrus feel respected … as if what he had to say was important. Holding back a chuckle, he wallowed in the feeling of being a raw recruit, trying to impress his CO. He really needed to work on believing that he deserved his rank.

Victus sat and crossed one ankle over his opposite knee, slouching a little in the chair. "It's been a long few days."

Garrus swiveled his chair and sat. He braced his elbows on his knees, his hands hanging loose. "It has."

"What you've built here … ." Victus shrugged and shifted a little in his chair. "It's remarkable. I've never heard of anyone doing anything like it."

"Shepard laid the foundations before she died," Garrus replied, not trying to diminish his accomplishment, but only willing to take what credit he was due. "The whole time we were chasing Saren, she wove this web of resources and contacts that none of the rest of us even knew about." He chuckled. "And none of us would have guessed. Not even me."

"The two of you were together." It wasn't a question, and when Garrus stiffened, straightening in his seat, Victus just shrugged. "My bond-mate died nearly a decade ago. That look in your eyes has been staring back at me from mirrors for a long time." A long breath hissed between his teeth. "Torini in our position find ourselves in a world of expanding responsibilities and shrinking connection."

Victus dropped his foot to the floor then leaned forward, mirroring Garrus's posture. "I've been watching you since I answered your call for assistance." He chuckled, defusing some of the pressure of that declaration. "Your people love you, and more importantly, they respect and trust you, but with the exception of a few, you're isolated." Holding up a hand to forestall Garrus's reply, the general shrugged. "You have no government to fall back on. You're the leader of an army, but also a small city-state. It's a burden that few understand." Another shrug rippled across his shoulder as he ducked his head a little. "I can't even claim to understand completely."

Garrus cocked one brow plate, really hoping that Victus was working toward offering to be friends
or allies. Everyone within Archangel, except maybe Melanis, just understood that he wasn't interested in anything personal. It had saved a great deal of social awkwardness over the cycles.

"Anyway, I'm tired, so I'm rambling," Victus continued, "but under all the words, I'm trying to say that I respect what you've built, and you have my support and friendship. My voice doesn't carry much weight with the hierarchy, but perhaps between your father and I, we can chip away at them." He pushed off his knees and stood, offering his hand. "Good night, General."

Garrus stood and gripped the other torin's elbow. "Garrus is fine, General," he said, his subvocals thrumming with gratitude.

Victus chuckled, a warm rumble. "Then I suppose you'd better call me Adrien." The general nodded and released Garrus's arm. "See you on Omega, Garrus."

"Goodnight." Garrus watched the smaller torin leave, then reached out to lean against the back of his chair. Exhaustion lowered a massive hand on the back of his cowl, threatening to push him down into the chair and force him to sleep right there. Instead, he pushed off and followed the turian general to the elevator. Time to get back into bed and hope for at least six straight hours.

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25 Days ASR

Omega. As Garrus stepped off the shuttle and took a deep breath, he winced and then chuckled. Ah, the sweet, 'rotting corpse in the sewer under a machine bay' stench of home. It seemed like weeks since he'd left rather than just over a week. His mandibles added an ironic flick to his grin as he realized he truly had come to think of the reeking chunk of rock and metal as home. He looked up at the towering block of buildings. Home ... probably because he felt closest to Shepard there. Maybe because those buildings had formed the beginning of the dream. Maybe because the grief had been so fresh when they moved in. Maybe because of the dreams.

Taking a deep breath, he shook his head and set out for the far end of the bridge. No time to worry over it right then, whatever the reason. Even though homebase had yet to come under attack, Kasumi Goto had managed to infiltrate all of the staging areas, planting bugs in the Blue Suns and Eclipse camps. The thief reported thousands of mercs and mechs had moved into Kima district, living in makeshift tent cities. They'd even set up recruiting areas in Afterlife and the markets, hiring civilians as bullet sponges. Luckily, with Archangel providing employment and safe harbour for so many over the years, the mercs' recruiting efforts mostly resulted in extra gun hands arriving at homebase.

"The shuttles with the ammo and supplies are leaving the ships now," Martin said, jogging up to walk at Garrus's side. "I let Nihlus know that they're on their way." The kid looked in the direction of Building One and whistled. "Holy crap, that's a lot of turians."

Just outside the main door, General Victus stood at the head of almost one hundred off-duty turian soldiers. Garrus headed that way, finding yet another reason to be grateful for Adrien's presence. Every single off duty soldier the turian ships could spare had reported to the shuttles. Garrus expected maybe a handful of volunteers. Guarding the civilian shelters could hardly be considered adventurous work, but apparently wherever Adrien Victus pointed, every last one of his people followed.

"Quiritus," Victus said, his voice a resonant boom that echoed off Omega's filth, "this is General Garrus Vakarian, commander of Archangel. He'll be your unofficial CO for the remainder of this little vacation." His mandibles flicked in response to the low chuckle that followed the word
vacation. "If you have any interpersonal squabbles, bring them to me, so I can slap you in the back of the head and remind you that we're guests in these people's home. Get along, be polite and helpful. Learn your way around. Take care of each other and the civilians in your charge.

Garrus stepped up. "Thank you for volunteering. Although you can always approach myself or Spectre Kryik if you have issues, there are eleven instructors who will be stationed throughout the building." He gestured toward Martin, spying Nyreen walking up behind the kid. "Instructors Weaver and Kandros are two of them. You can tell who they are by the gold wings on their chests. The rest of Archangel staff and cadets wear the wings on their arms."

He waved Martin and Nyreen closer. "These two will give you the tour and set you up in your shelters. You'll each get a billet, and there will be clearly marked dextro food and beverages in every shelter. Make yourselves at home." He cleared his throat. "Archangel employs and trains people from all races, so yes, you will see hanar, volus, batarians, krogan, and even a drell, apparently." Garrus watched the young drell stride past, a set of Blue Suns armour painted over with the Archangel colours. That should prove an interesting story. He dragged himself back.

"We run under a policy of complete tolerance for racial differences and a complete intolerance of disrespect. If anyone gives you a hard time, or expresses disrespect in any form, take it to one of the instructors." He glanced toward Victus, who just nodded. Apparently, Garrus had command. "Thank you again. You're dismissed to get settled in."

"Hey!" Martin called. "Welcome to sunny Omega, and yes, it always stinks like this." He waved everyone forward and headed in the door. "Come on, Instructor Kandros and I will give you the tour and show you where to stow your gear."

Victus stepped up beside Garrus. "Think any of your people will report back to the hierarchy if I stick with you and fill some mercs full of bullets?"

Garrus chuckled and shook his head. Over the course of his life he could count the number of people he considered true friends on his talons, and most of those had been Shepard's people. Of all the places and situations he could've thought to find a friend … well, Omega would be down near the bottom of the list. "General who? No idea who or what you're talking about, Adrien." He tilted his head toward the door. "I need to make sure my base is buttoned up and locked down. Care for the tour?"

"Vakarian!" Wrex bellowed from the other end of the bridge. "Where do you want my krogan?"

The behemoth laughed and pummelled his way through the disorganized mass of krogan warriors.

"Bring them along," Garrus called. "We'll put them where the fighting is bound to be thickest." He grinned at the celebratory chorus from the krogan ranks and waved for them to follow.

Just after Garrus passed through the door into the lobby, he felt a slight electrical tingle along his arm. "Miss Goto," he said, his voice low, "I trust you've been keeping busy?"

"You know," the young woman's voice said out of empty space, "this is almost as much fun as the time I spent a week casing the Museum of the Goddess on Thessia. Lived right under their noses … left candy wrappers everywhere. Drove them mad." She chuckled. "They're getting ready to make their move, General. The Eclipse plan to drop their YMIR mechs on the bridge outside of building one. The heavies will be backed up by LOKI and FENRIS mechs as well as Eclipse personnel."

"How many of each?" he asked, stopping at the top of the stairs. He held up a talon, asking her to wait before answering as he turned to look over the mass of krogan. "Wrex, I'm leaving you in
charge of your men. They'll be stationed in the lowest sublevel. My people are already in position
down there. Grundan and Mieran will make sure you have everything you need. Don't break my
elevator by overloading it." He grinned and turned away without waiting for Wrex's inevitable
retort.

"If you're calling us fat, Vakarian … ."

Garrus chuckled and headed for the elevator. Once the doors sealed and they were on their way
down, he let out a long breath. "Okay, numbers, Miss Goto?" He reached out where he figured she
was and thumped a hand down on her head. "You could make it easier for everyone if you
deactivated the cloak."

She shimmered into existence. "Fine. The Blood Pack come in just over one thousand, but most of
those are vorcha. Maybe three hundred krogan." Her mostly hidden face curled into a delicate
sneer of distaste. "They brought in twenty or so shipping containers full of varren. I couldn't get a
decent count on them because the varren picked up my scent and alerted the guards."

"Where are they coming at us? The tunnels?" Garrus leaned back against the railing, his talons
gripping it just behind him, using the posture to hide the fact that the enemy numbers were quite
literally staggering. If the Blood Pack wasn't even quite a third of the enemy numbers … .

"Yes. No one else wanted to be anywhere near the Blood Pack or the sewers." She took a long
breath and opened her omnitool. "The Blood Pack staging grounds are outside the district sewers,
so they'll be coming in along these routes." Lines of bright red appeared on the map.

"They have three choices to get in, all of which we have covered. So … next?" He straightened as
the elevator chimed, and then led the way out into the surreal and pristine garden level.

"What in the … ," Victus whispered. "Spirits. You have a paradise in the sewers of Omega."

Garrus grinned and took a deep breath, the heady aroma of flowers and herbs killing the usual
stench. "We got the idea from some vagrant sellers in the black market down by the docks and ran
with it. Imported soil … put in a water reclamation and irrigation system … gold-halide lights.
Quarians helped us lock down the details. Most of our produce is grown right here in our basement
levels." He led the way toward the far end. "Next, Miss Goto?"

"Blue Suns. They're the biggest group because all the smaller merc organizations merged in with
them. Guess they didn't trust the vorcha or the mechs. Anyway, the Suns have two dozen gunships.
I spent the week stealing parts and sabotaging them, but they have a decent repair crew, so they get
them back up within a day or two. I would've just planted a big bomb in their hangar, but I was
afraid they'd attack before we—"

"How many Suns?" Garrus asked, cutting off the rest. Fear threw off sparks, incinerating his
patience.

"Twenty-seven hundred give or take. They took over the abandoned buildings at the edge of the
district." She bent down and picked a pea pod off a vine and split it open. "Oh, nice." She popped
one into her mouth. "Anyway, the Suns are planning to let Eclipse soften you up and draw your
forces to the front, then hit from the sides. They're going to use the gunships to take out the blast
shields over the windows and drop troops on uncovered floors."

Thirty five hundred so far plus who knew how many varren. "Eclipse?" he demanded, tighter and
gruffer than he intended as a vice closed.
"Fifty YMIR mechs, five hundred LOKI, another two hundred FENRIS give or take. Fifteen hundred personnel. They were prepping the mechs when I left their base two hours ago. We don't have much time." She vanished. "Orders?"

Garrus paused. The YMIR mechs and the gunships presented the greatest advantage. Even with all her technical prowess, he doubted that Kasumi could take care of very many of the mechs, but the gunships … . "Take Keiji, and blow the shit out of those gunships. They're attacking anyway, and the aerial advantage is too great. We need to control when and how they enter."

"Yes, sir, General, sir."

He heard her rustling through the plants and turned. "Be careful, Miss Goto."

She laughed, bright and cheery, sounding as if the entire thing amounted to one huge adventure. "Of course. I'm always careful." He envied her the seemingly endless well of optimism and self-confidence she possessed.

"General Vakarian!" a haughty, clipped voice called from a storage room along the right hand wall. "I believe I asked to speak with you a week ago."

Garrus looked over at the quarian contained behind the plexiglass door. "I've had other matters to attend to, Admiral Xen. I'll deal with you when I have time." He strode up to the cell and leaned forward. "And by deal, I mean send you to Purgatory where they will freeze you into a quarian-shaped ice cube and stick you on a shelf for … ever." Giving her his most condescending smile, he turned on his talons and strode off.

"Who is that?" Victus asked, glancing back as Xen pounded against the door.

"One of the quarian admiralty board,' Garrus explained. "One very sick, sadist piece of work."

"Rannoch is the quarians' by right of evolution," Xen called after them, her voice growling through her speaker. "And now we're supposed to accept it back from the hands of the geth in some grand act of charity? They are our tools, our creations, ones that should serve our will. We will take it back, and put the geth back in their rightful place as our servants."

Garrus just shook his head and blocked both her and the memories of Haestrom out of his head. He didn't need that mess rolling around in there along with the rest. By the time they reached the other end of the garden and stepped down into the staging area, he'd wrapped up all his emotions and packed them away. They'd just get in the way. He needed to stay in his head.

"We're ready here, General," Grundan called as soon as Garrus started down the stairs.

"So I see," he agreed, looking over the neat rows of cots, weapon racks, crates of food, and water packed in ice. His people sat around tables cleaning their weapons. "I've sent fifty krogan your way." Glancing behind him, he saw the first of those krogan making their way through the garden. More than one of them held flowers, sniffing at them with a mixture of wonder and suspicion.

"Thanks, boss. We can use them." The krogan hitched up his armour and nodded toward the open door on the right hand wall. "Only real weakness is the garage, but we have cover set up all over in there." Garrus walked over to look into the huge chamber. Another large squad sat with Mieran working on wiring explosive charges. "Looks like you have things well in hand here."

"With these reinforcements, we'll hold them." Grundan's face contorted into a vicious-looking smile.
"I know you will. Keep in touch. One hour check-ins until the enemy engages, then every thirty minutes." Garrus turned and headed back up.

They found Nihlus on the first floor, setting up racks of heat sinks along the balcony. Spare M-97 Vipers lay in open cases along the low wall in case of jams or other malfunctions.

The bandage and the regen cage were gone, and when he straightened to greet them, the Spectre's movements looked steady and strong. He strode over and grasped Garrus by the shoulders. "You look better. Get some sleep?"

Returning the embrace, Garrus nodded. "Yeah, a full seven hours. Kandros stood guard outside my door and threatened anyone who tried to wake me." He slapped Nihlus on the shoulder and stepped away. "You look better as well."

The Spectre answered that with a rueful grimace. "Chakwas. She stuck me in a regen field and stood over me with a syringe, threatening to tranq me if I moved." He looked past Garrus. "General Victus, welcome to Archangel. Thank you for the extra bodies. They're freeing up a lot of guns for the line, and we're going to need them." He looked back to Garrus. "Chakwas has distributed stims, but we're going to have a hell of a time rotating people out to rest."

Waving them over to the balcony, he pointed to movement on the other side of the barricade erected across the far end of the bridge. "They've got the numbers to keep us running even with the bottleneck."

Garrus stared out at the yellow uniforms hurrying around the other end. They didn't have long, and Nihlus was right. Once it started, they were in for a long, hard fight with very little rest. "I'm going to head up to the twenty fourth floor and check on things there."

"Chakwas and Mordin have taken over the whole floor and spent the last few days training medics. They upgraded the geth to act as triage medics." He chuckled. "Count on Chakwas to have even the inorganics running scared."

"And the civilians are in the gymnasiums on thirty to thirty-six?" Garrus confirmed, but held up a hand to forestall Nihlus's reply as a low whirring sound filled the room, rolling in through the open balcony. "They're sending in heavy mechs!" he bellowed as antigrav lifts flew over the barricade. He lifted Ingrid from his back and flicked off the safety. "Call general quarters. This is it, people. Archangel is at war."

Chapter End Notes

(A-N: Don't want to jinx myself, but might actually be getting onto a semi-regular writing schedule. Thanks to everyone who has read and reviewed. Hugs)
Chapter Summary

Shepard puts boots on Omega. Can six more people make a difference against thousands?

Image is Shepard Returns by the lovely Cordovan Lily. :D

Chapter Notes

(A-N: So, long chapter is long. Sorry/not sorry. I could have broken it up, but didn't want to stick another update between these two crazy kids. So, grab a coffee or hot chocolate or iced tea and settle in. :D)

25 Days ASR

Space. Awe at its beauty and terror at its vast emptiness always tore Shepard back and forth, a two headed dog with a rope. One second the black nothingness sucked the air from her lungs, the next, natural masterpieces of colour and light packed it all back in and then some. Sometimes, she didn't go near a port for days, preferring the illusion of solid walls and the bright glare of lights. Others times, she spent hours just sitting at a port or in a viewing lounge, staring out at a nebula or star, losing herself in nature's chaotic art.

The darkness though … the darkness terrified her all the way to the marrow of her bones. Impossibly cold, impossibly empty, the endless stretches between stars amounted to one of the least hospitable environments humans could experience. She'd survived her EVA training thanks to the wonder of the Earth and Moon around her, the ship just behind her, suspended like magic … or science. The difference between the two depended on the angle and her terror level.

That night, the emptiness flowed past, cool and comforting as it slipped along the length of her body, a mother's hand stroking her hair. The suzerain slept, and between the stars, the darkness wrapped her in peace as she sailed through it: free, graceful, and silent. A distant nebula called to her, its gravity tugging ever so gently. She shifted, adjusting her internal energy flow, and as the field grew around her, that tiny piece of gravity sped her on, faster and faster, following her will.

The suzerain roused, the disturbance it sensed out amidst the stars appearing in her mind as well. A call to watch, to still the endless chatter of the beings that filled those systems, to wait. She released her destination reluctantly, the beautiful colours leading her on. Desire. Yes, the suzerain had taught her desire, the yearning strong. But not as strong as the pain.

Agony seared through her, a blackness so much colder and darker than space tearing along every seam between notes ... the billions of fragments that bound together to form the song that was her. She released the nebula, the suzerain's will overriding hers, turning her toward the filthy rock. It did not sing. It howled and wailed, a beast in pain, its song soured by suffering.
"Captain Shepard?"

Shepard’s eyelids fluttered open then slammed shut, the brilliant orange fires of hell searing her retinas to a crisp. "For the love of the holy Enkindlers, what is it with doctors and trying to blind people with omnitools?" She lifted a hand to cover her eyes, taking refuge in the dark until the fireworks died down.

"We take a class. It covers freezing cold hands and medical tools in addition to blinding patients with omnitools, and of course, proper development of the god complex. The exam is a real killer." Not Chakwas. So, the company doc. What was her name? Eis. Doctor Eis, the smart ass. Right.

When her eyes stopped complaining, Shepard peeked out between her fingers. The orange light of doom had vanished. She lifted her head to discover lowered privacy screens … even the lights had been dimmed, and a nice thick layer of blankets covered her. How comfortably considerate.

"Am I going to live, Doc?" Shepard asked, looking up at the woman. Shifting a little under the covers, she tested out her arms and legs. Other than a steady thumping in her head, she felt not too bad.

"You will. I flushed the narcotics from your system, repaired several hairline fractures and a great deal of soft tissue damage, and am treating your neurotransmitter imbalance." As if to emphasize her proactivity, she pressed a syringe to Shepard's upper arm. "You will be up and ready to get yourself blown up again by the time we reach Omega."

Shepard chuckled. "I generally try to avoid that part." She lifted her right hand to her face, feeling for the hard little pieces of crystal, but they'd disappeared. Looking at her wrist, she saw that the cuff was gone as well. She didn't recall it coming off. "When did the crystal on my arm come off?" she asked, not sure whether to be relieved or worried. The bombardment on the planet had scared her, but she'd hoped to get a chance to figure out what the crystals were, maybe find a way to contact the intelligence behind them … because there had been intelligence behind the desperation. She knew that as surely as she knew anything.

"I gave you a sedative. I needed to get beneath it to set your wrist fracture." The doctor held up a tray, two halves of the cuff sitting on it. "As soon as I started looking for a way to get it off, it just snapped open and fell off in my hand." Dr. Eis gestured toward Shepard's face. "All the ones caught in your wounds fell out at the same time. I gathered them on the tray, but after I was done, I looked and the little bits had disappeared."

Shepard sat up, crossing her legs under the covers before she took the tray, leaning close to examine the object. The cuff looked like hundreds of thousands—maybe even millions—of slightly foggy diamonds pressed together into a solid structure. Damn. Blowing a slight sigh out her nose, she slumped. She'd have suffered through a slightly misaligned wrist to have unravelled even a couple of the mysteries behind the strange crystals.

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She set the tray down on her lap and picked up the two halves. "Don't suppose you have some sort of latch somewhere?" she asked. Placing her wrist in one half, she set the other half over top. Without a sound, or any perceptible movement, the two halves sealed around her arm once more. She grinned, the fog of disappointment evaporating before the sun. "Well, what do you know?"

A wave of joy and expectation rose up to meet her own, the two twining and building to almost frightening level. Shepard's heart hammered against her chest wall and high in her throat, dizziness setting in. Or was it hers at all? She shook her head, pushing away the foreign emotion, erecting a wall to close herself off. "Don't force your emotions on me," she whispered, glancing over at the doctor who activated her omnitool. "I'm not going crackers, Doc. I think it … they … are some sort
of crystalline life form. They're scared and reaching out, but too strong. I think they're trying to force me to empathize with them."

"Something is going on along your neural pathways, spiking energy readings along the same paths that were depressed before." Eis keyed the interface, her fingers speeding over the tool. "Shut it down, Captain. Even if it means taking it off."

Directing her attention back at the cuff, Shepard tried to form her commands into emotion and pictures as she said, "Communicate with me. Don't try to manipulate me." After a second, the emotional storm backed down. She let out a long breath of relief as the feeling of being invaded drew back. She really did have far too many people treating her brain like the extranet.

Drawing in a long breath, she focused on projecting her curiosity and suspicion as she spoke, "Thank you. What are you? Who are you?"

Her omnitool activated, the translation program opening. A small glowing screen activated inside the cuff, slightly obfuscated by the crystal. A list of words began to appear, slowly scrolling around the circumference of Shepard's arm.


Shepard held the cuff up for the doctor to see. The woman met the captain's stare, overflowing with wonder that mirrored the fireworks going off inside Shepard's head. Actual contact with an alien lifeform … the stuff of every dreamer who ever looked at the stars and wondered what else lived out there. "You're alive?" she asked, feeling dumb the second the words escaped her mouth.

"Alive," appeared on the screen again, then disappeared. Shepard stared at it, trying to figure out how it could possibly be alive.

"Do your people have a name?" Dr. Eis asked. She leaned in so tight that Shepard wondered if the doctor was going to crawl into her lap.

The cuff flashed, 'Chiastyllia.'

An image of a single, but intricately complex, crystal replaced the name. Above it, Shepard read the words, 'Note. Single. Not smart.' The word note pricked her memory. She'd heard the single life forms referred to as notes somewhere before. Closing her eyes, she let her mind drift, trying to follow the thread of that word, but then her omnitool dinged, pulling her back.

More and more notes appeared on the cuff, drawing together to form an image of the cuff. "Small song," scrolled around her arm. "Not very smart." More notes clustered until it created a likeness of the SR2. "Large song. Smart."

Shepard understood. "The more of you join together, the smarter you are. You share consciousness and intelligence."

"Yes."

"This is extraordinary," Eis whispered, leaning close over Shepard's elbow. "If they have no real consciousness or intelligence in their singular form, how do they know to form these larger songs?"

Shepard felt the answer as she had felt the familiarity with the name for the singular beings, it
tickled the back of her mind, an itch her hand lifted to scratch, but even as she rubbed the back of her neck, the solution remained elusive.

"Will." The word glowed.

"Wait." Of course. "This cuff formed when I wished for some way to communicate with the notes … to find out what they wanted. I focused on my omnitool … being able to use it to speak to them." She squinted, staring at the word even though it dissolved into an orange blur as she focused her attention inward. Will pulled them together, forming them into something useful. "If I had wanted a weapon to destroy the notes?"

Despair stabbed through her, sliver sharp and piercing. When she focused on the cuff, it displayed one word.

Death.

"On the planet, the voices kept crying out about being in pain and alone," she said, trying to focus on the chorus of tiny voices all speaking as one. "You said something about my having broken the darkness, having defeated the old masters. Do you have to obey someone's will regardless of what they would do with you?"

"Suzerain," appeared on her cuff. "Yes. Have will. Stronger will wins."

Again, that word sent a prickle of recognition trickling through her brain and down her spine. "Those are the masters?"

The door into the medbay opened, Miranda striding in, doing her best to hide her limp. "Captain, EDI said you're awake." She looked over at Eis. "I thought I asked to be informed the moment Shepard—"

"Miranda, stop," Shepard said, her voice slicing through the XO's. "This is not Miranda Lawson's little kingdom." She stuck her arm under the blankets. "Thank you, Doctor," she said, hoping that Eis would understand to keep their little chat to herself. Not that EDI would.

High time to curb that little issue, if at all possible. "Miranda, pull up a chair. I want to have a chat with you and EDI. That means I'd appreciate being able to see you as well, EDI." Shepard nodded as the blue pawn-shaped hologram appeared on the emitter. "Thank you." Waiting until Miranda settled, Shepard put together her argument. Despite Miranda's assertion that her boss had been killed escaping the station, Shepard knew that someone still pulled her strings. She had her suspicions about who that was, but in the end, that didn't matter ... if she could manage to get some autonomy.

Miranda rolled a chair over and sat, one knee over the other, her hands folded in her lap. "Very well, Shepard. What do you want to talk about?"

Taking a deep breath, Shepard packed down the annoyance Miranda's tone inspired. If she lost her temper, she'd just feed into the operative's conviction that she needed to be micro-managed. "We need to come to an agreement about a few things. The first is my privacy. I don't intend to have my every bathroom break and sneeze reported while I'm aboard this ship. If I pass out in my cabin, slip in the shower and crack my head open, or grab a knife from the galley and go all, 'Here's Johnny,' that's one thing, but day to day, I want EDI and you out of my hair."

Miranda just raised an eyebrow and shifted a little in her chair. "Anything else, Captain?"

Shepard chuckled. "Oh yes, get comfortable. You've told me that I am in command of this ship,
and yet you hide information from me, and have everyone reporting to you rather than me. You
don't even report to me unless it's something you want me to do. That ends. Right now. EDI, you
report to me. Miranda, you also report to me. Everything that happens on this ship in a day is
assembled into a report that crosses my desk at the end of beta shift. I don't care if it's how much
toilet paper we ordered, I want it in the report."

"Shepard … I … ." Miranda shifted again.

"This is a deal breaker, Miranda. I'm not a puppet. I don't want crew coming to me to ask me about
why there's no toilet paper, and having to fumble for an answer like an idiot." She met and held her
 XO's stare, shaking her head once as Miranda moved to open her omnitool. "I'm going to ask these
people to trust me and follow me as we go up against a race of aliens who could crush us like
insects under foot. Are they going to have that trust if you are constantly undermining me by being
the effective CO?" Her shoulders popped in a shrug that hid the depth of her discomfort and
distrust.

The operative's hand hovered over her omnitool for a moment, then dropped to her lap. She tilted
her head, watching Shepard with a cocked eyebrow and a very dubious stare. "How can I trust that
you'll report everything to me? You certainly haven't demonstrated a keen desire to cooperate with
me this far."

Shepard chuckled, surprise pulling it from her lips before she could stop it. Command of the great
ship Nameless might just be the most messed up situation she'd ever found herself in. "I won't tell
you everything, Miranda. There are some things that just frankly are none of your business." She
leaned forward, her forearms resting over her knees. Of course, in order to start gaining the crew's
respect and loyalty, she needed to get her ass out of medbay and start attending to the day to day.

"Excuse me, Captain Shepard, Operative Lawson," EDI said, "our contacts on Omega have
reported in: the attack on the Archangel base began just over twelve hours ago."

"Thank you, EDI," Miranda said, "that's not unexpected." The operative didn't even shift her weight
or expression.

"The hell it's not." Shepard glanced back and forth between the glowing chess piece on the emitter
and her XO. "This is the first of it, Miranda. I want you to bring me up to speed, and from now on,
I know everything. I can't command this vessel and bring its crew back alive from missions if I
don't have all the facts. So, start at the beginning. Who or what is Archangel?" Holding up a finger
to forestall Miranda's answer, Shepard looked over at the doctor. "Raise the head of the bed for me,
please, Doc?"

The top half of the bed tilted up until Shepard could lean back comfortably. "Thanks."
She returned to Miranda. "Okay, go ahead."

For the next two hours Shepard's executive officer and enhanced defence intelligence filled her in
on the state of the galaxy. Archangel's existence and the sheer size of it blew her away. This
mysterious turian figure who believed in the Reapers enough to start it … had she known him? Met
him at some point? As far as she remembered, no one other than the Normandy crew believed.

Damn the blank spots in her head. If she didn't already felt like a glass dropped off the top of a
skyscraper, she'd push, see if she couldn't draw any memories forward. No one outside her circle
had believed in the Reapers when she died. So either her people managed to convince someone
else, or her mystery turians were all the same. Had her lover taken up her fight? She poked the
blanks spots, but to no avail. No matter how close she got to rediscovering her life, something
always seemed to hold it just out of reach.
Sweet baby Jesus, I need to get to Omega already.

Scowling, Shepard dragged her focus back to the problem at hand. Regardless of who ran the organization, the council, Collectors, and Reapers had already tried to take out Archangel's leadership, set off a massive bomb on Tuchanka, wiped out a couple of facilities, and had over five thousand mercs on Omega ready to wipe out the six hundred or so defenders. Somehow, she needed to make the addition of six people count enough to tip the scales.

She almost laughed.

Looking between Miranda and EDI once more, she asked, "Okay, so if Archangel has been getting this big and scary … building a navy … developing new weapon tech, why have the Reapers waited until now to try to wipe them out? Theories?"

"The attacks against them coincided with the success of Project Lazarus," Miranda offered. The operative shifted in her chair, uncrossing her legs to change knees, then folded her hands in her lap once more. "Perhaps the enemy didn't concern themselves until there was a chance you would return to take up leadership. You've killed one of them using less."

Squinting, focused on the options as her mind flipped through them, Shepard nodded. "That might be part of it, but very little is that simple. I think it has more to do with these human colony disappearances. Archangel is looking into them, so the Collectors distract them from looking too closely by beating them down. The Reapers are ready to make their next move." The more she spoke, the more she knew she was headed in the right direction. "They allowed Archangel to grow unchecked, knowing that they really weren't a threat. What does it hurt to let them spend their resources, build, and organize when you know that with a couple of good swats, you can take them all out, leave them with no time or resources to rebuild."

Miranda's pretty face hardened into a scowl. "It makes sense to leave things as long as they could in that case." She leaned forward, her arms crossed over her knee. "However, other than the Collectors taking out Archangel's weapon testing facility, the enemy's plans have failed. They didn't go in with enough ships to guarantee success at Tuchanka or Freedom's Progress."

Shepard's face drew into a scowl as well. "Hmmm. Maybe my early wake up threw their schedule into fast forward." Narrowing her eyes she stared down at the chiastyllia wrapped around her arm, eyes following the glimmers of light and reflection as her brain sorted through the problem. After a minute or so, the taiko drummers behind her eyes rolled in their drums and took formation. "I think you're right, Miranda. They expected to have at least six more months to work before I became a problem … if their assassination attempts failed."

"Your logic is sound, Captain Shepard," EDI stated.

"What's our ETA at Omega?" Her stomach clenched, anticipation and dread raising their banners to flutter above the battleground. So many possibilities awaited on that filthy rock.

"Fourteen hours."

A long time for those beleaguered soldiers to hold off the enemy. Hopefully they had solid defenses that helped offset the enemy's numbers. "Send all the intel on the merc numbers and organization to my omni-tool, EDI. I'll go over it and see if I can orchestrate a miracle." Shepard kept her omni-tool hidden under the blanket, even when it beeped, acknowledging receipt of the information.

"Captain," Dr. Eis said, drawing her attention as the woman stepped up beside her bed. "You need
to rest as long as possible." Shepard's mouth quirked into a crooked smile as the doctor turned to Miranda, her shoulders square and pushed back, jaw set. "Operative Lawson, I need to put your leg back in a regen cage, and then you should eat and get eight solid hours of rest. Report back before we arrive at Omega. I want to be sure your bones and ligaments are up to taking the strain of combat."

Miranda stood and headed for the door. "You can bring the equipment to my quarters, Doctor Eis." She glanced over at Shepard. "I'll be available if you wish to run anything past me, Captain."

Shepard nodded, but put enough steel in her expression to assure her XO that she wouldn't be debating her battle plans or running them past her except during briefings. She waited until Lawson left before she looked at the blue thing on the small platform. "EDI, I want to know every scrap of intel that comes into this ship. I don't want my every move reported to Miranda or the people she works for … and don't bother trying to sell me the line that they all died. I might have just been reborn three weeks ago, but I'm not an idiot."

EDI didn't reply, no doubt checking with Miranda. Not that Shepard could blame the AI. She had programming blocks that forced compliance. After a full minute, EDI said, "As you wish, Shepard."

Shepard looked down at her wrist, sending the chiastyllia a request to get her wrist back along with a promise to help them if she could. The cuff detached, and Shepard passed it to Dr. Eis.

"Do you think they'd talk to me?" the young woman asked, her eyes practically sparkling with excitement. She held the two parts of the cuff gingerly.

"That would be a question for them, Doc." Shepard let out a long breath. Despite the fascination that sparked at the base of her skull and tingled along her arms, unless she found a way to clone herself, someone else was going to need to research the new lifeforms. Her plate overflowed with more than enough to keep three of her busy. "If they are okay with it, send me a daily report with what you learn, and if they need to talk to me, let me know."

"Thank you, Captain, I will." The doctor returned to her desk, a huge grin brightening her face.

Well, Janey, that's one more crew member who won't stab you in the back than you had a few minutes ago.

Shepard opened the information EDI had sent her on Archangel's situation and started to read.

Lawson … oh, who was Shepard trying to fool? … Cerberus had connections on both sides, so their intel was impressively thorough. After testing Archangel's defenses with a tenth of their heavy mechs, Eclipse and the Blue Suns had attacked from three sides while the Blood Pack blew into the tunnels from the sewers. The fighting had been long and bloody, but the defenses held and the fighting had devolved into a holding action, harrying the Archangel lines just enough to wear them down.

Someone had blown up all but three of the Blue Suns gunships. The Suns tried using shuttles, but Archangel's heavies sent them straight to hell. The Suns were currently also holding as they waited for a transport filled with new gunships. Shepard wasn't worried about them, though. They weren't due for three days. What did worry her was Archangel's remaining fighters, of which there were just under five hundred. They'd already be exhausted and their lines would start to falter even with a supply of stims. In two … maybe three days at most, they'd start making fatal mistakes. If it went on long enough for the gunships to get there … if Shepard didn't come up with something miraculous … Archangel would cease to exist.
Of course, you do occasionally pull off miracles. Particularly when all you need to do is blow a lot of shit up. You have a gift for that.

Confidence began to crystallize, notes of knowledge and experience formed lattices of competence. The mechs were the key. If she could co-opt their IFFs, Eclipse would be wiped out before they even became an issue. And if she could rig a dozen of their antigrav lifts so they dumped heavies where she wanted them … the poor sods inside that building might actually get enough time to choke down some food.

She could do it. She'd done things far more impossible. It would come down to planning and a decent diversion. Shepard brought up the map of the Eclipse base of operations, forcing all her conflicting emotions and thoughts aside. She had a mission to plan. "All right. Where are you, mechs? And where is your computer network?"

§§§

26 Days ASR

"That was a lot easier than I anticipated," Miranda whispered under her breath as the squad strode away from the Eclipse recruiting station.

Shepard chuckled. "I think Jack bouncing that lieutenant halfway across the markets when he tried to grope her made an impression." Glancing toward the young biotic, Shepard checked to be sure that the young woman had come through unscathed. Jack seemed restless, edgy and more temperamental than usual, but Shepard suspected the biotic owed that to her new armour rather than anything else.

"Run around wearing nothing more than a few leather straps for years and the assholes don't bother me." Jack tugged at the collar and rolled her shoulders. "Stick on six inches of ceramic plating, and one makes a clumsy grab for my tits. Asshole." She sniffed and rolled her throat, ready to spit, but stopped when Shepard shook her head.

"I thought you showed reasonable control," Shepard replied, her gaze travelling over the rest of her team. "And that asari captain's reaction clearly said that Lt. Grabtits tries that crap all the time." Vincent and Liara walked along, guarded and watchful, but settled. Javik stalked, muttering to himself under the helmet Shepard had insisted he wear. They'd have an easier time claiming he was just into his armour being some bizarre fashion statement then trying to explain the unknown alien in their midst. Miranda stayed just behind Shepard, silent, her eyes fixed on the side of Shepard's head as if trying to burrow inside to discover if the captain had left anything out of their briefing.

Shepard headed across the marketplace to a shop belonging to an elcor called Harrot. He'd been recommended as the least expensive place to buy the electronics she needed. As she made her way past the batarian ranting about sin, humans, and repentance, she listened to the soles of her boots making cricket noises in the sticky filth, dejavu hitting hard. The whole market seemed familiar, as if she walked in footsteps she'd taken before. Longing and sadness threw down gauntlets and swaggered into the ring, but she didn't indulge them, pushing on.

"Hey there!" a high-pitched female voice called from Shepard's right. She turned to face the young asari who waved. "Hi. I remember you … don't see soldiers your size much. Did that dress knock his mandibles off?"

That dress? Shepard frowned, trying to draw forward the memory. That dress … ?

The frown transmuted into a slow smile, as the image of looking at herself in the mirror flashed
through her mind. Midnight blue … more collar than dress … and impossible heels that actually
gave her an ass. "Magic shoes," she muttered to herself. She remembered wearing that dress to get
past the Blue Suns. Oh! Yes! The memory of the shop returned, along with a pointed ache behind
Shepard's eyes.

"The impressively sexy woman to your right, C-Sec." She waved. "Yeah, hi. It's me, not a
ventriloquist act. Let's go."

She smiled, pushing the pain aside. "Yes, it went over very well." Even covered in blood and sewer
crap. "Thanks." She lifted a hand as the sadness transformed into a flutter of hope and excitement
deep in her belly … and an impressive pounding across the front of her head. C-Sec … she'd called
him C-Sec.

So close. So very close.

Shepard stopped outside Harrot's shop and turned to Vincent, Javik, and Liara. "Okay, you three go
procure the other items on the list. We'll meet you at the Eclipse transport site in an hour." She
snagged Javik as he grumped past, his entire demeanour setting off the alarm at the base of her
skull. "Stay silent. No calling people primitives, no saying how people were so much less stupid in
your cycle … . You're there to watch their backs. Today is not the day to unleash the last prothean
on the galaxy."

He nodded, apparently taking her warning to heart as he moved on without arguing.

Miranda and Jack followed Shepard into the store, the three of them splitting up to go through the
kiosks looking for the items on Shepard's list. Fifteen minutes later, she said—thank you for the
slush fund, Miranda—and then headed to the next store along the marketplace. Three stores later,
Shepard herded the ladies over to a food court and a table in a back corner. Sitting with her back to
the crowd felt like painting a bullseye on the back of her head, but she wanted to give her weapon
building endeavours some cover. For long seconds, she forced herself to sit there and breathe, to
relax down into her seat and wall up the panic. She couldn't go into every crowd for the rest of her
life and panic for fear of someone shooting her in the head.

"Miranda, grab us some drinks so no one pays us any attention." Shepard managed say, her voice a
harsh croak as it muscled its way out past the fist gripping her larynx. When her XO nodded and
walked away, Shepard took out the first of the toys, cracking it open.

"So, why toys, Shepard?" Jack asked, sitting next to her, also facing the wall.

"These sorts of remote control toys all have chips to slave them to their owner's omnitool." She
exposed the chip in question, entering the new frequency and carrier codes before popping the chip
out. "They're pretty much the exact same chips that basic machinery uses to recognize operator
commands." Three more chips sat on the table in front of her before Miranda returned and thumped
three cranberry juices down on the table.

Shepard passed them each a couple of the toys. "Jack, set those to your omnitool and pack them
full of your little surprises. Miranda, just pack them and then pass them to Jack."

Jack practically cackled as she picked up a handful of mining explosives, kneading a handful of
metal scrap into it. "Fuck, yeah, this is the good stuff, it's going to take merc heads off for a twenty
metre radius." She picked up a toy helicopter and packed the cab full of the deadly mixture, a
maniacal grin splitting her face. "First giant mechs and now two gangs! I should have signed up
with you earlier. You really know how to show a girl a good time, Shepard."
Shepard repurposed another chip and then popped it out. "I was dead earlier." She grinned at the look Jack shot her way. "What? It's true." She winked and focused on her work. "Come on, let's get our presents ready, we've got twenty minutes until Vincent and the others get to the transport station."

Twenty minutes later, she led the way to the transport station, the toys all carefully reboxed and laid out along the bottom of two duffels, overtop of which she and Jack had piled their weapons and armour. Recruits showing up with duffels filled with gear wouldn't raise eyebrows. Toys … toys would. She just hoped that their check-in officer would be too busy to do thorough searches.

"Shepard," Vincent greeted her. "Got everything on the list and a few extra little items from a dumpster that will liven the party considerably." A wide, cocky grin spread across the broad planes of his face.

"Excellent." She nodded to the human driver. "Hi." She held out the datapad with their orders and details.

The man stared at her for a few seconds without acknowledging her, as if waiting for her to explain why she dared interrupt his very vital session of car leaning. Then, snatching the datapad from her hand, he looked it over before nodding toward his car and then the asari standing beside the next one. "Get in, meat." He shoved the datapad into Shepard's chest hard enough to stagger her. For a second, he bristled … expecting her to come at him, maybe?

Shepard just shook her head and cocked an eyebrow, quietly proud of herself for not feeling even the slightest anger. Instead, a oddly calming brew of pity and amusement turned her away. Trying to bully a tiny freelancer who wasn't even in armour … no wonder he'd been stuck out on driving duty. She sent her second team to the other car, then climbed in and just stared at the driver, a silent challenge to rise above his petty power crap.

He relented. The ride to Kima District passed quickly and silently, the driver staring determinedly straight ahead. She left him to his issues, spending the time running through the map in her head. The mission had to go quickly and smoothly. Need tied a tether to her … she smiled softly … to her C-Sec, pulling her on with greater insistence every second. Archangel's time slipped away all too quickly.

That morning's reports from Omega set the number of defenders down to four hundred and change. And while the mercs had lost five times as many, the odds weren't tipping in Archangel's favour quickly enough. Hopefully, she and her misfits could do something about that.

The last time she'd entered Kima District, the entire place stood deserted thanks to people abandoning the outer, uncontrolled reaches of the station for the relative safety of the areas where either Aria or the Blue Suns kept the peace … in their way. As Shepard climbed out of the car, bodies flowed around her like ants rebuilding a kicked over hive. Her heart clenched at the sound of gunfire … not as distant as she would have thought. The buildings carried sound very well. That would work in her favour, helping seed chaos through the ranks.

"Hey! New meat! Over here!" an asari called over the background roar. She lifted a hand and nodded, waving them over when Shepard looked her way. "Yeah, come on. We haven't got all day. The second wave launches in ninety minutes, and your worthless asses need to be ready to take point." She snatched the datapad from Shepard's hand, just as cranky as the driver, but impatient.

Eclipse really needed to either stop recruiting social morons or open an internal charm school. Shepard leaned on a hip, wondering absently how many recruits just turned around, deciding the rude-ass Eclipse could go straight to hell.
"That your gear?" the asari asked, jabbing her chin toward the duffels. Shepard nodded, letting all of her nervous excitement bleed through, her hands shaking as she took back the datapad. The asari took a deep breath, letting it out in a sigh that clearly told Shepard she'd gone through the spiel numerous times before.

"All right, pick up the duffels and hold them open," she said. When Jack and Shepard complied, she shuffled through the top layer. "Nice gear. You guys might last a minute or two." Grunting, she gestured for them to back off. "Welcome to the Eclipse FOB." She pointed toward the buildings across the wide avenue.

A group of Blue Suns stood along their side of the street, hollering insults across at the Eclipse, who gave back as good as they got. It sounded like good-natured ribbing but for a thread of real ugliness and hatred running beneath the surface. A line of ice-cold ants raced up Shepard's spine.

The lieutenant shrugged when Shepard looked back. "That's Blue Suns territory. Don't even look over that way. We're here to fight Archangel, not that arrogant bunch of SOB's. They're trying to pick fights—killed a couple of freelance meat who strayed too close. Their CO's ripped the shit out of them, so they're pissed. Don't give them a reason to shoot you before Archangel does."

Shepard glanced that way then nodded. Three major gangs and a dozen smaller ones all jammed into a couple of blocks ... it didn't surprise her they were already trying to kill each other.

"Understood, LT. Where do we report?" Glancing behind her, she raked her stare over the others, but they stood calmly at parade rest, looking as if they signed on to be bullet sponges every day of the week.

"Captain Burgess is assembling the vanguard forces straight down the street here." The asari pointed, drawing Shepard's attention down the road toward a bunch of loosely grouped people in mostly old, ragged-looking gear. "Gear up, rest, get plenty to drink, snack ... especially if you're biotic, and be ready to go in ninety minutes. We're going to crush these traitor bastards into paste."

"Yes, ma'am." Giving the lieutenant a curt nod, Shepard led the others down the street. They had a hell of a lot to do in ninety minutes. Her people's true usefulness lay outside the lines, hitting large, grouped targets, sabotaging equipment, and hopefully turning the gangs on one another.

To do any of that, they needed to break up before they checked in with their Eclipse CO. Taking a deep breath, Shepard settled, flipping over into operative mode. She spotted a small, closed out shop with a broken window off to their left and nodded her people toward it. Keeping a look out, she waited until last to hop through into the dark, dingy room.

"Okay," she said, setting down her duffel and unzipping it. "Vincent, Jack, Javik ... as discussed, you're heading up into the upper levels. Your whole job is to cause the biggest diversion possible, and take as many of the Suns out as you can ... start a gang war if at all possible. We need to cut their numbers down as much as we can before we get across that bridge. Archangel's people have got to be exhausted. They've been fighting and watching their friends die for a day already. Let's make sure this ends in the next couple of hours."

Shepard dug into the duffel and pulled out her armour. She needed to suit up. Action time. A glance to the side revealed Jack doing the same despite grumbling about the armour.

Vincent set down another large, canvas bag. "Okay, so we got the chips you needed." He withdrew a small bag and set it down. "There are three hundred in there. I said I bought a pile of secondhand irrigation mechs." He pulled out a spool of wire. "One of the little surprises ... Det cord ... a lot of it. We could bring down a big chunk of property."
Shepard grinned as she stepped into her underlayer. "It should come in handy."

A wicked grin spread across the ex-Marine's face, accompanying the reveal of four fair-sized crates. "These are full of odds and ends. Just metal scrap from some sort of demo. We pack these things with explosives, deliver them into the middle of a staging area. We could take out a couple hundred in a single blow."

Liara winced and stepped forward. Her eyes shone dark with tightly reined in tears. "A bomb like that …." She made a sad little sound in her throat.

Shepard shrugged the underlayer onto her shoulders then met the asari's horrified stare and nodded. "Yes, it is a brutal way to do this, Liara, but for the next few hours, we have to be brutal. There are six of us and thousands of them." She held the blue gaze with firm compassion. "Do you have friends in that building?" When the asari nodded, Shepard mirrored it. "Yeah, and they're so very tired right about now. They're hopped up on stims and hungry ... thirsty. They're standing over the bodies of their friends, knowing that they don't have very long before they can't fight back." She reached out and squeezed Liara's shoulder. "They might not know it, but they are counting on us to get them through."

Liara opened her mouth to talk, but Shepard cut her off. "There are six of us, Liara. That means we have to use every dirty trick we can." She stared at the asari, eyebrows raised.

"Good speech," someone said from the empty, front corner. "Very moving. Who are you?"

Shepard's heart jumped into her throat, wrapping strangling tentacles around everything it could grab hold of. Damn! Infiltrator! She snatched her pistol from the duffel. A chorus of whirrs and clicks accompanied six pistols training on their invisible interloper.

"Whoa! So jumpy. Relax, I'm on your side," the voice said, sounding more cocky than nervous.

Shepard closed her eyes, listening to follow the woman's movement around the room, her heart loosening its grip and starting to slide back down into place. "That remains to be seen. Who are you?"

"My name's not important. I'm Archangel's thief in residence, and for the last day, saboteur in residence."

Shepard grinned and lowered her pistol a little. "The Suns' gunships? Nice."

The voice chuckled. "Yes. Thank you. Always nice to have my work appreciated. The boss said, go blow up their gunships, so I did. Shame about those last three, but at least I grounded them for a while." A faint shimmer appeared, passing before the faint light at the window. "So, how can I help? You need to get some explosives into enemy territory?"

Instead of answering, Shepard held out her hand. "Captain Jane Shepard."

"I figured it was you." An invisible hand took hers in a strong, very tingly, and reassuring grip. "Kasumi Goto. Pleased to finally meet you, Captain. I've heard a lot about you." The hand released her. "Of course, most of that centered around you being dead."

Shepard chuckled, a thrill of excitement and joy adding strength to every breath, every thump of her heart. They'd spoken about her ... all the people she'd left. "Yeah, that happened." She turned her head to show the massive scar along the base of her skull. "I got better." Setting her pistol down, she began sealing her armour into place. "You out here alone, Miss Goto?"
"No, the bosses would never allow that. My partner is keeping watch." Shepard heard her move to the window. "What's the plan?"

Miranda cleared her throat, but Shepard didn't acknowledge the reminder. She really didn't need the operative to tell her to be suspicious. Invisible people showing up with offers to help automatically went straight to the top of her suspicion list. Still, beggars couldn't really be choosers.

"How did you recognize me?" Shepard asked, sealing her girdle into place. Something told her that she could trust the thief, but still, Miranda's subtlety had the right of it, and the answer to her question might just settle the issue.

"Both of the big bossmen have your picture next to their beds," the thief said, laughing as the rest of the squad either chortled or choked. "And I saw you on Freedom's Progress. You were a little busy pulling our asses out of the fire, but it was you ... and the rest of you, too. Well, except the one over there. Smart move covering that head. What is he, anyway?"

Shepard nodded, holding up a hand to forestall any commentary from her people. "Okay, Miss Goto, I'm going to put my faith in you." She glanced over at Vincent. "Prep the bombs. Did you grab timers?" When he held them up, she winked. "I knew I could count on you." She took a deep breath. The bombs and the extra two, invisible bodies were a gift. She needed to use them well. "Do you know where these will do the most damage?" she asked, glancing toward the sound of quiet steps whispering through the dust.

"There are staging areas for both Blue Suns approaches," the thief replied. "And I'd like to take out the Blood Packs varren cages. Those things are tearing our people up. There's just too many and they soak up bullets like dog treats. Wrex's krogan have been charging them, but with the way the Blood Pack regenerate, it's a meat grinder down in those tunnels."

The genuine grief and concern in Goto's voice settled the last of Shepard's misgivings, the rumble in the captain's guts going quiet. She finished putting on her armour, then passed Jack the duffel. "Put all our little christmas presents in there. I don't feel good about them being stuffed in with the rocket launchers." She grinned when the biotic muttered something about not being completely hopeless or uncoordinated.

Picking up the bag of control chips, Shepard shoved them into her belt pouch with the ones she'd taken out of half the toys. She watched Javik helping pack explosives into the crates. Damn, with the amount they shoved in there, the shrapnel would take heads clean off.

"Come on, folks, we have …" She checked her chrono. "... just over an hour to be ready to move out with the vanguard. It's our ticket in there, and those mechs need to be hacked before we go." She paced, the dark, filthy room closing around her, the smell of the place working its way so deep into her sinuses that it began picking out drapes and measuring for carpets. Pungent ... holy blessed Enkindlers, it was pungent enough to trigger her gag reflex if she thought about it long enough. It also triggered a strong sense of safety ... which made no sense. But definitely safety, and connection. Yeah, the most wonderful feeling of connection.

"Done here, Shepard," Vincent announced, sealing the last crate. After zipping up the duffel, he turned to face … nothing. "This explosive is stable, so you don't have to worry about bumping it and blowing yourself up. Just set the crates down, activate the timer and walk away."

"I understand." The bag lifted from his hand, looking completely ridiculous for a moment before turning on its end and disappearing. "It's not going to be easy moving around with this thing, but … ." Boots thumped softly on the other side of the window. "Good luck. See you on the other side."
"And to you as well, Miss Goto." Shepard focused on her people. "Well, let's hope that makes everything a little easier." She held her hand out for the datapad. "We all wrapped up, here? You guys ready?"

Jack hefted the duffel of toys, her armour back in place. "Are you fucking kidding me? This is going to be hella fun." Coffee-brown eyes snapped and sparked with fierce joy as she cackled. "Blowing shit up… here I come."

Vincent and Javik settled their burdens over their shoulders, the former Marine stepping toward the exit as he said, "We'll get it done and meet you at the staging area in just under an hour, Shepard. Don't worry about us." He opened his omnitool and brought up the map of the area, focusing in on the building. He gave her an Alliance salute, and headed out.

"Okay ladies," Shepard sighed once the other three had headed out. "Let's go sabotage some mechs."

They made their way through the ranks of the Eclipse without anyone paying them the slightest bit of notice. It calmed some of Shepard's lingering nerves to see that they were just three more hunks of meat amidst the hundreds. If they weren't dressed in yellow, custom armour, they might as well be rocks. Thank the sweet baby Jesus, because they really needed to be rocks.

Shepard paused at a broken gate that had been dragged back out of the way. Something about it tweaked her memory, again. That and the place being full of troops. The last time she stood there, she'd dreamed about retreating to Omega, setting up shop, and preparing for the Reapers. They'd talked about it. That filled her with warmth. He—C-Sec—had taken up her dream, just as she'd suspected. And he was out there… a hundred metres or so away, fighting for his life.

"Shepard?" Miranda's hiss pulled Shepard back.

*Focus for pity's sake, Janey. You can turn into a fourteen year old with her first crush once the mercs are all dead. Otherwise, you'll be reuniting with his corpse.*

Nodding, she ducked through the smashed gate and then into cover between the warehouse where the mechs were stored and another building. She glanced at her chrono, then pulled the rocket launcher off her back. Hopefully the other team started—

Thunder boomed from the other end of the block. A million volts of exhilaration spiked straight down through Shepard, her hands and feet vibrating as the other team's handiwork set the street beneath her trembling. She raised the rocket launcher to her shoulder and sighted her target as carefully as if she wielded Ingrid, setting her up for a gold medal shot. Squeezing the trigger, three quick twitches, she sent a volley of rockets tearing through one of the command tents set up between buildings.
The fireball and resulting blast threw her on her ass, then concrete, poly sheeting, metal, and scrap pelted down like hail from hell.

"Pull back," she hissed, shoving the other two behind her as she retreated back to where the buildings clocked the worst of the debris. Hanging the rocket launcher back up, she watched chaos and fury erupt amidst the Blue Suns, a combination of satisfaction and regret fighting for dominance. The second team certainly held up their end of the plan as explosion after explosion rocked the ground, and the air filled with a truly choking amount of dust and smoke.

"Helmets on," she whispered, not taking her own advice as she crept back up toward the corner of the warehouse. Fires ripped through the Blue Suns camp, the fire suppression systems just adding to the chaos. Gun fire. She nodded. Good for them, the twitchy, suspicious bastards. "That's right, shoot the living crap out of one another, glory hallelujah and praise the great glowing asses of the Enkindlers," she whispered.

The large doors on the front of the warehouse cracked open, two salarians and an asari stepping out, looking around like voles popping their heads out of the ground for the first time. A squad of Blue Suns spotted them, and raced into the street shouting, blaming them for the explosion, regardless of their complete lack of weaponry. A moment and a few shots later, the three of them lay strewn in their own blood.

Shepard waved to Miranda and Liara, preparing to move as soon as the Blue Suns backed off. One
of their commanders, a huge batarian, ran out of the far building, roaring at the top of his lungs,
calling his scattered troops back into order.

As soon as backs were turned, Shepard sucked in a big breath and ran, slipping through the narrow
opening in the door, then spinning around to push it closed. Liara and Miranda helped, then
stepped back as Shepard locked the door. She didn't dare scramble the codes or anything that
would raise suspicion.

Once it was secured, she turned to her squad. "Go do a quick sweep and check out the warehouse.
Make sure no one is left. If someone is, take care of it." She pointed up. "The office is directly
above us."

As the two women crept into the ranks of robots, Shepard took a deep, shaking breath and wished
for Kasumi Goto's cloak. Infiltration … flying under the radar … had never exactly been her forte.
She went in full bore, mowed them over with boisterous flare and sexuality and cocky swagger.
Challenge them, piss them off, make them slip up. That was her MO. All flash and misdirection.
Sneaking … she sucked at sneaking.

Closing her eyes, she lifted a hand to turn up the ambient on her aural implants, listening for
footsteps, voices … any sign. She took deep, slow breaths, focusing on keeping her heartbeat slow
and steady while she flexed her hands. A vid played in the office above her, and Liara and Miranda
tiptoed across the top of the room … but no one moved out on the floor. Three guards for a nearly
a billion credits worth of mechs? Did it stem from supreme overconfidence? Maybe when one had
the enemy trapped behind a thousand troops and five hundred mechs, maybe someone sneaking in
to sabotage them ceased to be a concern.

Until today.

Shepard nodded, and headed toward the neat lines of mechs. Most of the YMIRs crouched in
antigrav lifts, ready to be dropped at the head of the second wave. Without hesitating, Shepard
activated her omnitool and cracked open the control panel. It took only a few seconds to remove
the original remote command chip and install her own. She popped the panel back on, then paused,
listening.

Gunfire resounded everywhere. She could hear voices shouting amidst the chaos, trying to restore
order, but then another series of explosions rattled the warehouse windows, chaos winning over
reason for at least a few more moments. She moved on to the lift.

"The warehouse is clear, Shepard," Miranda reported as they returned.

"Good. Watch me do this one, then you two can finish the rest while I sabotage the smaller
mechs." Sealing the nervous energy trying to make her hands shake behind a wall of professional
pride, Shepard showed the other two how to replace the chips in the mechs and their lifts. Once she
watched them replace one on their own, she headed to the back of the warehouse.

She didn't have enough chips to mess up the IFF on all the smaller mechs, but three hundred
running rampant through the Suns' and Eclipse camps could do a lot of damage. She crouched next
to her first target and popped the cover.

Focusing on the work to the exclusion of all else, Shepard moved quickly down the line of
FENRIS then LOKI mechs.

"Done, Shepard," Liara called softly from across the floor.
"Excellent. Go listen at the door and let me know when the fighting dies down enough to move out." The explosions had stopped, hopefully because Vincent's team had run out of toys and headed for the staging area, rather than because they'd been caught or killed. Giving that fear a hard shove, she concentrated back on her work. By the time she finished, she could hear that the fighting had died down to a low roar. The voices of reason, berating both sides, asserted control.

"We need to move, Shepard," Miranda called. "It should be safe, and we've got minutes to report in."

Letting out a long, slow sigh, Shepard straightened and jogged across the floor, weaving between the powered down robots. Hopefully the mechs gave them enough of an advantage. If they didn't … . She shook her head and packed that fear down with the rest of them. No, she needed to believe in the plan. It would work.

Pushing between Liara and Miranda, she unlocked the door, then nodded for them to pull it open a crack. She peered out into an entirely new district. Smoke and dust rolled down the street and billowed up to gather against the ceiling high above. Debris ranging in size from skycars to gravel lay everywhere, and amidst it all … bodies.

Holy blessed sweet baby Jesus … the bodies. She squeezed her shoulder into the crack and shoved until she could wriggle through. Despite the speech she'd given Liara, and believing it completely, the horror of that street … . It shook her to the marrow in her bones.

"Dear God," Miranda whispered, the words a faint hiss between clenched teeth. "We struck the match in a hell of a powder keg."

Shepard just nodded and struck out for the far end of the street, sticking close to the side of the building. The thick, choking air should help hide them, at least. Digging into her belt pouch, she pulled out a handkerchief and held it over her nose and mouth rather than putting on her helmet. She hated the damned thing, felt blind and deaf wearing it, and for the next while, she needed to be able to see and hear.

A cool breeze of relief rippled through the smoke and coaxed a smile onto her face when she saw her people standing amidst the nervous, milling gathering of recruits. When they spotted her, they hurried over, taking up positions behind her.

"How many do you think?" she asked Vincent, the nausea and sorrow swirling around in her guts adding a phlegmy, nasal thickness to the inquiry. If the number came in under five or six hundred, she'd be shocked.

He shrugged, a tight pop of his shoulders followed by a long sigh. "Don't know, but rumours say as few as three hundred Eclipse and as many as seven hundred Suns, so the truth is probably in the middle somewhere."

Shepard stumbled, her guts lurching hard enough that for a second, she clamped a hand over her mouth. Been a long time since she'd had to massacre a couple thousand people, the callouses had peeled off.

"Hey! Meat! Over here before you lose your guts," a human male called. The man raised a hand, waving them over, his fingers crooking toward his palm. "Don't throw up on me, little one," he said, his voice grinding like tracks over gravel, and took the datapad from her hand. He read it, then looked them over. "I'm Captain Burgess, your CO for this mission. You lot look fairly competent, you'll cover the heavy mech drop." He jerked a head off to his right. "Go stand out of the way, check your weapons. We'll be heading out once the CO's figure out this fucking cock up."
He jutted his chin toward the carnage.  

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Shepard herded her ducklings off to one side and into a small custer. "Okay, we seem to be set." She closed her eyes and rolled her neck, as much impatience as relief greeting the end of their preparations. Forcing herself to face the consequences of her plan, she looked up at that rocket-riddled building across the street, and wondered how Kasumi Goto fared. None of the explosions had been big enough to have been caused by the crate bombs.  

"Listen up!" a salarian called from the end of the street. "The second wave goes ahead. Mech support team form up at the gate. Stay behind the barricade, and keep your heads down. Archangel's snipers are taking off any head that shows up in their sights." He looked past them to the human and nodded.  

"All right, meat, move it out." Burgess hopped down off the crate he'd been using as a podium and strode past them. A single finger beckoned to Shepard as he passed her. "Short stack, you and your people with me."  

Shepard bit back a chuckle, but then caught a glimpse at the expressions on Vincent and Jack and shook her head. They'd get their chance to do all sorts of clobbering soon enough. She reached behind her shoulder to grab her Mattock, settling it easily in her hand. It still wasn't Roger, but it would put bullets in the enemy with satisfying efficiency.  

They passed through the broken gate, crouching as they pushed forward through the smoke. If Archangel had thermal scopes, and she'd put a great deal of money on that, they needed to stay low. Then the barricade loomed ahead of them, three times as tall as she was and built to be hard to climb. They'd all be lucky to make it over the top without bullets through their skulls.  

Excitement began to override the fear. Her life awaited her … her old life … Anderson, Sparky … the Normandy … and him … them … whatever. It all sat so very close … almost within her grasp. White hot coals of longing burned in her chest, the ache spreading to warm her all the way to her toes.  

Climbing the barricade, she picked her way up high enough to peek over. A bridge spanned a long drop into more bridges and then other blocks of buildings lower down. Ahead of her, Archangel had turned the bridge into an obstacle course designed to slow down the mechs. She looked past, straining to see through the smoke. A small cluster of buildings stood on the other side, one ahead of the others, centered with its front door at the bridge.  

"Wait a second," she muttered, a slow scowl furrowing her brow, drawing it down low over her eyes. "I … ." She stared up at the buildings for a second, then popped up, forgetting completely about keeping behind cover. "What the fuck? I own those buildings!"  

(End A-N: So close. Monday, I hope. I really want to get back to Monday and Thursday updates. I think you can see why this one was a day late. LOL So much to this siege versus the game. Anyway, thanks as always to those who read and to those who check in and say hi. *hugs* Onward and upward!)
Chapter Summary

Omega is hell.

Petri - Petrin plural. Female turian under the age of 15

Buratrum - The realm of the spirits of dishonourable association.

Ungentira - A large warm blooded, cat-like predator native to the high mountains of Palaven. It is neither mammal or reptile, but has aspects of both, featuring a heavy, plated hide along its back, and a rich, luxurious pelt along their underside. They are ferocious predators.

Moruvesin - Winged insect analogues native to Palaven that grow to approximately 2 cms in length. Covered in articulated armour, they are very difficult to kill and have a sting that might not kill you, but it will make you wish it had.

Siligur - a grain grown and harvested on many dextro worlds. It has a high protein count and is used as a primary ingredient in dextro meal bars. Ground more finely, it is used as baking flour.

Vastator - The turian version of the bogeyman. In ancient mythology, the vastator crept through sleeping armies, threatening or tempting the soldiers to see who would turn their back on honour and their brothers/sisters. Anyone who gave in to the Vastator was immediately consumed.

Morumplacus - Restless spirit, undead, ghoul. From ancient turian folklore. The souls of those slain by dishonourable means were believed to wander after death to exact justice. They were believed to torment the living by taking the form of whatever the victim feared most.

Praela(s) - The name for ancient warrior spirits who were believed to ride great beasts (or forces of nature) into war at the head of their tribe's legions. Spirits of great bravery, tenacity, and a fearsome beauty.

26 Days ASR

Muted thumps echoed around his head, and for a moment, as they tossed him back and forth, he almost barked at his assailant to stop treating his head like a drum kit. Almost, but he didn't possess the energy to force the words from his throat. Then the seal on his helmet clicked and he realized that his mugger moved with purpose. Someone hit the retractor button, and lifted it free. He gagged at the stench that rolled in, replacing the air conditioned pleasantness with hot and fetid air, heavy with the reek of excrement, urine, charred flesh, decay, and burned out heat sinks.

"Give me back my helmet," he muttered, blindly groping for it. His talons bumped off his armour and the table beside him, numb and clumsy. "Can't breathe."

A blurry, white shape moved in front of him and gave him a gentle push toward a chair. "Sit, you're far too tall, and you'll crush me if you fall over on me."

He did as he was told, his limbs numb and wooden, folding like rusty hinges until his ass hit the
seat of the chair. A slow gurgle of agony trickled out through his second larynx when his calf muscles and the ones along the inside of his thighs seized solid as stone the moment his weight released them. He needed to make it stop. Pushing through the fog, he tried to puzzle out how to do that.

"You've been wielding a firearm like this?" A foul curse and rummaging sounds followed. "Are you experiencing muscle spasms?" Chakwas shoved her face into his line of sight. He nodded, his focus lazy as it slid over to meet her concern. She didn't wait for an answer before she gave him a shot. "This will help with that."

He winced back and threw a hand up to ward off the sun she shone straight into his eyes. "Spirits, Doc. I can't fight blind." Tears rolled out of his seared and branded eyeballs as she shoved his hand out of the way.

"Stay focused on the end of my nose." Blinding him once again, she flicked it up and down, then left and right. At no point did he see even the slightest sign of her nose. A soft sigh-grunt preceded her next order. "Now, follow it."

He did his best to follow the light up and down then side to side, but his eyes kept drifting closed, shield doors dropping to ward off the laser-sharp brilliance.

"You're blind because your pupils are reacting too sluggishly. You need to sleep for at least a couple of hours." She took him by the shoulders and shook him. "General! Eyes front, soldier. You're exhausted to the point of collapse. I'm ordering you to lie down."

It took mental crowbars to force his eyelids open, but her face slowly drew into focus before him. "I just need stims, Doc. I'm fine." He smacked his mouth a couple of times, not sure if she'd understood any of the slur that had tangling around his teeth and tongue on its way out. Spirits, did he ever. He'd been up longer, fought harder, surely. How long had it been since he last slept? Surely not more than twenty-four hours. "How long has it been since the attack started?"

Chakwas stepped back, leaning on one hip, her arms crossed in her patented concern pose. "Twenty-eight hours." A slight shake of her head closed his mouth, although he couldn't recall what he intended to say. She leaned forward a little. "I have a reliable source that says you haven't left your post that entire time except to run to provide support on the ground floor. Step back for a few minutes, Garrus." Chakwas laid a hand on his shoulder. "You're dangerously dehydrated, you haven't eaten in over a day, and you've taken too many stims. If I give you another, you're going to start hallucinating, maybe even have seizures."

The general tried to form an argument, but after twenty-eight hours of fighting, and being up hours ahead of that going over reports, he conceded the doctor her point. Turning to the interior of the room, he hollered, "Need replacement on sniper blind."

The young drell in the repainted Suns' armour ran up, a shiny new Mantis in his hands. "Cadet Krios reporting for duty, sir." His sea-blue skin flushed pink at all the lighter spots, his entire body trembling. Some combination of nerves and eagerness, Garrus felt certain. Spirits, had any of them ever been that young?

"You're a sniper?" Garrus cocked a brow plate at the kid. The old, familiar claws sank into his gut. No. The kid was too young, too eager. He'd just get himself killed.

"Yes, sir, General." He gestured toward his armour. "Good enough that when I got here from the Citadel, the Suns recruited me." Excitement transmogrified into fury and disgust in a heartbeat. "Then Tarak said that when we got in here, we were supposed to kill everyone, even the civilians
and the families … kids … mothers." His jaw set and his eyes flashed as he nodded. "First chance, I sneaked across the bridge. I want to help, General, and I can shoot."

"Thank you," Chakwas said, her voice soft. "You'll do fine, young man, just stay behind cover." The doc gave Garrus another injection. "This one is electrolytes, absorption enhancers, and a mild, short-acting sedative. By the time you eat, it'll start hitting you hard, so move." She backed up a step, then shook her head.

"What?" Glancing around nervously, trying to place the reason for her sudden misgivings.

"If I send you downstairs, you're going to end up sleeping next to Nihlus and Zaeed at the dinner table. Marcie has been trying to wake them up and move them to beds for two hours." She stepped up and started popping seals on his armour.

The general bristled and reached up to push her hands away. He could sleep in armour, he'd done it plenty of times before. If the gangs attacked, he needed to be able to react instantly. The doctor just brushed aside his pathetic attempts and continued.

"I'm just removing your pauldrons and yoke. You'll sleep better without them." She set the offending bits of armour under the table, then slid a hand under his arm. "Come on." Despite her words and posture, she didn't lift, but looked away, her gaze scanning the busy room. "I need a courier here!" she bellowed, then turned back and helped him stand.

His legs felt as though they belonged to someone else as she guided him to a cot and sat him down. "Shouldn't you be helping the wounded instead of nurse maiding me?" he asked, pulling loose of her grip. He sorted himself, mostly just out of pique.

She let out an almost turian chuff. "General Victus called me. He said you were doing your best to make sure you died somewhere close to the head of the line during this siege. I'm not going to stand before Jane Shepard in the afterlife and explain how I allowed that to happen. So shut up, eat your food, and get three hours of sleep. No less." She glared into his eyes, the very model of stubborn self righteousness, until he nodded, relenting.

"Courier, Dr. Chakwas?" a young petri called, running over.

"Get the general some hot food and a big glass of that wretched juice he likes," the doctor ordered without turning away. "And quickly, before he falls asleep." She laid a hand on the top of Garrus's head. "Make sure you eat before you sleep. Your body needs to spend that time rebuilding, not eating itself alive."

When he nodded, too weary to argue, she turned and hurried from the room, her hand lifting to her radio … no doubt getting a call to help with someone who really needed medical attention. Garrus groaned as he settled back a little further on the cot. He must be getting old.

When the courier brought him his meal, he smiled thanks at the youngster, taking note of the dull cast to her eyes. "How long have you been running?" he asked.

"Ten hours or so, sir," she gave him a wide, proud grin. "I'm good for another couple. My mari always says I have too much energy for my own good."

His stomach growled as he inhaled the glorious scent of whatever she'd given him … some sort of spicy stew by the look of it … then nodded. "My filiam always did too. What's your name?" Spirits, she reminded him of Sol … the bright spark of life, the body in constant motion … the sweetness.

"Neetara." She looked down, her mandibles spreading a little in a bashful smile. "My mari works
in the gardens, and my pari is down below with the others. They said we needed to help you
protect everyone." She bobbed her head a little. "Thank you, sir."

He held up his bowl and smiled. "Thank you, Neetara." After eating a ladleful, he nodded toward
the balcony. "You stay safe and keep back from the windows."

Grin widening, she nodded again and backed away a few steps. "I will, sir. You stay safe too." She
stared into his eyes for a moment, then turned, hurrying off toward another call for a courier.

After the first couple of bites, Garrus's body clicked over into starving ungentira mode, and he
finished off the rest of the stew so quickly that he barely tasted it. Belly full, he drank down his
juice then fell over onto the cot, the doctor's 'mild' sedative hitting him like a runaway freighter. He
sorted himself then fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chaos dragged Garrus from sleep and into a heavy, blurred fog. For a moment, he laid there, his
entire body fighting to return down the dark tunnel into sleep. Just another hour and—

Shouts, screaming, explosions, gunfire.

He leapt off the cot and ran over, sliding the last few metres across the floor to take cover next to
Nihlus. "What's going on? Are they attacking again?" Easing himself up off the floor, he peered
over the balcony. Other than a few mercenaries at the top of the barricade milling around, shouting back
and forth, he saw no sign of attack.

Then explosions … three more, flames erupting from the far end of the street. Gun fire broke out,
people screaming in fear and pain … CO's bellowing. What in the name of buratrum … ?

"It's an attack all right," Nihlus said, a faint chuckle chasing the words out. "But they're attacking
one another." His head bobbed. "Looks like they couldn't stand being in such close quarters."

Garrus nodded and rolled over, crawling over to his armour. Once away from the open expanse of
balcony, he stood and retrieved his armour from under his blind. Once he had it all sealed in place,
helmet back on, cool air flowing over his face once more, he lifted his gun from the rack next to
the table and looked up at the drell youngster.

"Cadet Krios, you are relieved. Go get yourself a drink and some food." Garrus stepped back to
give the kid room to hop down.

"Thank you, sir, I was getting a little hungry." Krios stood, and turned, a weary grin on his face.

"No! Kid, stay behind the—" Garrus lunged forward and grabbed the drell's armour to drag him
down, but before he could, the all too familiar report of a sniper rifle cracked across the deserted
bridge.

Blood bloomed red and bright, an obscene display of colour against the white paint covering the
front of the blue armour. Krios tumbled forward, but Garrus caught him on his way to the floor.
Dark eyes latched onto the general, wide and terrified, seeking solace and hope, searching for a
face behind the blank faceplate of Garrus's helmet.

"How bad is it?" the drell gasped, his heavily flanged voice thick and wet. He coughed, spraying a
mist of red speckles across the blue-greens of his face.

Unable to force either the truth or a lie to answer the question, Garrus crouched and laid the youth
down, using his thigh as a backrest. "Let's get a medic over here," he said, wishing a smile showed
through the faceplate to make up for exhaustion and shock draining all the inflection from his
voice. "Medic!"

The geth hurried over to crouch next to them and ran a scanner over the drell. A single shake of its head told Garrus what he already knew. Still, the general hit the kid's medigel control, it would provide pain relief if nothing else. When it dinged, he hit it again.

The kid laughed, just a harsh cough that sprayed more blood. "That bad, huh?" Garrus tried to get up. He needed to get the young sniper moved upstairs. Who knew, maybe the docs could save him. "Transport! I need transport for wounded here!" He slid his leg out from behind the kid's back, preparing to lift him into a cradle carry.

"Please … " The drell coughed again, his slender form trembling hard from shock and pain. "... don't leave me?" One slender hand gripped the cowl of Garrus's armour, a grip weak with blood loss—the general could lift it away without the slightest effort—but its tenacity … the sheer will to live behind it, made it impossible to budge.

Garrus glanced toward the balcony. Things seemed to have calmed, the attack inside the merc camps diverting their attention for the time being. His people slumped against the wall, taking the chance to rest. Kitchen crew proved their ingenuity, rolling through the room, lying face down on their antigrav lifts, pushing coolers of water and food ahead of them. The young drell just had the bad luck to be the last casualty of the first wave. "How are we doing up there?" he called, finding his fratrin still standing guard behind the opposite blind.

Nihlus glanced over and shrugged. "No one near the bridge or barrier, the last of them took off after their command tents exploded."

The general nodded and reached up to remove his helmet. He set it up on the table and glanced around. All the transports had wounded or bodies on them already, their bearers pushing them toward the stairs. Regret surged through Garrus's veins, his heart slowing a beat for every body being dragged up to the makeshift morgues. Soon, this … child's would join them, his name just one of hundreds. Garrus crouched and slid his arms under the wounded child. "What's your name, Cadet Krios?"

Garrus leaned into the general's chest. "Kolyat Krios."

Garrus lifted him off the floor, wincing at the lad's bellow of pain. "Come on, Kolyat, let's get you up to the hospital." As he walked to the door, Garrus looked back over to see Nihlus watching him. "I'll be back down in a few minutes. Call me if anything changes."

The Spectre just nodded, his expression inscrutable behind the tinted faceplate, but his entire posture screaming exhaustion and sorrow. Careful of his burden, Garrus pushed through the flow of bodies coming and going, just managing to squeeze into the elevator before the doors closed.

"Hospital, sir?" a voice asked out of the crush. Garrus just nodded. Where else would he be going?

Kolyat curled into Garrus, his head resting between the general's upper arm and chest. "I wish I'd had a chance to see my father again," he whispered. He opened his mouth to speak again, but only thick, blood-soaked coughs escaped. When they eased around the tenth floor, he sighed. "He left me after my mother died." Those black, fathomless eyes latched onto Garrus's again. "I tried to to find him. Found out he was some sort of assassin."

Garrus just took a deep breath and nodded. "He wanted to protect you from his life," he replied. "Didn't want you to follow his path. He'd be proud you came here to defend innocent lives." The numbers on the control passed slowly … too slowly.
"Why didn't he love me, General?" the kid whispered, his focus drifting toward the ceiling. His
breaths slowed, blood whispering from the corner of his lips and bubbling from the wound. Damn
it, they were moving too slowly.

Garrus forced the frustration aside and leaned close, his voice a harsh whisper. "He did, Kolyat. He
does. I know he does."

"How?" The black eyes drifted closed, tears smearing the blood into pale rivers across the child's
face.

The control for the hospital level lit up. Finally. "Did you stop loving him?" the general asked,
shifting toward the doors. Open! Spirits, why were they taking so long?

Kolyat tugged weakly at Garrus's cowl. "Never. I adored him. Wanted to be just like him."

Garrus answered that with a decisive nod. "There you go. No matter how far apart and how angry
we get, fathers and sons … we still always love one another." The doors opened to a hallway
jammed with people and transports, beds, and chairs, all full of wounded. "Hold on, kid, we're
almost there."

Garrus shoved his way out less carefully than he'd pushed into the carriage. "Make way!" he
shouted, pushing his way into the throng. "Come on, make a path, people."

"Kalahira ... mistress of inscrutable depths ... I ask forgiveness," the kid whispered then laughed, a
faint, sorrowful panting sound. "Sorry, Dad … that's all I … remember." He let out a short, soft
exhale, and Garrus knew he didn't need to hurry.

Letting his head sag, Garrus slowed, weaving through the press rather than pushing. He nodded,
beckoning to the first free transport bearer, laying out the kid's body on the stretcher. "Sorry about
that, kid." Laying a hand on the scaled brow, he bowed his head. "I hope your mother is waiting."

"Garrus," Nihlus called, dragging Garrus from his half-formed prayer, "they're starting to mass
behind the barrier for the second wave."

"On my way," Garrus answered and straightened, turning his back on the child he'd barely known,
but who had somehow managed to gut him in five minutes flat. Maybe it was the father issues …
maybe … maybe it was such a senseless, stupid death coming after not nearly enough sleep. He
stepped into the elevator and leaned against the railing, the trip down seeming to take a quarter of
the time it took to go up.

"Did the lad make it?" Adrien asked, meeting Garrus halfway across the floor of what had been the
upstairs lounge, but looked more like an abattoir.

Fury and sick, helpless frustration snapped and snarled, lunging at the end of its leash. Garrus just
shook his head, not trusting that his hostility wouldn't break free and attack the other general.

Victus laid a hand on his shoulder, the weight supportive but pressure-free. "Did you know him?"

Garrus twisted away, his words coming out snarling, his sub-vocals heavy with a volatile
combination of sorrow, fury, and betrayal as he replied, "No, but it doesn't matter, does it? They're
all the same. Too young, too inexperienced, too innocent to even realize why they're dying." He
swept furious talons toward the balcony. "They lured away all the fighters, left us here with the
rawest." Spinning a slow circle, Garrus looked around, his gaze slipping over the smeared and
puddled blood, the wounds bleeding so many colours on so many faces … the empty places where
friends should be … friends now lined up under tarpas.
"Everyone left here is either an old friend," he snapped, "or kids too young to realize that the fucking universe doesn't give a shit about any of this." Turning his back on his people, he stumbled over to pick up his helmet.

Victus grabbed him by the shoulders and spun him around, pressing his face in tight against Garrus's. "Yes, it hurts every time, and yes, let it make you good and damned angry, but don't let it strip the heart out of you. Never let them get that far in, Garrus." He reached up, his hand wrapping around the back of Garrus's neck, just below the fringe. "Never let them that far in. You keep your heart locked up for this part, so that when it's over, you unlock it and still remember how to live."

"How many have died in your arms, crying for their fathers?" Garrus demanded, both hands gripping Victus's cowl.

The other general let out a soft, low keen. "Too damned many. Too many, General. But I'm still here, twenty cycles later, and I'll still be here twenty cycles from now, because I know how hard I fight for every one of them." Victus pressed his brow to Garrus's. "I don't trust anyone else to fight as hard or to care as much. Do you?"

Sucking in a long and shaky, but bracing, breath, Garrus pulled back. He shook his head, clearing away the last of the rage with another long breath. He patted the cowl of Adrien's armour then released him. "No, I don't. Thank you."

The torin nodded, his mandibles flicking in a quick smile. "That's why I'm here," he replied, keeping his voice low and mostly sub-vocals to keep the words between the two of them. "This is the shit, and the guts, and the grind of command that no one tells you about." He slapped his hand against the armour over Garrus's heart. "Lock it up for the fight, and the second you put the guns down, open it back up. Don't let it get hard. That doesn't honour anyone."

The general patted the back of Garrus's neck a couple of times. "I'm going to go grab some food. If they're getting ready for another wave, it's going to be a while before I get another chance." He turned toward the door to the stairs. "Want anything?"

"No. Thanks." Garrus walked over to the puddle of Kolyat Krios's blood and lifted Ingrid off the floor. "Clean up by the west blind!" he called, then hopped up onto the table.

Garrus lifted Ingrid into the slit at the top of the blind and settled her stock into the space between armour sections. Taking a couple of deep breaths, he settled himself, letting all thought and worry drift out of his head. He needed calm, he needed emptiness, to become a creature of action and reaction, pure skill-driven reflex.

Chaos still ruled in the Blue Suns and Eclipse camps. Humans, asari, batarians, salarians, and turians milled about, the fighting over, but the smoke and dust choked air still crackled with hostility. Behind the barricade, he spotted movement: mercs slinking into position to start the second wave. Garrus pulled a long breath of cold, clean air in through his nostrils. At least they culled their own numbers before the attack. The gangs had come at them fairly easy the first time, mostly testing defenses, getting a read on where they could strike hardest. The second wave would most likely sweep Archangel right off Omega.

Garrus alerted to movement at his end of the barricade. Someone peeking over the top, doing a little recon. He scowled, watching them … no, her. Definitely a her as she popped up, head and shoulders above the top of the barricade, her posture almost comical, like a preteril popping out of its burrow to stand on its hind legs.

He reached up to tweak the focus—damn Shepard and her insistence on manual focus—the side of
the human woman's head appearing sharp and distinct in the crosshairs as she looked down, speaking to someone. His talon tightened on the trigger. She turned to look up at the balcony, then dropped down, disappearing behind the barricade.

Ingrid sank slowly from his shoulder, his brain frozen on the image of that face. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Too little sleep. Taking a long, ragged breath, he realized that he'd been holding it. Spirits. She looked just like ... An ancient, poisoned dagger slipped between his plates, the edge so sharp it barely hurt as it pierced his heart ... at least until he tried to take another breath.

A keen erupted from his throat, so piercing that every eye on the floor turned to look at him and so loud that it echoed out into Omega's eternal twilight.

"Why now?" he whispered. Thoughts spun, tumbling over one another, trying to find an explanation that didn't include losing his mind.

Hallucinations ... Dr. Chakwas said something about stims giving him hallucinations. Grabbing onto that simple explanation—and his sanity—with both hands, he closed his eyes and took another breath. He wasn't seeing Shepard. His Kahri was dead, and he knew that to be true. That face amounted to nothing more than the stims messing with his mind.

"Here they come. Big mechs rolling in," Nihlus called. "Everyone to the lines. Repeat, all guns to the lines. Support crews and second line, stand by."

Garrus glanced toward his fratrin, wondering what Nihlus had seen and why he hadn't taken the shot. The woman had been standing in plain view ... an easy shot. Why hadn't Nihlus taken it?

He lifted Ingrid to his shoulder, clenched his teeth, and steeled himself. The next time that head appeared in his scope, it dropped.

Droning like a swarm of huge moruvesin, the merc's antigrav lifts soared over the barricade, dropping their deadly burdens on the bridge. Three ... six ... nine ... twelve ... fifteen. Spirits. As his heart stopped in recognition of their imminent deaths, he glanced toward Nihlus only to see his fratrin staring back at him.

Nihlus took a deep breath and nodded. Garrus replied in kind, a grim sort of smile passing between them as the Spectre reached for his helmet and put it on, sealing it in place. If it was their time, it was their time. They'd done what they could, put together a force that really could have given the Reapers a fight had they been given a little longer to prepare. A little more support couldn't have hurt either.

He faced front and brought Ingrid to his shoulder, settling her comfortably ... an old friend ... a last connection to his reason for being there in the first place. Cold, grim smile softening a little, he cracked his neck and sighted down the scope, ready to give them hell. Dying wasn't the worst outcome for the day. Kahri would be there waiting. He grinned, a soft keen rolling through his subvocals. Maybe that was what he'd seen ... his love coming to escort him home. Spirits, he hoped that was what he'd seen.

The YMIRs unfolded, their arms locking into firing positions. Garrus put two bullets in the head of one of the lead ones before the Eclipse began to leap over the barricade. No, not Eclipse ... none of them wore uniforms. Meat sent to soak up bullets and keep Archangel pinned down so the mechs could move in. Innocent blood still wetting the front of his armour, Garrus focused his fire on the mechs, taking down one of the lead rank and the three unfortunate freelancers who happened to be running into cover next to it as it exploded.
"The mechs aren't firing," someone yelled. "Why aren't they firing?"

"How did I miss that?" he whispered. And then he saw her. Draped over the top of the barricade, several others at her side, she worked away on her omnitool. She lifted her head, a wide grin spreading across her face. Before he could even wonder about it, the mechs all turned, their guns lifting, but facing toward the barricade.

A stunned sort of silence dropped over the bridge as the freelancers suddenly faced five lines of twin mass accelerator cannons. For one second, they froze, then the YMIRs opened fire, shredding the mercs hirelings like a thresher harvesting *siligur.*

"Oh shit!" The woman's yelp carried even over the mech fire, drawing his scope back to her. She was leaping down from the barricade, a small squad on her six, the lot of them diving for cover. The woman's head popped up, looking around, then she shoved one of her people out, sending them to the next cover forward. Eclipse behind her, pouring over the barricade in force … the mechs and Archangel in front of her, she raced from cover to cover. She dashed behind a tall crate, then leaned out, the N7 patch on her armour as clear as day.

Short, red hair flashing in the light … the sharp, pixie face with its busted up nose … it was Shepard's face. But how? Clone? Doppelganger created through surgery?

Then the connection clicked inside Garrus's head and all expression drained from his face. Ice crackling through his heart, he finally put together the pieces. Dammit. Anderson and Nihlus … the silences … the hesitations in their communications … . She was the reason.

Garrus lifted Ingrid out of the slot in the sniper blind and spun. Still crouched, he dropped down off the table and stormed across the balcony. Although aware of the bullets hitting his shields, he didn't let them get in the way of his anger as he bulled in behind Nihlus's blind.

Garrus shoved Ingrid into the Spectre's hands. "Explain this to me, Nihlus." He waited, a brow plate raised. Rage and terror and horror all launched weapons of mass destruction at one another as that tiny impossibility raced to new cover, dodging a rocket from one of the mechs. He grabbed Nihlus by the yoke and spun him around to face the phantom working her way closer and closer to base.

The Spectre just handed the rifle back. "She saved us on Freedom's Progress," he replied, simply. He took a deep breath that exaggerated his exhaustion rather than lifting it. "She's the reason Ashley called me after the Collectors attacked the Cerberus base. The chief saw her evacuating a group of people."

Fury won the initial salvo, and Garrus lunged toward his *fratrin.* "And no one thought to tell me that Cerberus had created this fake Shepard before she showed up at my door?" His throat closed as the sound of her voice echoed up from below as she called to her people, moving them in on the base. "What is she?"

Nihlus stepped into him, gripping his shoulders. His mandibles dropped and spread, his subvocals thrumming comfort and understanding. "Would you have thanked me for telling you about her while you were on Tuchanka? Or while you were on your way back here?" Ignoring the rigid spines that Garrus threw between them, Nihlus leaned in to rest the brow of his helmet against his *fratrin's.* "I don't know who or what she is, but … " He pulled away and gestured toward the devastated camps … the mechs cutting down Eclipse and Blue Suns faster than they could run. "... she's saving us again, Garrus."

Horror launched a second sortie, beating the others to the punch and Garrus reeled back. "You
don't believe it's Shepard." Forgetting he was wearing it, he lifted his hand, raking his talons along his helmet. "You know she's dead, Nihlus." He stumbled back another couple of steps, stopping when his thigh hit the table he'd been sitting on moments before. "You know that Shepard … our Shepard is dead."

Nihlus nodded and turned to stand against the wall at the end of the balcony, peering out around the cover. "I know, but Garrus … she called Alenko by his nickname without the slightest hesitation, and she was hailing the Enkindlers and spouting sweet baby Jesus … ." Nihlus leaned out a little. "And look at her. The way she moves … the decisions she makes," He glanced Garrus's way, his expression unreadable through the heavily tinted faceplate. "She insisted on getting us clear before taking on the mechs, even though the dark-haired woman was yelling at her to leave us."

Garrus glanced out past his cover. The pretender had almost all of her people behind the closest cover. True, she looked like Shepard, and she moved like Shepard … the aura and flavour of her command was Shepard … . No. It amounted to the worst sort of madness: him lying to himself, tricking himself. He shook his head hard enough that pain flared behind his eyes and made him feel as though his nose bled. No, he wouldn't let himself get sucked into Nihlus's delusion. He held Kahri as she died. He held her hand for three days. Dead was dead.

The enemy had more than proven their dedication to destroying Archangel over the past week, this woman merely the next shot in a battle that wouldn't end until either the Reapers or Archangel lie in ruins. It was a strange ploy, unless she was some sort of sleeper agent … an assassin or some sort of bomb meant to take them out. He lifted Ingrid to his shoulder and sighted down the tiny, redder-doppelganger. She activated her omnitool, and he zoomed in to see the interface. Mech controls.

She'd bought their reprieve, and more than likely turned the gangs on one another as well. Okay, so she wasn't working for the council. He couldn't see them unleashing a sleeper agent who obliterated most of their attack force. Cerberus, then … trying to get back inside Archangel, but to take control of it. That would not happen. He'd burn the whole thing down and throw himself into the pits of *buratrum* first.

The fake Shepard alerted to something on the other side of the barricade the moment before he registered the sudden quiet. The mechs and Eclipse had stopped firing at one another. He watched her, frantically tapping away at the interface glowing on her forearm.

"What is it, Shepard?" a dark-haired human woman shouted from the next cover. He glanced her way as her shout carried. "We need to keep moving in!"

"They're going to blow the barricade," the fake Shepard hollered back. "Damn it. I don't think Miss Goto made it through. Her presents should have gone off already. I've got to trigger the mechs in the camp and get these bastards into a holding line."

As she spoke, the remaining YMIRs stomped down the bridge, shoving aside the obstacles in their path. They lined up shoulder to shoulder across the center of the bridge. She—the redheaded commander gave the darkhaired woman a wave, ordering her and a second individual in strange-looking armour into the last piece of cover a few metres in front of the building.

"They're blowing the barricade," the fake Shepard hollered, looking up. After searching for a moment, she locked onto Garrus's sniper blind. "I've sabotaged about half their LOKI and FENRIS mechs, but they're probably covering for a heavy Blood Pack push in the tunnels." She glanced behind her as the barricade at the far end of the bridge exploded, tearing a huge hole through the center. She launched herself over her cover and took up a firing position, her Mattock aimed
toward the breach.

"One of your people, a Kasumi Goto took four pretty massive bombs into enemy territory, but I don't know if she got through," she called, glancing back toward the balcony again. "She was going to try to take out their varren."

Garrus lifted a leg up onto the table and turned his back to lean against the wall, unable to look at her any more. Whoever … whatever that was … it was an insult … an abomination. He took a deep breath, clenched his teeth and reached up to his radio. "East balcony, sitrep."

"We're holding over here, General. Getting a chance to take a fucking breather," Zaeed barked back, his voice even more coarse than usual from shouting orders. "Goddamn mechs are keeping the Suns back, and now there … are … . Just a goddamned second." Garrus heard banging and then running footsteps. "What the bloody hell is that?" Muffled shouts reported back. Zaeed sniffed, deep enough to have sucked his brain out through his sinuses, hawked, and spat. Garrus winced, but then the merc was shouting in his ear again.

"Hundreds of the little mechs marching through the Suns' camp, shooting the shit out of them. The merc bastards are massing in the small park space at the end of the bridge, forming a line to hold them off. What the hell is going on out there, General? Did our fucking ships make it back? Is it our people?" He hawked again. "Keep the line solid. Don't let the fucking mechs do all the work, goddammit. Keep an eye on those Suns … they're starting to push in on the bridge!"

Garrus nearly choked on his desire to just say Shepard's name … to shout from the roof of the building that his love had come back to save them all. Instead he swallowed hard, managing to force words past the morass of betrayal and disgust. "Small outside squad. Looks like Cerberus. Keep your eyes open. Vakarian out."

He glanced over at Nihlus, unable to make himself look out. "What's going on?"

The Spectre didn't look away from the scene below. "The YMIRs and her squad are holding back the Eclipse and the unfriendly mechs." He chuckled as a sniper rifle cracked the air, the echo snapping back and forth off the buildings. "She sure shoots like Shepard."

"It's not Shepard. For fuck's sake, Nihlus." He opened a channel to the west balcony, where Butler reported the same situation. The big mechs protecting the building, Blue Suns setting up lines just beyond the end of the bridge to hold off the hundreds of renegade mechs.

"Martin, sitrep," he called, changing channels and doing his best to ignore the consistent bark of the sniper rifle below … and the running commentary from one of the members of the forgery's squad.

"All right, this time you're definitely going to fucking miss," the young woman crowed. "No way anyone gets that many fucking headshots in a row."

Garrus closed his eyes and focused on blocking it out. The channel opened, quick, ragged breaths blowing hard. Footsteps. Underneath that, the constant chatter and cough of rifles.

"Martin? Weaver, do you read me? Respond."

inhalation.

Finally . . . "We're holding, General. Mostly by our fingernails, but we're holding. Just drove back another wave of vorcha and varren." He lapsed into a choking fit. "They have flame throwers, set fire to … fucking everything. Then sent the varren in." He coughed for a good thirty seconds, then took another drink. "How are things up there? Can you spare anyone?"

"We've caught a reprieve up here. Someone coming in from the outside. Small squad . . . six people, but they hacked some of the Eclipse mechs." Garrus didn't have to focus on blocking out the outside, the pain and exhaustion in every one of Martin's breaths latched meathooks into his guts, pulling him down into that burning hell. "I'll send you who I can. The Blood Pack might be making a heavy push here in a few minutes. Can you hold for a half hour or so until we see if the lull up here is going to take?"

Martin grunted. Scrambling and metal scraping against metal, the ceramic ring of armour accompanied the kid shoving himself back to his feet. He started coughing again. "Where's the fucking medic?" he called. "I need stims and something for my lungs." More scuffling. "Yeah, General, we can hold that long, but we could sure use a few miracles. Wrex's krogan are down to half. The ornery old bastard is still up, but both Mierin and Grundan are dead. We all would be if that crazy bastard of a salarian didn't run those explosives down the tunnel." More choking.

Then. "Where the hell have you been? We've got dozens of smoke inhalation cases in the tunnel. Get down there . . . give them shots, and tell them to get their fucking helmets on."

Garrus heard the kid's breathing smooth out a little, a little banging and clattering as he put his helmet on. It sealed. Garrus cleared his throat. "If anything changes, let me know immediately," he ordered. "And kid . . . take care of yourself."

"Yes, sir. Weaver, out."

A sharp ache stabbed through Garrus's teeth as the channel closed. Forcing his jaw open, he stretched out the muscles. His people were dying down there, he couldn't just sit around with his mouth hanging open while waiting to see what that fake Shepard had in store.

"Friendlies incoming!" that voice bellowed from below. "Please, hold your fire."

Garrus's radio signaled an incoming transmission on the command channel. "General? Nihlus? Either of you there?" Nyreen called. "We've got someone saying she's Jane Shepard at the front door asking permission to come in." She paused. "Do you want me to shoot whoever the hell this is?"

For long seconds, the order rattled around between his front teeth and the tip of his tongue. One bullet to the head, and he wouldn't have to deal with her. He'd never have to look into her eyes and see someone else looking back from the face . . . . He swallowed and slammed his talons into his helmet again trying to rake his fringe.

Spirits, the universe just never seemed to run out of sadistic ways to play with him. One bullet and that sick joke would end before it got a chance to tear his guts out and strew them across Omega. He opened his mouth to give the order, but no sound came out.

"She saved us, Garrus," Nihlus said, cutting into the channel, his voice soft and expressionless, even his subvocals dead and flat. "More than once. She doesn't deserve to just be gunned down regardless of who she is."
Garrus grunted and jerked his head in a single nod, but couldn't grind the order past his teeth. He could no more just let her in than he could give the order to execute her in cold blood.

"Let them in, Instructor Kandros," Nihlus replied. "Escort them up here, please." The Spectre looked back out over the bridge, his rifle couched securely into his shoulder. "Bridge is still clear. The big mechs are holding them back."

Turning toward the stairs, Garrus stumbled backward until his thighs ran into the edge of his blind. It wasn't Shepard. He could face down this golem, get some answers, and then . . . . He chuffed. And then what? Send her on her way? Shoot her? What did he do with her?

He heard her speaking to her people, warning one of them to leave his gun on his back and reassuring another that everything would be fine.

"We're here to find allies, Jack, if not friends, and shockwaving the lot of them probably not going to help with that process," she was saying as she appeared over the interior balcony's low wall, climbing the stairs.

Garrus lifted Ingrid to get a close up look at the woman . . . no not a woman . . . she was a thing . . . a vastator sent to tempt and consume him. She turned his way for a half second, his gut clenching when he saw the web of deep wounds, her flesh cracked like mud flats in a drought. What in the pits of buratrum . . . ? Try as he might to keep a wall of ice erected between them, those wounds . . .

Agony must hunt her like a pack of deranged klixen. He focused in on the glow that escaped through the horrible fissures in her flesh. Cybernetics. She wasn't a VI. Too much independent thought and action. Maybe an AI? But the body . . . ? Liquid nitrogen flushed through his veins. Dear spirits, please not that. Damn the human navy and their burial at sea. His beautiful, fierce little praela being twisted into some sort of morumplacus . . . . He'd kill them all.

At least, if they constructed a monster, the cybernetics and lack of true brain function would preclude the vastator feeling the pain of the wounds that covered her face and neck. However, as he watched her move, he saw a careful edge to the casual swagger . . . the minute winces that she tried to hide when she turned or bent. No, not some undead robot. Torment was that woman's closest and most constant companion.

"Trust me," the tiny redhead doppelganger said as the small part entered the lounge. She turned to look behind her. "I own these buildings. Aria gave them to me . . . " She turned to face front, her words dropping off as she scanned the room. "... when I saved . . . "

Garrus kept Ingrid held tight to his shoulder even as he moved his eye away from the scope as the vastator's gaze landed on him and froze. Mouth hanging slack, she just gawked at him for long seconds before finishing her sentence.

"... her daughter."

How did she know about that? Garrus's head reeled, his heart racing so quickly that he swayed, dizziness hitting him hard and fast. Damn it! Giving his neck a vicious crack to pull himself back together, he focused . . . the reason for the imposter's apparent memories bringing up the rear of the small group. For a second, his finger twitched next to the trigger as the traitorous blue face stared into his scope, going pale with recognition. His finger twitched again, and in his mind's eye, Garrus saw the bullet leave Ingrid's muzzle, the crack as she fired, glorious and final . . . then violet blood erupted out the back of the asari's head, splattering the walls. The body dropped.
Garrus slammed his eyes shut against the vision, horror sending a surge of vomit rolling up his throat. Swallowing hard, he managed to keep it down, the burn shaming him as he reopened his eyes.

*You're not a cold-blooded murderer. You've been down the road that ends in rage and blood, and you swore you'd never go back.*

Liara opened her mouth, no sound came out, but she shook her head, her expression pleading with him not to make any hasty decisions.

"Sweet baby Jesus," the vastator gasped, taking a step toward him.

Garrus snapped Ingrid around so her crosshairs rested between the forgery's eyes. Instead of showing fear at having a gun trained on her brow, the fake Shepard grinned, her face lighting up with an expression of almost painfully intense joy.

"Blessed Enkindlers, there you are!" She lunged forward a step. "I never thought I'd see you again." She laughed, high and bright, a sound of sheer delight, and she rushed toward him. "I've been so worried about you."

For a half second, Garrus slipped his talon over the trigger, but then the rifle disappeared from his hands. He stumbled back, his armour scraping along the edge of the table, as she cradled the weapon in her arms.

"Ingrid! Oh man, I've been so worried about you. But … where's the old man?" The fake Shepard looked up at him, her eyes filled with hope. Those eyes. His heart contracted around the dagger as she asked, "Do you have Roger too?" Without waiting for an answer, she turned a slow circle, looking over the room, the joy fading from her brutalized face, melting into suspicion and uncertainty.

"You have my gun," she whispered, backing away from him a step, one hand drawing an arc around her to indicate the room. "You've built my dream in the buildings I own … ." She turned another slow circle, stopping when she spotted Nihlus standing behind the sniper blind. Moving toward him a couple of steps, she cocked her head. "You were on Freedom's Progress," she said, her tone hard and commanding. "Are you the one in charge?"

"He's not," Garrus replied, finding his voice at last. Taking a deep breath, he took Adrien's advice, locking away his emotions the best he could. It wasn't Shepard. He'd foiled the rest of the enemy's plans to take him out. The vastator in front of him was no different. "I am, and since we aren't the ones wearing a dead woman's face, we aren't the ones who owe anyone an explanation."

She spun around, stumbling backwards as she faced him, the soles of her boots grinding through the thick layer of grit that covered the tiles. One hand floated up to press against her temple, her expressions flipping through emotions so quickly that he scarcely recognized one before another pushed it aside. "Wha … ?"

She pressed her eyes closed, her entire face seeming to collapse around them. Ingrid slipped from her hand to clatter on the floor. "Why can't I drive you away?" she whispered, the words coming out slowly, each seeming to hesitate inside her mouth, as if she needed to taste them, to verify their authenticity.

Opening her eyes, the fake Shepard reached out a hand, her fingers trembling so hard that it took all his rage and horror to keep his hands at his side. Those impossibly tiny, nimble little hands. Sliding one foot a hand's span toward him, she searched the blank faceplate of his helmet. "Garrus?" A
palsy even worse than the one in her hand rattled through her voice.

"Shepard … ," the black-haired woman called, stepping up behind the forgery, her omnitool glowing on her arm. "... you need to calm down. Getting upset will just make it more painful."

The doppelganger spun on the woman, her voice still shrill, the words travelling on the scream as she cried, "You said we were coming here to get help. You knew didn't you? I come in here … and I own these damned buildings." She lunged forward, grabbed Ingrid off the floor. Staggering to her feet, she threw the rifle into the woman's face hard enough to clip her in the chin. "My gun! You knew all along what I'd find here, didn't you? How much more have you lied to me about?"

Garrus stepped forward, closing in on the two women. "What the hell is going on? Who are you?" He directed the last at the black-haired woman. "Are you responsible for … this … " He stabbed a talon at the forgery. His gorge rose, and for a second, as he stared at the abomination … the living insult to the bright center of his universe, it took his entire will to keep from vomiting. "... this … thing?"

Shepard spun to face him. "Thing?" Her face contorting with agony, she stumbled backwards, going down on one knee, another scream cutting its way out between clenched teeth. Hands clutching at the sides of her head, she curled into a ball.

"My name is Miranda Lawson, General." The black-haired woman tossed the words at him as if she did him a favour even acknowledging them. Leaping forward, she crouched, reaching out to help the fake Shepard, who rewarded her with a shove hard enough to stagger her. "Shepard! Calm yourself." The omnitool flared to life again, the woman's fingers flying over the interface.

"What is this?" Garrus tore off his helmet and threw it onto the nearby couch. Releasing his grip on the storm, he let it roar, feeling as though lightning sizzled along the inside of his armour and thunder rumbled through his bones. "Is this your sleeper programming kicking in? Is she going to explode? Try to kill me?" Talons shaking with deadly promise, he grabbed Lawson's wrist as she tried to escape backward. Shoving his face into hers, he snarled through his second larynx, his demand barely verbal. "Why have you created this … profanity?"

"General?"

Garrus's heart stopped at the soft call. Releasing the Cerberus operative, he spun around to see the forgery unfold, her hands dropping away from her head … the rictus fading from her face. After a second, she clambered to her feet, clutching one of the planters. Meeting his eyes, she smiled, a soft, almost wistful smile. "General Garrus Vakarian." Pressing her lips together, she nodded. "I like it." A long sigh accompanied a faint head shake. "But, I'm not a weapon."

"They're retreating onto the bridge!" Nihlus called, interrupting. "I could use a little less theatre and a lot more help on the—"

A massive explosion rocked the building. Next to Garrus, fake-Shepard whooped and pushed past him, running to the balcony. She laughed, high and a little maniacal, then hollered, "Oh, Kasumi Goto, you beauty! Yes!" A fist punched the air as she laughed.

Garrus hit the wall at her side, able to see nothing beyond where the barricade once stood except for a massive wall of churning smoke and dust roaring toward the building. "Blast shields down!" Even before he called, he knew it was too late. "Helms on! Get down! Everyone in cover!" He ducked down and covered his head, glancing under his arm at the helmet half a room away as the blast wave washed over them.
When he looked up, his vastator had Nihlus by the cowl, her brow resting against his. He could hear them speaking, but just the tone, not words. She pulled back and slapped the Spectre’s shoulder companionably.

Garrus opened his mouth, but then the world pitched hard once more, and then again before he could regain his balance from the first. Clawing at the low wall, he kept himself on his talons, but just barely. A fourth explosion followed a few seconds later, that one not as close … probably several levels down in the Blood Pack’s camp.

Fake-Shepard stood, grinning ear to ear as she faced him. "That's some infiltration team you've got there, General. She waited until they were packed together. If we have a hundred Eclipse and Blue Suns to take out I'll be surprised." The fake Shepard alerted, looking out into the impossibly thick cloud that choked the air. "Gunships. They must have repaired the ones Miss Goto didn't destroy." She yanked a kerchief up over her nose and mouth, then turned and ran for his helmet.

Garrus just watched her, stunned. They'd completely programmed her to believe she was Jane Shepard. The whine of gunship thrusters pulled him away from her. Between the dust and the echo off the buildings, he couldn't place them. "Thermal scopes!" he called. "Everyone behind cover, use your scopes. Everyone else, wait for them to—"

A flash drew his eye. He spun and threw himself backward, knowing even before he did, it was too late. The impact threw him back, lifting his feet right off the floor as the world exploded into a supernova of fire and thunder.
Chapter Summary

Shepard deals with the reality of being recently undead.

**Haksaya kubenar** - A term of endearment, literally translates as 'my strong, true heart'.

**Cikabeknai** - The reciprocal term of endearment for the above. Literally translates to 'brave love'.

**26 Days ASR**

General Garrus Vakarian.

*Damn, Janey … just look at him. Isn't he magnificent?*

Magnificent he was. Strong, in complete command, and although it didn't look as though it sat easily, that command suited him. What was it Anderson always told her? The best leaders were the ones who found it most painful?

The heartache and confusion in Garrus's eyes tore into her with unrelenting claws, but she forced herself to keep a distance that stripped her to the bone. He needed time. Even more than the things he said, his body language made that agonizingly clear.

*He's mourned you for two years, Janey. That assassin tore his heart out. Give him time.*

She nodded. She could do that. She could suffer a little while after everything Garrus had been through. Oh, but she wanted to slip her arms around him and feel his strength envelope her, his love wash over her with its gentle, patient passion … to wrap herself in the aura of safety that emanated from him like warmth and light streamed from the sun. As she looked around, seeing the way the people—his people—looked at him and reacted to him, she knew they all lived and thrived under that sun as well.

An explosion dragged her out of her thoughts kicking and screaming, and threw her toward the open balcony. Yes! She hooted as Kasumi's packages went off. The thief had made it through, and in glorious form. Then the wall of dust and smoke sent them all diving into cover, and she found herself face to face with Nihlus.

"It really is you, isn't it?" the Spectre whispered, pressing his helmet against her brow.

She didn't get a chance to do anything more than nod before three more explosions rocked the building and sent her reeling. Turning around to peer up into nothing but a wall of dust, she caught Garrus staring at her and tried a smile. A soft sigh squeezed through the bars when he deflected it and moved away.

Using the low, balcony wall, Shepard heaved herself to her feet and turned to look at the *torin* who had danced along the edge of her memory for a month, and through her dreams for years before that. Heart thumping hard and fast against the inside of her breast, she just drank in the rugged, beautiful lines of his face; the sweep of his neck; the long fringe that he constantly raked with his
talons when he got upset or stressed. Memories swarmed her like moths around a light, their touch soft as they flitted past. All the love she'd felt for him poured back into her, filling her until it pounded in her temples and throat along with her pulse … until she felt as though it should blow her into tiny pieces. She pressed her hand against the chest of her armour, suddenly sure if she didn't hold it in, her heart would leap straight out.

*Why didn't you let yourself feel all this before? You really can be a complete idiot, Janey Shepard.*

And there he was, standing a metre away … close enough to touch, but yet an impossible distance stared at her from those eyes, the razor edge of his voice cutting to the bone with every word. His body language threw up walls and bulwarks, locking her on the other side of a hundred-foot-tall, electrified fence.

"That's some infiltration team you've got there, General," she said, fighting to keep her tone light … not reactive. She just needed to give him time and space to see the truth once his fear and shock began to fade.

Shepard took a step toward Garrus, stopping when he flinched away from her. Her hand lifted a little, aching to skate along his mandible, to press against his cheek and feel his heat. It dropped back to her rifle. Trying to ignore the fist that hammered her in the gut, she pushed forward, focusing on Kasumi and her bombs. "She waited until they were packed together. If we have a hundred Eclipse and Blue Suns to take out I'll be surprised."

She opened her mouth to continue, but then sucked in a quick breath and held it as the telltale whine of engines and thrusters cut through the background roar of debris, fire, and screaming wounded. "Gunships. They must have repaired the ones Miss Goto didn't destroy." Yanking her kerchief up over her nose and mouth, she stared at Garrus for a fraction of a second. Where was his helmet? She caught a glimpse of blue on the couch and ran to grab it for him.

"Thermal scopes!" Garrus shouted, spurring his troops into action. "Everyone behind cover, use your scopes. Everyone else, wait for them to—"

A detonation launched Shepard forward into the couch, her ribs letting out a muffled yowl of pain as she slammed into the frame. Gasping, blind, and deaf, she flailed through a heavy fog of confusion. Why has the entire world dissolved into madness around her?

"Garrus!" Nihlus's cry fear and horror.

A blur of blue flew past her, landing hard and sliding, leaving a metre long streak of indigo across the floor before it stopped. She stared, fractions of a second seeming to stretch into days as she struggled to process what she saw. The smoke and dust cleared, revealing torn and smoking armour and blood.

Oh sweet baby Jesus … so much blood.

"Garrus." Horror ripped her off her knees and threw her across the metres to his side. Hitting the floor on her knees, she slid the last metres, grabbing his arm even before she stopped. Shaking hands fumbled along his armour, finally finding and hitting his medigel. No. No. No no no no. Not like that. The universe did not get to snatch him from her like that. She hit the medigel again then dove into his belt pouch, rummaging for anything she could use, tossing everything she couldn't.

Topical medigel packs! A strangled cry of victory greeted the find, and she tore three of them open at once, dousing the areas that seemed to be bleeding the most. Helpless terror wrapped hands around her throat. Everywhere seemed to be bleeding the most.
"Medics!" she screamed, her voice cracking as the hands tightened their grip. "Where are the medics?"

"Blue Suns are repelling in on the ground and first floors." Nihlus's voice called, buffeting the edges of her perception. "Victus, Thompson, Geranc, Powell, and Treela cover the main floor from the interior balcony."

 Barely aware of the bodies running around her, Shepard ripped open her belt pouch, pulling out her topical medigel, bandages, and extra kerchiefs. The dry ice of panic built up behind the stranglehold on her throat and crawled just under her skull like ants. "Come on! Medic!" she screamed again, refusing to look at the remains of Garrus's face other than to spread medigel over the worst spots.

"Heavies!" Nihlus bellowed. "Where are the damned heavies for those gunships?"

"None of the rocket launchers have thermal scopes, sir," a young woman answered.

"For fuck's sake, use your damned ears," Shepard shouted over the din. She caressed Garrus's intact mandible as if to apologize for her outburst. "You're okay. Hang in there, big guy," Shepard whispered, leaning over him as she packed bandages over top of the medigel, applying pressure the best she could. "Just hang in there. I've got you."

"Shepard! The fight is still going on," Miranda shouted over rest of the din.

Shepard's hands just kept working, packing anything she could find against the wounds, trying to stop the bleeding. "If he dies, there is no damn fight. Not for me." She glanced up. "I need more medigel here!" A handful of ampules hit the floor next to her leg. Snatching them up, she tore them open.

The operative grabbed her shoulder, reefing her back away from Garrus. "Priorities, Shepard. And you wonder why I kept you away from those memories."

The captain whirled on the operative. Grabbing Miranda by the collar, Shepard shook her like a feral dog throttling its prey. "He dies, that's it. Do you understand me? You can take your fucking fight and stuff it up … ." Miranda's omnitool flared next to Shepard's head, the orange light burning into the captain's eyes. Flinging herself back, she spun and bent to kiss Garrus's temple. "Hang in there, Callor. We'll get you looked after in just a minute."

Standing, she strode across the room to snatch a rocket launcher away from a young woman whose hands shook too hard to hang onto the thermal scope let alone attach it. "Step back a bit, sweetie. We don't need anyone else getting their head shot off today." Shepard settled the thing on her shoulder and closed her eyes, listening for the distinctive whine of the gunships. "How many rockets left in here?" she demanded without opening her eyes.

"Ten, ma'am," the girl squeaked.

"Say it like you mean it soldier, and get the hell over to that balcony. Keep them from getting up the stairs." Taking slow, deep breaths, she counted slowly as she listened. In … two … three … four … five.

"Ten, ma'am," the girl hollered, "and yes ma'am, Captain Shepard, ma'am."

"Better, but stop with the ma'am." A grim smile slammed her lips down tight as she homed in on the first gunship. "Shoot my torin? You want to blow people up with rockets, you bring that shit to me." She opened her eyes when the vehicle's engines lowered in pitch, preparing to hover and drop
more troops. Her finger twitched on the trigger as the vehicle appeared, faint through the billowing clouds of dust. The first rocket impacted just below the nose. The second took off a thruster and the A-61 spiraled down into the guts of the superstructure, taking all four troops along with it.

The second ship dropped down fast behind her. She spun, a fierce, angry smile contorting her face. The gunship fired first, but she dove behind a couch, praying some steel, leather and foam could deflect a rocket. The couch erupted into the air, bursting into flame as it flipped over her head. She heard it tumble away, but she'd already sent three rockets straight for the wing-mounted rocket launchers. The pilot sneered at her, taking aim.

She pushed herself up off her knees, sending two more after the first just in case, but before they cleared the window, the gunship had been reduced to chunks of burning debris. She listened, but didn't hear a third. Perhaps they hadn't been able to get the last one flying. After waiting another second, Shepard spun toward Miranda.

Storming over to the operative, Shepard shoved the rocket launcher into Miranda's chest with enough force to throw the woman back, sitting her down hard on a planter. Shepard snarled in the woman's face. "Over enough for you now?"

Turning back toward Garrus, the captain cast a glance toward Nihlus. "All clear out there, old man?" When the helmeted head nodded, she returned it and ran the last few steps to Garrus's side.

Two familiar forms hunched over Garrus when Shepard hit the floor across from them. Relief flickered through her, bright and cool, the sun shining through leaves, and a smile broke across her face, so wide it hurt like hell. "Doc. Mordin. Sweet Jesus, I've never been happier to see two people in my life," she said, her words breathy. "How is he?"

Chakwas stared at Shepard, mouth hanging open for less than a heartbeat before continuing on, unrattled. "It's difficult to say right now, but we need to get him stabilized. We'll take him up to the twenty-fourth floor." She waved forward two orderlies and a gurney.

Shepard scrambled back out of the way, then helped lift him onto the zero-g stretcher. Clutching Garrus's talons in a desperate, terrified grip, she ran beside the stretcher all the way into the elevator.

"Bring him back to me, Doc," she whispered, her voice burrowing down into that place inside her that still believed wishes spoken out loud didn't come true. She backed toward the door, her fingers refusing to let go of Garrus's talons. What if it was the last time she ever held them? Finally, his glove slipped from between her fingertips, his hand hitting the surface with a faint thump.

"We'll do our best … " The doctor hesitated for a second, her voice coming out hard and confused when she continued. "... Shepard." As she spoke the doctor's expression remained so grave that Shepard threw herself back through the elevator doors and brushed the uninjured side of Garrus's mouth with the gentlest of kisses.

"I love you," she whispered against his mouth, the first sour-acid tears leaking from the corners of her eyes. "Don't leave me."

"Shepard, must hurry," Mordin called. His voice, higher pitched and more rushed than usual, betrayed just how close death hovered over that stretcher. His hand held the door open, waiting for her.

She nodded, but had to drag herself away, her stare clinging to Garrus's face, his features blurry through the tears. "Please … ." The door closed, leaving her staring at blank metal, her heart
trapped on the other side. She swallowed the cancerous tumour that spread tendrils of panic through her throat and down into her gut.

*Sweet baby Jesus, if you hear any prayer, hear this one ... please. Just ... please.*

The tumour spread into her sinuses, the pressure building until it burned in her nose and leaked salty tears over her cheeks. Not him. Not just ... not before he even knew she'd come back to him.

"Shepard, there is still an entire base to secure," Miranda called, striding up to her from the lounge. "Now that General Vakarian is receiving treatment, we need to send out—"

Whipping around, Shepard stormed over, shoving her face so close to Miranda's that her nose bounced off the operative's cheek. When Miranda pulled back, Shepard just pressed in harder, trapping the woman in the corner by the door. "Is he one of the reasons you said I'd be grateful that you brought me back?" she asked, her voice a feral roar originating low in her chest. She pinned Miranda with a forearm at the operative's throat while the other hand stabbed a finger toward where Nihlus stood, still keeping watch on the bridge. "Is he as well?"

Miranda drew herself up as if she wasn't a half centimetre away from being turned into human paste. "Yes. You see, Shepard? I told you that you would thank—"

Shepard backed off two steps, then drew her arm back and let loose with all of her freakish strength, slamming her fist into Miranda's face. She felt the woman's jaw crack, but just clenched her teeth and leaned back in. "How dare you keep them from me?" she demanded, her voice lowering even further until it resonated from her gut.

Miranda wobbled for a second, then crumpled, leaning against the wall, her legs folded under her. After thirty seconds or so, Shepard reached down, slipping a hand under her arm and helped her back onto her feet. Miranda pressed a hand to her jaw, that and her slurred speech her only concession to the injury.

"Same reason couldn't contact Anderson. Memory overload—"

"Bullshit!" Shepard leaned in, forcing her hand down to her side. They might need Miranda to be able to fight, and she wouldn't be fit for duty if Shepard smashed her jaw completely. "You kept those memories from me because you knew that if I remembered him ... if I remembered them, there was no way in hell you could have maintained any sort of control over me." She laughed, cold and hard as ice and backed up. "And you were right. I'd have sneaked off that station of horrors in a garbage bin if it meant getting back to Garrus."

Hearing footsteps behind her, she reached for her Mattock, and twisted, shooting a Blue Sun who managed to reach the top of the stairs. Once the merc fell, Shepard turned back at Miranda. "You lie to me again, Lawson ... . You hold anything back from me again, and I will leave." She held up her arms in a mocking shrug. "Don't know if you noticed, but my boyfriend has an army and a navy all his own."

Walking away, she heard Miranda tapping away at her omnitool and called back, "Day 26, Jane Shepard hit and punched and hurt my face on Day 26." Let her. Fuck it. Let her report back whatever the fuck she wanted. Shepard had a fight to finish. "Go get your jaw looked at. Twenty-fourth floor."

Just ahead of her, Nihlus hopped down from his blind, a hand lifting to remove his helmet once he hit the floor. "General Victus, keep an eye on the bridge for a second, please?" he called, glancing over his shoulder at another turian. He set the helmet down on the table, stared at Shepard for a
moment, and then his mandibles spread, a wide smile that trembled a little. "Haksaya kubenar."

Shepard took a long breath, seeing nothing in those bright green eyes but acceptance and love. She shook her head as Tashac began to hum … a lilting celebration of reconnection.

*Down girl.*

"Cikabeknai," she replied, a grin spreading as the endearment just rolled off her tongue. She sighed. Nihlus looked as though he'd been threaded through the mangler a few times, but good … functional if fragile … a mug dropped on the floor but glued back together.

*Sort of like someone else, huh?*

Yeah, she knew all about that particular brand of broken. Damn, but she'd missed him. "Hey there, old man," she said, her lips trembling. Pressing them tight, she strode toward him with purpose, wrapping her arms around his waist.

Nihlus hugged her against him, his grip strong and comforting. He pressed his mouth to the top of her head. "Hey there, yourself." A long sigh whistled from his nose as he squeezed her tight. "You broke a lot of hearts, you know."

She clung to him, trying to ignore the gunfire in the background. "Yeah, sorry about that. I'll try not to do it again." Pulling away a little, she pressed a kiss against his mandible. "It's good to see you." Grinning, she popped a shrug. "Even better to remember you." A rough sigh greeted the sound of increased fighting, and she pressed a hand to the side of his face. "Guess we should get to work." She glanced around, letting her hand drop as she took a deep breath, settling back into Captain Shepard.

Nihlus nodded, his mandibles flicking low and tight. "The worst fighting is still down in the lowest sublevel. We've got Blood Pack flamers down there wreaking havoc." He reached back for his helmet and tucked it under his arm. When he looked down at her, his eyes shone with warmth. "You taking over, Spectre?"

She held out her hands and shook her head, incredulous. "This is your circus, but with your permission, I'll take a team downstairs to clear them out, work our way around and up through the camps." She stepped away and pulled her Mattock off her back. When he nodded, she continued, "Gather up twenty-five or so of your best and freshest, make sure they have backpacks full of heatsinks, food, water … whatever they need. We'll be gone a while."

Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself and nodded. She could clear away the rest of the trash, help the fighters below finish off the Blood Pack and then clean out the camps, make sure nothing remained but prisoners and ashes. At least that way, she'd be able to forget about her heart, clinging to life twenty-three floors above her head.

She sent Nihlus her radio frequency and then Vincent's just in case. Grinning as she imagined her XO's pique at Shepard going out without her, she said, "When Miranda comes down, put her to work. Don't let her give you her haughtier than thou crap." She reached out and squeezed his hand. "I'll see—"

Nihlus's talon sliced the air, cutting her off as the other lifted to his radio. After a second, he chuffed a little and nodded to no one. "I'll let her know. Nihlus out." Both hands dropped, his mandibles as well. "Garrus is refusing to go into surgery until he talks to you." A strong, heavy hand pressed down on her shoulder. "He's in bad shape, so you should head up now."
Shepard spun and bolted for the elevator. "I'll meet the team downstairs. Let my people know to pack me a kit." When she pressed the door control, she turned back. "Let Liara know her attendance is optional." She smiled when he nodded, gratitude warming her from her toes up. "Thank you."

He nodded and smiled, but again, she saw his mandibles tremble. As soon as the fighting ended, she just needed to sit down with him, talk … connect. Hopefully start helping him heal the hole she felt gaping at his center. Their eyes locked for another moment, but then his pain disappeared beneath his helmet, sealed in.

The door opened, Shepard stepping aside to let the full carriage of people out before she leaped in and hit the control for the twenty-fourth floor. Hope sparked bright and clear at her heart. Garrus demanding to see her … that had to be a good thing. It just did. Surely, he'd come to see that it was her, not something programmed to believe it was. He just had to. How … could she even make it through without him at her side? What would be the point in even trying?

Miranda might have a point about your priorities.

Shepard shrugged off the faint sliver of guilt. Things would work out, but first, he needed to come through his surgery. She nodded stoutly, and stood at parade rest, nose practically pressed into the doors, bouncing a little on the balls of her feet. Twenty-three floors later, the elevator opened, releasing her into complete chaos. She weaved her way through wounded lying on beds and gurneys, sitting on chairs … even on the floor … wherever they managed to squeeze into an open spot. Her heart ached as she pushed on, smiling to those who called out, but unable to stop … to provide any sort of comfort. Once the fighting ended, she promised herself. Once the base was safe, she'd do her best to help.

At the end of the hall, a wide door opened, the familiar professional, compassionate face of Karin Chakwas appearing above the crowd. The doc looked around for a few seconds and then, spotting Shepard, raised a beckoning hand. "This way."

The fact that the doc didn't even call her by name … the sheer strength of the doubt and disbelief, the hard edge to the doctor's tone, slammed into Shepard like a tidal wave, leaving her reeling. Beneath the wave, an undertow of isolation and loneliness grabbed hold of her, tumbling her along the bottom until drowning seemed imminent. Was she going to end up alone, cut off from everyone but Nihlus?

Then Chakwas stood before her, blue eyes cold and distant. She gave Shepard a curt nod, then hit the door control, stepping aside to allow Shepard to go ahead. "The general needs to go into surgery immediately, but he's demanding to see you before he'll let us do anything," the doctor said. "Be quick."

Once they entered the softly lit, almost silent space, the doctor stepped up to walk at Shepard's side. "What are you?" she asked. "A clone?"

Shepard slumped, the question stabbing a knife under her ribs.

Better get used to that question, Janey. It's going to get asked a lot.

"They say they salvaged my body and spent two years rebuilding me." She reached up and tapped the back of her head. "I have a shiny, new cybernetic brain stem and nanites running rampant through my body cloning and replacing cells. At least, they've stopped implanting me with new tech every couple of days." A long, low sigh spooled out, feeling like the endless handkerchief from a magician's act. "I'm pretty sure I'm me."
Chakwas stopped at a door on the left wall and held out a hand. "Be quick, and don't upset him."
When Shepard looked into that familiar, welcome face, she saw no welcome there for her. She
nodded and hurried past, barely holding in an apology, even though she had no idea why she
needed to apologize.

Antiseptic burrowed into her sinuses, randomly jabbing the sensitive lining with pins, and her
footsteps rang through the silence as she crossed the tile floor to stop next to his shoulder. She
stared down at him, the air freezing solid in her lungs, her ribs threatening to explode with the pain
of it. The corners of her eyes burned as she fought to hold back her tears, refusing to allow them to
escape. He didn't need to see her blubbering over him as if he'd already died. Leaning down a little,
she brushed the backs of her fingers over the exposed ball of his shoulder. How had she forgotten
him? How could she have ever forgotten him? Then to lose him just as . . . . A million lost, stiletto-
sharp moments sliced through her, leaving behind shallow, thin cuts that stung like brands as they
leaked laughter and tears, kisses and angry words.

Stop it. Damn it, Janey, you never truly forgot him. And if you don't want to lose him, he needs
surgery sooner rather than later.

Right. Shepard took a deep breath and forced a smile onto her face. "Garrus?"

His good eye opened, the other hidden under a blood-stained towel. For a long moment, he stared
up at her without recognition, but then the blurriness disappeared, replaced by all the anger, hurt,
and betrayal she'd seen downstairs. "You're still here," he said, his voice low and rough, slurred as
he spoke without moving his jaw.

"Yeah, of course. I'm not going anywhere," she whispered, and sniffed, wiping away a tear before
it dripped from the end of her nose. Damning her traitorous eyes, she let all her joy and love radiate
through her smile. She leaned down to brush a feather-light kiss to the end of his nose then
shrugged a little as his eyes fixed on her. "Well . . . . She looked down to follow the trail of her
fingertips as they caressed the curve of his uninjured shoulder. "... I had to return a few things you
gave me." She leaned down, her breath warm and soft against his cheek. "You're going to need
them."

His hand lifted, batting ineffectually at the blanket. "What things?" His eye closed, his chest
deflating with his breath.

Shepard slipped her hands under the blanket, grasping his talons between them. His grip was weak
but calloused and warm. She smiled, just a thin press of her lips. "It's okay, Garrus. I came back.
I'm really here." Nodding, she ordered him to lie back on pillows he hadn't left. "Get some sleep.
I'm going to go help things get settled downstairs, and when Dr. Chakwas and Mordin are done
putting you back together, I'll be here. I imagine that the docs are going to want to run about a
million tests on me." She pressed her lips to the back of his hand.

"Shepard, must begin," Mordin called in a hoarse whisper from the door. He stepped around
Shepard to inject meds into Garrus's IV. "Risking the general to wait."

Shepard started to pull away, but Garrus tightened his grip on her hand, holding her close.

"What is it?" she asked, bending down to hear him.

"What are you?" Garrus whispered into her ear.

Shepard jerked away from him, her brow furrowed, her eyes burning so fiercely that when the tears
fell, she expected them to come out blood. A hiccough of pain erupted as she breathed out, but she
clamped her jaw closed on it. Her chest refused to cooperate, however, spasming with stillborn sobs.

He blinked slowly, staring into her eyes. "I held my Kahri as she died. I sat beside her body for three days before we buried her." His eyes closed, and his voice faded as the drugs sucked him down into oblivion. His last words drifted out on a shallow breath, "Don't come back."

A ragged, open-mouthed gasp escaped before Shepard bit down on her lip and cut it off. Steeling her jaw and locking everything down tight, she managed to inhale and exhale without screaming as she placed his hand back under the covers. Joints rigid, she spun toward the door just to find Chakwas watching her. Suspicion screamed at her from the tight lines around the doctor's eyes and tightly pressed lips. Letting out a soft, resigned sigh, Shepard nodded. It didn't matter; their saving Garrus did. "Take care of him, Doc," she whispered between clenched teeth.

Just as Shepard stepped past the doctor, Chakwas reached up and gripped her shoulder. After staring into the captain's eyes for a moment, the doctor lifted gentle fingers to brush the tears from Shepard's cheek. "When you're done cleaning up the mess downstairs, come back. We'll run tests, check the age of your DNA and retinal tissue … ." A firm nod met the warm bud of hope that blossomed in Shepard's chest, thawing everything enough for her to breathe without breaking down. Chakwas nodded toward the door out of the ward. "If you are Jane Shepard, we'll find a way to prove it. Go on, get to work."

Shepard pressed out a flat grimace that tried for a smile. Giving the doctor a quick, grateful nod, she headed for the door, her stride resolute. With Chakwas and Mordin on her side … there was no way everyone could doubt her. No way she could doubt herself. They'd find irrefutable proof that she was still Jane Gwendolyn Shepard.

Pushing back through the throng blocking the path to the elevator, Shepard walled up all the emotional sludge sloshing around in her brain. For the next day or so, she could allow herself one focus: clearing out the bad guys and bringing her people home. She pressed the control for the lowest sublevel, a slight smile greeting the fact it was called the garden. What hadn't he done with those few deserted buildings and some cash? She had a feeling that his genius would continue to amaze her for weeks, if it ever stopped.

The reek of smoke and charred … everything … invaded the elevator five floors before her destination. She untied her handkerchief and dragged out her water bottle. After drinking her fill, she soaked down the cloth and tied it back over her nose and mouth.

What awaited her on the other side of the doors when the elevator arrived was anything but paradise. Smoke and dust roiled in the air, charred and broken bodies lay thrown in a long pile along the walls. Hundreds of them. The garden had been trampled into a swamp of mud and gore. And everywhere, screaming and gunfire, shouting and the endless roar of flame throwers.

She leaned her head all the way over to the right and cracked her neck then rolled her shoulders and shrugged her Mattock into her hands. Time to clear out the rest of the mercs and let all these good, exhausted people rest. She strode toward the far end of the gigantic space. It had to be ten acres all told. The fighting centered at the far end where three tunnels branched out into the rest of the station.

Halfway across the space, she began to make out forms in the smoke, wounded sitting off against a wall, a couple of people working over them … soldiers popping up over cover to fire down the tunnels and then back down. Some just sat with their back against the cover, legs splayed out in front of them, too tired to move. A couple of young people crawled along the floor, handing out water and sandwiches.
We've got to save these people, Janey. Damn, aren't they something?

A figure approached her. "Are you the one Nihlus said was coming down to help us clear the tunnels?" The command and strength in the voice almost completely disguised the soft-edged slur on all the words and the slow, careful diction needed to be understood. "Your squad just showed up," He sighed. "We're damned glad of the help."

Shepard stopped, tears springing back into her eyes. "Fuck," she muttered to herself. "Snap out of it! I can't spend the entire fucking day crying." Impatient fingers swiped at her eyes as a soldier strode out of the carnage. Tall, broad as a barn door, and wrapped in some sort of hydraulic armour, a man … blessed Enkindlers … a man walked toward her, helmet visor open, gait loose and confident.

She stopped and leaned back on a cocked hip, her rifle cradled in her crossed arms. "Yeah? So what if I am, kid?"

The man stopped, his entire body expanding as though every bit of him sucked in a huge breath. After three more halting steps, he stopped and just looked at her, the breath whooshing out. His mouth worked for a second, before he said, "You look beautiful today, Shepard," his voice tail-diving into an almost incoherent slur. A choking sort of sob chased the words out.

"You look pretty beautiful too, kid." Shepard just stared for another moment, dragging out the exquisite joy of seeing how spectacular he'd become and the agony of having missed it all. She shook her head and strode forward, her arms spreading wide. "Oh my god, look at you! Holy shit, Martin. You went and became all amazing on me."

"And you died on me." The last came out tangled in harsh sobs and then his arms wrapped around her, gentle despite the massive armour. Kisses covered the side of her head. "How? What the hell, Shepard? How … ? You died." Strong arms lifted her off the ground, and then he tore his helmet off, his tears cool and wet against her ear.

After a long minute, when he set her down and held her at arm's length, Shepard shook her head. "I can't say quite how, other than to blame some combination of mad science and miracle." She took his face between her hands. "I'm damned glad to see you, and I can't wait to just sit down and fill in all the blanks, but how about we kick these bastards in the ass first?"

Grinning, he pressed his face into her touch for a moment before turning to plant a soft kiss into the palm of her hand. "Sounds good." He bent to retrieve his helmet, hesitating for a moment before he straightened and looked into her eyes. "I'm not dead, right?"

A soft smile answered his question as she reached out and wrapped her fingers around his. "We're both very much alive, so come on, let's get this done."

Word spread that the archangel herself had joined the fight, and although the realization of where Garrus had come up with the name made her uncomfortable, Shepard couldn't deny the rallying effect her presence created amongst the beleaguered fighters. Within an hour, they'd cleared the warehouse and right hand tunnel, sealing it up at the far end. After three, only one route out into the rest of Omega remained open.

Shepard sat on a low crate, a cold bottle of water held between her soot-covered hands, and looked over the exhausted troops. A glance over at Vincent, and her people from the brave ship, Nameless, revealed exhaustion, but they looked daisy fresh compared to the Archangel personnel. She finished the bottle, ate the last bite of a really fine tuna salad sandwich, and then took a deep breath. "So, who's coming with me to clear out the stragglers?"
A bright, clear laugh greeted the massive show of hands. "Anyone who has family in the base … you need to stay, take care of your loved ones." That dropped about half the hands. "Anyone who has any medical training, shower and head up to the twenty-fourth floor, they could sure use you." Another dozen dropped their hands. "Okay, the rest of you, if you're uninjured and think you have another day of walking and fighting left in you, pack enough food, water, and heat sinks. We'll meet here in—"

"Does someone want to tell me why I just had to hang some pyjak up by his ankles for lying to me?" a deep krogan roar bellowed from the end of the cleared tunnel. A minute later a wall of red armour charged into the room, shoulders forward, head set down into the yoke. "Who do I need to shoot for shitting on Shepard's memory?" Carmine eyes flashed with rage as they seared the crowd under a laser-intense glare.

Shepard sighed and pushed herself up off her crate. "I was comfortable there, Wrex," she grumbled. She stalked over to meet him halfway, her shoulders hunched, hands on her hips, stare focused on the floor. When the wall of armour filled her vision, she looked up … just lifting her eyes. "Please, don't make me headbutt you. I've still got a long day ahead of me."

Wrex narrowed his eyes and leaned in close, his head cocked.

"What? You going blind in your advanced age?" Grinning, she gave him a shove. He looked good, unchanged other than the proud set to his shoulders and jaw, her hopes for him brought to fruition. "Yep, still can't even rock you."

The behemoth leaned back and hung up his shotgun. "You looked like something a varren crapped out, Shepard." His wrecking ball of a fist slammed her shoulder hard enough to punch straight out the other side, sending her stumbling into Martin, who jumped in to catch her.

"Yep," she grunted, rubbing her shoulder, "that still hurts like hell." Rolling her shoulder a little to ease the ache, she cocked an eyebrow and gave him her best, shit-eating grin. She couldn't have asked for anyone better at her back. "Going to come hunting with me or have you gotten too old and lazy?"

"Don't push your luck, Shepard," he muttered, but without any heat. "The void might not spit you back out a second time."

A-N: Still really trying to get back to Monday/Thursday ... just failing miserably. Thanks to everyone who reviewed last chapter. Writing is a very solitary thing, and hearing from people ... it's a wonderful thing.
Chapter Summary

Some believe, some don't, but Nihlus ... not a single doubt that the universe has granted him his most fervent wish.

**Stabata** - a long, narrow, nine stringed instrument strummed with both hands. Due to its many resonance chambers, and the movable flanges within, it is capable of intricate sympathetic harmonics similar to turian subvocals.

**Drellak** - Tall, relatively slender four legged herd animals weighing approximately 300 kilos.

**27 Days ASR**

Nihlus found very few methods of waking up as obnoxious as his comms chiming in his aural canal. It never failed to intrude upon his dreams in insidious ways, or cause dreams to form around it. In those, he spent an inordinate amount of time searching for the cause of the annoying pinging, just to wake shaking with frustration. They were worse than his dreams about searching for a clean, functional lavatory.

That particular incoming call grabbed him by the fringe and ripped him from a nightmare, heart pounding, sweat prickling along his throat and belly. He answered the call, grateful for its intrusion. Damn nightmares. She'd come back. Why did he still have to watch her die every time he closed his eyes?

"Kryik here." He winced at the blue threads of panic that remained tangled in his subvocals.

"Hey there, sleepyhead," Shepard replied, then yawned, coaxing one out of him.

He rolled over onto his back and stuffed all his pillows under his head. "Hey yourself. How are things going out there?"

Her voice came through dull and slurred with exhaustion but resolute. "Fine. I think we so completely obliterated the Blood Pack that they're going to consider Omega a plague ship for several generations." He closed his eyes, able to see her cheeky grin, slanted with weariness … the cocked eyebrow. "Krogan ones." She yawned in answer to another from him, then chuckled and said, "Stop that, I'm at least fifteen hours from being able to collapse." She sucked a long breath in through her nose, one of her tells that she was bracing herself. "How are things back there?"

He knew what she meant. "Garrus is still in surgery. They got him mostly stabilized and then took a break to let him gain strength and for them to get some sleep. I went up to check on him, but they kept him out." He sighed and stretched, arms and legs extended to the point his entire body vibrated with it. "When they went back, they scrubbed a couple of geth in to help. Apparently they're going to need to do quite a lot of cybernetic repair."

Shepard just hummed a soft reply.

"He's stable, Jane." Even though he knew he didn't have to, he added, "Just focus on getting back
here." He wished he was sitting on the ground next to her, back pressed against a planter or column … somewhere with a good sightlines … a bottle of water in one hand, sandwich in the other. They didn't need to talk, just sit shoulder to shoulder. Well, shoulder to arm, anyway.

Or even better, despite the impossibility, he wished she were there, safe and warm, lying next to him.

The oddly full silence of the open channel answered him for long seconds, her voice barely loud enough to hear when she finally spoke. "He told me not to come back."

Nihlus chuffed, trying for a lightness that belied the sympathetic ache that resonated through his bones, her tone plucking his strings like talons playing a stubata. "He really should know better. The easiest way to ensure Jane Shepard will do something is to tell her not to." He closed his eyes, his head heavy as it sank into his pillows. After just listening to her breathe for a few seconds, he asked, "Jane? Are you sure you're all right? You know he'll come around."

"Yeah, I'm fine, just tired." Another pause. "We're about … I don't know … a third of the way through what used to be the Blue Suns' camp. We should be back in fifteen hours. Depends how many more prisoners we pick up. We're running out of zip ties and water. I might have to send a squad back with our little chain gang."

"Zip ties?" He laughed, the detail surprising him. "Where did you find zip ties?"

"The gardening shed in the basement. Whole bag of them." He heard her head thump against whatever was behind her. She asked, "Is the base secure? Fighting all wrapped up?"

He smiled. Right to business. Always to business when personal got uncomfortable. He closed his eyes, conjuring the feeling of her lips pressed against his mouth, wishing he could kiss her and keep her from throwing up the walls. Instead, he answered the question. "Yes, for hours now. We ran a few quick area recon sweeps, but just found a lot of busted up mechs and dead mercs." He rolled onto his side and leaned up on his elbow, his voice softening to a plea. "Come in, Jane. You all need to rest."

"We will." Her tone softened to caress along his. "I just need to let the Reapers and the council know in no uncertain terms that Jane Shepard is not only alive, she's going to tear them into little chunks and serve them to the krogan on toast."

"Damn it, Shepard," Wrex bellowed in the background, "haven't the krogan suffered enough?"

Nihlus grinned and shook his head. Leave it to Wrex to shatter the moment.

Something heavy hit next to Shepard, then slid, metal screeching against metal. "Say hi to Nihlus for me," Martin said then groaned. "You're going to have to carry me the rest of the way, Shepard. I can't go on."

"Sit up, kid. You're crushing me." Turning her attention back to Nihlus, she said, "We'll be back before … what time is it? We'll be back before supper. Check in if there are any developments with the general." She let out a long, weary breathe. "Go back to sleep, and we'll see you later."

"Okay. Be careful out there." He let out a half sigh, half chuckle at the faint scoffing sound that answered his charge. "I really should know better than to ask that by now. Just get back here in mostly one piece."

"I will. Shepard, out."
Nihlus flopped back onto the mattress, readjusting his pillows to cradle his head. He closed his eyes, letting the broken music of her voice whisper through his head, savouring every word. Checking his chrono, he saw that he'd been asleep just over three hours. Every inch of him assured him that he needed at least a couple more hours. Every part except his head and his heart. They insisted that he not sleep until Shepard slept. His body led a rebellion, forcing his eyes closed and adding weights to his limbs.

The rebellion died after a scant twenty minutes of lying there, visualizing the conditions out in the camps, wondering how badly damaged the base was, and how to dispose of thousands of bodies before they began to really foul the nest. He threw back the covers and swung his legs over the side. A shower would have to do in lieu of sleep.

Marcie and the kitchen staff already had the kitchen and dining areas in order when he made his way to the ground floor. Fantastic smells wove through the stench, coaxing him to eat. Not that his belly required much convincing. The moment it smelled frying strips of drellak roast it began to roar and bark like a pack of varren.

"Good morning, Nihlus," Marcie called, passing him a tray. "Get any sleep?" The plump, motherly human leaned back against the counter and watched him pile up a healthy serving of breakfast.

"Three hours or so." He flicked his mandibles, a bashful sort of smile. After a moment, he stopped and looked at the matron. "Shepard's platoon won't be back for another fifteen hours, but they might be sending in prisoners. Do you think you could make some high energy food for them?" Brow plates pulling down low, he strained through two cycles to recall what it was Shepard had eaten all the time. "Shepard likes … peanuts? No … close, but it's sticky and pasty."

Marcie chuckled. "Peanut butter?" When he answered with a nod, she turned to the cupboards. "I'll make up a big batch of peanut butter cookies, and some of those cookies that cause wars amongst the turians when I make them. We can send those back to help get them through."

"Thank you," Nihlus replied, the weight in his gut easing as he imagined Shepard's reaction to the cookies. She enjoyed her sweets. He reached out to pat Marcie's shoulder, snatching his hand back when she jumped. "Sorry." Normally not one for touching people, he backed away, embarrassed. "I'm sure they'll appreciate that." After an awkward nod, he fled to the closest table and sat to eat.

Between his body thinking he'd tried to starve it to death over the past few days and worrying about the details of how to keep Archangel running while Garrus convalesced, Nihlus finished his breakfast without even really tasting it. One moment, his tray was full; the next, empty. At least the varren pack had gone silent.

He headed up to the lounge, the room empty but for the few snipers on watch. Pushing through the quiet, he felt it cling to him, funerary and cloying. Blood, soot, and death whispered through the silence, insistent and very present despite the room having been scrubbed and tidied. The three guards all leaped up when he began tearing down the median half of his sniper blind. When no attack materialized, they settled back into their positions, looking mortified for having been caught nodding off.

"Go lie down," Nihlus ordered, tossing a careless gesture at the cots set up at the far end of the room. "I've got the wall for now." He tipped his head a little in answer to their thanks, then turned to look out over the remains of Kima District.

Silence continued to whisper through the emptiness, shrouding the base in the uneasy, haunted pall of an ancient ruin. Archangel had lost just over a third of their defenders in the fighting. Of course, that number became disgustingly irrelevant when compared to how many Shepard had saved and
how many she'd killed. That burden wouldn't sit easily on her shoulders. No doubt a good portion of her insistence on completely searching out the enemy bases stemmed from guilt. She needed to look at what she'd caused, save who she could, and try to come to peace with the slaughter. That it had been necessary wouldn't be enough to shut up the voice in her head.

A small squad of turian external forces exited the elevator behind him, speaking to each other in the closed dialect. Most of General Victus's people had already returned to their ships to sleep. The general, however, had accepted Nihlus's invitation to remain at the base and was, no doubt, fast asleep in Garrus's bed at the other end of the hall.

The sharp, efficient clip of heels on the tile alerted him to another presence approaching from behind. He didn't turn, already guessing the person's identity.

"Spectre Kryik," the Cerberus operative called out upon crossing the threshold. "My people have informed me that Captain Shepard is away from the base?" Her tone battered at him, strident, clipped, and businesslike.

He nodded, keeping his back to her. "She is clearing out the remaining mercenary forces."

Glancing at his chrono, he shrugged. "She checked in about an hour ago, and expects to return in time for the evening meal."

The operative made a sound that clearly expressed how unacceptable she found the entire situation. She strode to the balcony and paced along the low wall, her stare riveted on the other side of the bridge. "She should have waited for me to finish treatment. I told Dr. Chakwas that I didn't need to … ."

His mandibles fluttered a little, a faint expression of amusement as he watched the complete stranger ranting, mostly to herself.

She spun to face him, her feet braced shoulder width apart, arms crossed. "I amuse you?"

He shrugged. "No, but you being able to tell that I was amused surprises me. Cerberus doesn't have a reputation for being able to see beyond humanity." Keeping an eye on her in the periphery of his vision, he returned to his watch.

She gave him a clipped nod. "As Shepard's XO, I knew I would be interacting with turians and other races on an ongoing basis. I like to be prepared." Pivoting on her toe, she resumed her pacing.

Nihlus raised a brow plate, surprised again. "So, is this genuine concern for Shepard's well being?" he asked, letting all his scepticism bleed through his voice. Just because he hadn't been able to guess Cerberus's game, didn't mean they weren't running one.

The woman brushed her hair back off her face, then absently tugged out the tie holding it back, and gathered it all together. He watched, fascinated by her fingers and how they managed to contain all the strands, tying it into a tight tail high on her head. How humans managed five digits and hair baffled him at the best of times. Combine them … forget it. Patting her work, Miranda let out a vague hum of satisfaction and glanced his way. "Of course I am. My organization spent over four billion credits to bring Shepard back from the dead. She's a vital and valuable asset."

Distracted by her hair wrangling, it took Nihlus a moment to even remember what he'd asked. Oh, right … caring about Shepard's welfare. A sharp bark of laughter escaped before the Spectre nailed down his surprise at her answer. "Really? That's how you're going to play it?" He hoisted his armour up his shoulders, settling it a little more comfortably as he shrugged. "If she gets herself really, really dead this time, you'll be out of pocket?" He shook his head and let out a heavy chuff
as he looked back out over the bridge.

The operative stepped up beside him, staying a careful distance away, and folded her arms, her hands cupping her elbows. Her jaw clenched and relaxed over a half dozen times, betraying the silent war going on inside her before she asked, "What do you mean?"

Surprise drew his head back and flared his mandibles. Surely they must have had some idea of who they'd brought back. He laughed, cold and hard with a covetous edge that he savoured. The arrogance. They just thought they could resurrect Shepard and dance her around like a puppet. "Do you know anything at all about Jane Shepard?"

The woman bristled. "I have detailed files." Her back arched a little, shoulders rolling back. "I know she can be difficult, but once she realizes that we're working toward the same goals … ."

Nihlus shook his head and turned away. "She will never realize that you're working toward the same goals, because you aren't." He leaned against the table beside him and crossed his arms, his sniper rifle cradled against his keel. "She refused to let me leave the Normandy alone our first mission. Felt I endangered her squad, and she was prepared to get the crap beaten out of her to make her point."

He glanced her way, dropping his brow plates low over his eyes, putting up a clear barrier of loved friend versus hostile stranger between them. He saw it register and allowed himself a small grin. Miranda Lawson might be owed some thanks for bringing Shepard back to them, but he wouldn't allow her any claim to ownership. He raised a brow plate to emphasize his point before continuing, "After Saren shot me, Shepard just kept hammering at me … antagonizing me until I almost hauled off and dropped her."

Another harsh chuff greeted the memory of that day. "Spirits, she truly can be the most impossible, annoying being in the galaxy." He shifted a little, rocking on his talons. "Took me nearly a week to realize what she was doing, and it really had nothing to do with getting a rise out of me. She was keeping me out of my head … distracting me. In her own, aggravating way, she was taking care of me. The important thing to know about Shepard is that she is a protector … a caretaker."

Miranda scoffed. "I assure you, she harbours no urge whatsoever to take care of me." She dropped her arms for a second, then slammed them right back over her chest—gates locking down tight.

Nihlus nodded toward the large black mark on her face, just managing to hold back his smirk. "That might be true. She hit you good and damned hard, but … she didn't shoot you. If you pulled that crap on me, I'd have shot you." He settled his rifle under one arm and opened his omnitool. "I'm sending you a list of people. I need you to have a look at their departments and skills, and assign them into teams to assess the damage to the base. I need them to submit reports on the actual damage and the cost to repair. I also need cleanup crews organized and supervised. That includes body disposal, but before the Archangel personnel are disposed of, we need their belongings collected and catalogued for their next of kin."

Miranda Lawson spun to face him, hip cocked, her right thumb hooking into her low slung belt. "Excuse me? I'm not a recruit." Try as she might to keep her face cool and expressionless, the haughtier-than-thou that Shepard warned him about kept peeking through the cracks.

He nodded. "And you're free to return to you ship. But if you stay here, we could use the help of someone with organization skills, and Shepard assured me you'd be eager to help." Brow plates raised, he stared her square in the eye, challenging her.

Without relaxing even one hair, she opened her omnitool and sent him her information. "Forward
the files." When the chime announced their receipt, she headed for the door. "I'll have a preliminary report for you within the hour."

Nihlus watched her cross the room, but when she reached the door, he called after her, "Operative Lawson." She stopped but didn't turn. Amusement tweaked his mandibles again. Damn, Lawson was strung so tight that Shepard must have far too much fun torturing her. "Your mistake was not making her family." He nodded when she glanced back. "That's what she does … what she did on the Normandy … what she's done with the rest of your people." He turned back toward the bridge, his eyes searching the rubble on the far side for that familiar face. "She's back with her family now. Don't expect her to stay with you."

A few seconds passed before he heard her heels clipping down the hall and then the stairs. He alerted to the sound of gunfire, but it remained distant … a couple of blocks away, at least. He glanced at his chrono. Shepard didn't expect to be back for another thirteen hours at least. Spirits, had it only been two since he awoke?

A soft chuff rolled from his throat. He'd never been very good at waiting.

"Nihlus?" Dr. Chakwas called on his comms.

His pulse sped up, thumping against the front of his cowl. Finally. "Go ahead, Doctor."

"We moved Garrus to recovery five minutes ago," the doctor reported, her voice betraying both her exhaustion and her relief. "He's been removed from all life support equipment, and is holding his own very well. He should regain consciousness in the next hour or two."

"And his recovery? Will he be … ?" How did he ask if his fratriin would be returned to them whole or if he wouldn't be the torin he was? Even thinking the question made him feel like a bastard.

"I believe he will recover fully. We were able to keep the cranial swelling to a minimum, and all his scans and tests look promising." She paused. "As to the matter of Captain Shepard … when she returns to the base, have her report to me."

"You can prove she's not a clone or some sort of AI puppet programmed to believe it's Shepard?" Spirits, he hoped she could. He didn't need it—Tashac had answered without hesitation—but the rest of the galaxy would demand proof.

"Eliminating cloning is easy. There are some cells in the body that age along with us, the cells in the lens of our eyes, female oocytes, and the cerebral cortex for example. I doubt her brain will be a good candidate, since a great deal of it will be cloned and regrown tissue, but the rest … should all be her calendar age. A clone's cells would be as old as they are. The rest … well, let's run the tests and see." She paused. "Do you believe it's her?"

Nihlus grinned as he heard a small, frantic firefight break out a block or so away. "I know it's her, Doctor. Thank you for the update."

"I'll have the nurses let you know when the general wakes. Chakwas, out."

Nihlus closed the channel then lifted his eyes to Kima District, listening to the music of battle. Her music. Of course he knew it was Shepard, Tashac or no. He'd known the moment she refused to leave his people before they were safe on the other side of that gate on Freedom's Progress. And now … could anyone else have wreaked such complete havoc when outnumbered a thousand to one? No. A slow smile spread across his face as he closed his eyes, able to feel her out there. Somehow the universe had answered all his drunken pleas and sweat-soaked, shaking prayers. The
darkness must have heard him when he woke from the nightmares of watching her die yet again.

"Omega merc extermination services to Archangel base. Incoming prison bus," Shepard's voice called in his aural canal, alerting him to the fact that the gunfire had stopped. "We're overloaded here, so I'm sending Wrex and the worn out members of the platoon back with the prisoners. ETA ten minutes or so. They'll be coming straight down the street, so maybe keep some sniper rifles on them."

Nihlus opened the channel and lifted his sniper rifle to his shoulder, using the scope to see down the street. "Roger that. It sounded like you found a pocket of fighters."

"Pft," she scoffed. "Pocket of pansies hiding from the fighting. Apparently they took refuge in this penthouse when the mechs started their little VI insurrection. They thought the AI armageddon had begun." She laughed, but damn, it sounded as if she'd just spent half her remaining energy to get it out. "We've got two more buildings to clear over here, then the Eclipse base and then bed. All the bed."

'Understood. Dr. Chakwas just let me know that Garrus is out of surgery and doing well. She wants you to report to her as soon as you come in."

"Roger that. As long as it involves a shower and the all you can sleep buffet, I'm in." She let out a long, heavy sigh, and when she continued, her voice came through soft and hesitant. "You'll keep an eye on the big guy for me?"

"I will. Just get back here. You sound like you're ready to fall over." He waited a moment for her to reply. "Jane?"

A softer, lighter sigh answered him. "I wish I could sit down for fifteen minutes and just listen to you." She chuckled, a gentle throaty sound that warmed him through. "It's strange to realize how much you missed something you didn't even remember." She cleared her throat before he could answer. "Okay, keep an eye out for our prisoners. They should be hitting the street about now, and the guards accompanying them are falling down tired."

"Will do. I'll be in touch when they arrive. Kryik, out." He closed the channel and watched the street. The prisoners all looked pretty subdued with Wrex looming over them, and shuffled along without giving their escort any trouble. Lowering his rifle a little, Nihlus called for guards to meet Wrex at the front door and escort the prisoners to the makeshift holding cells.

Ten minutes later, the krogan stomped into the lounge, collapsing onto the half-destroyed couch. "Can you get together a fresh squad?" he asked without any sort of preamble or pleasantries. "They're all tired as hell out there. Some fresh blood to do most of the leg work would help."

Nihlus nodded. "You'll have them. The matron downstairs is baking them some sweets that you can take back with you." He studied the clan chief. Wrex's exhaustion showed, but Nihlus couldn't remember seeing the battlemaster ever look happier. "How's she doing?" he asked, hating the way that Wrex closed off at the question.

"She's a fighter, as tough and smart as she ever was." Wrex bristled, leaning forward, his shoulders expanding defensively. "You think she's a fake, too?" He pushed up off the couch.

Nihlus shook his head. "I have no doubts about her at all. Just concerned. They brought her back from the dead, and she looks like hell, Wrex." He turned back toward the street, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. "I just … well, just take care of her out there."
"Ha!" Wrex thumped him on the shoulder. "Still sweet on her." The behemoth chuckled and shook his head. "I'll watch out for her." He sniffed the air. "I smell cookies. See you later." He lumbered from the room a lot faster than he entered. "Hey! Marcie, are those cookies ready?"

Twenty minutes later, Wrex, Butler, twenty fresh Archangel recruits, and a large container of cookies headed out to meet up with Shepard. Judging by the sporadic gunfire, she'd moved on to clearing another building.

The day passed quickly once the rest of the base dragged themselves out of bed. Operative Lawson proved her organizational skills: damage reports flowed in by noon, and clean up crews set to work shortly thereafter. By mid-afternoon the body disposal teams rolled in to start disposing of the merc corpses, the entire base thrumming with positive energy. The ugly part over, the mourning not truly begun, they all threw themselves into putting their lives back in order the best they could.

Nihlus remained on watch at the balcony, catching sight of Shepard and her teams sporadically as they fanned out through the remaining Blue Suns' camp and then crossed the street to sweep down through the Eclipse buildings. No matter how thorough her search, Shepard couldn't hope to track down all the mercs. A few would escape, but he knew she counted on the stragglers to spread the word of how brutal and inventive the resurrected Captain Jane Shepard had been in destroying Archangel's enemies. It wouldn't stop the council and the Collectors from trying again, but hopefully it bought them a little time to find a way to take out those Collector ships.

At last, just when the scent of cooking began to drift over the inner balcony, Shepard emerged from the building closest to the bridge and looked up at him. She waved, then opened a channel over the comms.

"We're on our way in. Just going to—" She stiffened and turned to her right. After searching around for a couple of seconds, she knelt next to a huge chunk of fallen building.

The sound of rubble being tossed aside rumbled and crackled in Nihlus's head before he heard a male voice, faint and heavy with pain, "Guess I know who our inside man was, hey Short Stack?"

"Yeah," Shepard replied, "sorry about that, sir, but I couldn't let you take out the good guys." More thumping and banging. "This doesn't look good, but we can't just leave you under that thing. Do you have feeling anywhere?"

"That leg has been pretty dead for hours, the rest seems not too bad."

He saw Shepard pop up. "Wrex! I could use you and your krogan over here for a second." She disappeared again. "These guys will get you out of here." A little more scuffling, then she addressed Nihlus again. "Nihlus, we're coming in. Looks like we could use a stretcher at the front door."

"Roger that. Kryik out." He messaged the hospital, then got up and headed downstairs. As he strode through the lobby, he called, "Wimak, keep an eye on the bridge. East sniper perch."

The batarian jumped up off the couch and ran up the stairs as if demons were chasing him. Nihlus chuckled and shook his head. Recruits.

Picking his way across the rubble-strewn bridge, Nihlus realized that they'd have to get the body disposal crews in immediately, the stink of death and all its associated indignities already beginning to reach a nauseating level. He steeled himself against the all too familiar stench and waded in. He found Shepard still crouched behind the fallen corner column.
"Need a hand?" he asked, chuckling a little as she jumped. He hadn't been the least bit quiet in his approach, so he suspected that she'd fallen asleep even crouched as she was.

The smile that answered him grabbed his heart and twisted it. "Yeah. Wrex and his warriors are looking for something to act as a lever, see if we can't lift this enough to slide Captain Burgess here out."

"Shepard!" Wrex called, striding toward them with an metal beam under one arm. "This should work." The krogan nodded at Nihlus then toward Shepard.

Catching the hint, Nihlus slipped a hand under Shepard's arm. "The best thing we can do is get out of the way." Once he helped her stand, he wrapped an arm around her waist and led her off to the side.

Letting out more than a few roars and bellows, the krogan managed to move the chunk of building enough to remove the Eclipse captain. Wrex picked up the human, carrying him like a child, and looked to Shepard. "Can we finally end this endless damned day?"

She chuckled and nodded. "We can, glory hallelujah." Leaning heavily into Nihlus, she looked up into his eyes. "Give a girl a hand, Spectre Kryik?"

When he nodded, she wrapped an arm around him, that gentle pressure setting his heart pounding. He knew what Garrus would say about his belief in Shepard. He'd say that Nihlus just wanted it to be true so badly he was willing to accept anything as evidence. As his entire body sang, revelling in Shepard's presence, he couldn't have said that Garrus was wrong.

He led Shepard up to the lounge, pausing only to grab her a bottle of soda and a couple of cookies. When he moved to help her sit on the unexploded end of the couch, she refused, sitting on the arm instead.

"If I get that far down, you'll have to get Wrex's team in to get me up," she said, groaning softly as she lowered her weight onto the leather. "Oh, yeah. That works." She met his eyes and smiled. "Hi," she said, chuckling softly.

"Hi." He leaned back against the wall of the inner balcony. "Once you eat those, we should run you through a shower and get you upstairs. I don't think we should wait on getting your identity verified." Watching her with eager, starved eyes, he found himself grinning as she bit off half a cookie and washed it down with almost the entire bottle of soda. She wolfed her food down, just as she always had. A habit shared by every human soldier he'd ever met.

"Captain," Miranda Lawson called, striding into the room. "Back in one piece, I see." The operative hurried over and activated her omnitool. "You've worn yourself—"

Shepard slapped the omnitool out of her face. "Miranda, go stand somewhere … else. I just want to eat my cookies, drink my orange soda, and wash the last two days off my skin. You can make yourself useful ensuring that Vincent, Jack, and the others get back to the ship and are well looked after." She upended the bottle of soda, finishing it off in three gulps. A decent burp rolled up afterward. "Excuse me. Anyway, the others have been through hell, and I'd appreciate you seeing that they all got a really great meal and then as much sleep as they need."

Miranda opened her mouth to reply, but the young batarian recruit, Wimak, turned from the window and called, "Spectre Kryik, sir, Captain Anderson just arrived in a shuttle."

"Thank you." Nihlus nodded, but didn't take his eyes off Shepard, who had paled a little, her eyes
latching onto his, a spirit in the pits of *buratrum* catching hold of a beam of light. He met her nerves with a strong, reassuring smile. Surely she didn't have anything to worry about. Anderson loved her, considered himself her father, everything would be okay.

A smile struggled to force itself across her lips, but he could see the toll her reunion with Garrus had taken as the smile trembled then shattered when Anderson's voice echoed up from below. "Where is she?"

Damn. The captain's yell resonated with several things, but none of them were love or acceptance. Nihlus drew closer to Shepard, drawn in by all the pieces missing from her gaze. The woman before him was Jane Shepard, he knew that as surely as he knew anything, but despite restoring Shepard's pulse, breathing, and memories, death had claimed big pieces of the woman he'd known … pieces Cerberus hadn't brought back from the void.

As tough as she remained, Nihlus felt a fragility flickering just beneath, sunlight shrinking between the leaves. He stepped up just behind her right shoulder, his hand brushing the back of her arm just to reassure her that he had her back.

Anderson strode into the room, stopping dead in his tracks as his hard, searching gaze landed on Shepard. Nothing welcoming awaited her there, but neither did Nihlus see anything furious or accusatory. The captain's stare just moved over her as if she were a piece of furniture.

"Anderson!" She jumped up and took two steps. Her boots squeaked to a halt as he jerked back from her, his hands lifting defensively. She extended a hand a couple of inches, her tone soft and pleading when she said, "Anderson?"

The captain edged around her without speaking a word, moving as if he expected that tiny body to erupt into a Reaper. Once clear, he stormed over to face down Miranda. Very real fear ignited behind Nihlus's keel, the threat of violence … the raw pain simmering in Anderson's rage palpable. The Spectre didn't care about Miranda, although he supposed he wouldn't let Anderson kill the woman, but a very real possibility resonated through the room that the captain might just try to put his daughter's doppelganger down.

Nihlus shifted to stand between Shepard and the captain, his talons poised to drop Anderson to the floor if he needed to.

Anderson bulled straight into Miranda's face. "Are you the one responsible for this … this sick joke?" His bellow rang tight with emotion.

For a moment, the captain's clenched fists seemed about to give Lawson a matching black mark on the other side of her face, but then Miranda stepped back, holding herself straight and apparently unintimidated. "It's not a joke, Captain." She nodded toward Shepard as if the entire situation were completely reasonable. "This is Captain Jane Shepard. My organization salvaged her body when it was jettisoned from the *Normandy*. It took nearly two years … ."

"Two years to do what? Reanimate some puppet?" he roared, his deep voice reverberating off the walls. Nihlus saw that it pummelled Shepard as well, her body jerking as if each echo slammed a fist into her gut. The Spectre opened his mouth to tell Anderson to back off, but the captain's rage erupted again. "Why? What is your angle? What could possibly justify perverting that beautiful child this way?"

Lawson took a deep breath, crossing her arms defensively. "We brought Shepard back because we believe she is our best chance at preparing for and surviving the Reapers, Captain." Nihlus winced as the haughty mask slammed into place. Spirits, Lawson really didn't have a clue how to deal with
people.

The Spectre turned a little to keep an eye on Shepard. Her entire body trembled, looking as though even the slightest touch would shatter her completely. He reached out to squeeze her fingers, but she drew away from him, balling her hands into fists.

"Bullshit." Anderson threw his whole body into stabbing another accusatory finger at Shepard. "You didn't even bother to make the copy convincing. Dull, pale … you didn't even bother with her freckles, and you expect us to buy this? She looks like …" The captain stared at Shepard for long seconds, his mouth trying to form words, eventually spitting out, "… a wax work, and a nightmarish one at that!"

Nihlus's gasp of dismay matched the one that sounded as though it had driven all the air out of Shepard's lungs, and she collapsed around the blow. Anderson's words tossed a spark into the fuel, and Nihlus's control exploded. He threw himself between them, sheltering Shepard with his body even though it could do nothing to block the worst blows. "Anderson! Enough! This is Jane, and she's standing right here. Shock is understandable … so is not believing that she's real, but spirits, you don't have to crush her heart."

Anderson spun, his weapon an invisible one, but Nihlus felt its deadliness nonetheless as it came to bear. "You believe this?" the captain demanded. "You believe that these monsters salvaged her frozen corpse and brought it back to life, soul intact?" He stalked a couple of steps closer, moving sideways to see past Nihlus.

Nihlus compensated, keeping Shepard sheltered behind him. "I do. I don't know how they did it, but they brought her back." He raised his hands, trying to placate the captain enough that he'd stop bludgeoning Shepard. She made a soft, mewing sound that reached down inside him and sank claws into his heart. That time, when he reached behind him for her hand, she clutched it with both of hers, stepping forward to press against his arm.

"She has all the beacon memories, and the knowledge that Amalair translated." He held a hand out to keep the captain back, but also hoping to calm him. "This is Jane."

Anderson drew back, his face twisting into an almost vicious scowl. "And how much have you had to drink?"

Nihlus winced, but drew himself taller and threw up his shields. Let Anderson turn all that bile on him. He'd taken worse and could weather it a hell of a lot better than Shepard. "Nothing for two days."

"This is not Jane. Jane is dead." Anderson emphasized every word by stabbing a finger toward Shepard's chest then spun back to face Miranda. "I don't know what Cerberus's plan is, but I've already contacted Alliance command. Admirals are being sent to investigate, so expect to lose your puppet. He backed toward the door a couple of steps. "As for this desecration … if there is the slightest sign of a VI or an AI, I will put it down myself."

Shepard's hands yanked free of Nihlus's, leaping to her chest, clutching one another over her heart as she turned away from them, frantic, terrified eyes searching the room as if hunting for somewhere to hide. A soft moan escaped before she pressed her fists to her mouth and started backing toward the door.

"Come on." Nihlus turned away from the captain and wrapped his arm around Shepard's shoulders, guiding her from the room. There was no point in letting Anderson cudgel her any longer. Even if it didn't break her, he'd piled up enough to regret once her identity was proven. Shepard didn't
resist, shock driving her into a protective shell. Once she had a shower and a chance to rest, she'd pull out of it. He led her into the back of the building, to the only place he knew no one would go looking for her.

When he stepped through the door to his small apartment, Shepard looked around the dim space. Her face remained slack as she asked, "Where are we?"

"My place." Nihlus stepped in front of her, his hands wrapping around her upper arms. "Anderson is just in shock, Shepard. He'll figure it out, and be glad for this … " He shrugged, his mandibles flaring. "... miracle?"

She just stood there, staring at him. One trembling hand reached up, tracing his *familia notas* with her fingertips. "They always seem to glow in the dim light," she whispered, her stare locking onto his eyes. Deep waves of confusion swirled through the green, tearing up everything in their path. Her voice came out in a sigh so soft, it could have been thought. "Why? Why didn't they just leave me dead?"

"No!" Nihlus yanked her into his arms. "No! Never say that." He held her tight, lifting her feet right off the ground, cradling her in his embrace.

"Did I say that out loud?" she asked, cocking her head a little. After a second, desperation latched onto him again. "Am I just some … thing, Nihlus?"

"Okay." Nihlus let out a long sigh that whistled through his nose. "You took care of me on Freedom's Progress. My turn." He released her, sliding his hands down her arms as he stepped back. Taking her hands, he tugged her toward the bed. "Come on. Let's get you into a shower and then upstairs." He pressed his brow to hers, eyes closing as he willed his strength and belief in her to transfer, buoy her up for just a little longer. "You're okay, Shepard. I've got you."

(A-N: Another milestone this week. Thank you all so much for the support. *hugs and love for all* See you in a few days.)
Chapter Summary

A brief lull in the storm.

28 Days ASR

Shepard opened the bathroom door to a massive cloud of steam. The humidity created a formidable barrier that solidified around her nostrils and mouth, making each inhalation a chore. Aching, her entire being stripped to the bone and as numb as a foot gone to sleep, she pushed into the rolling billows of steam. She could find the energy to stay on her feet long enough to wash Omega from her skin.

Even before the door closed, she ripped open the collar panel of the skin-tight tunic and pulled it over her head. She reached behind her to undo her bra, but couldn't convince her arms to lift far enough. Not that her smallish B cups prohibited pulling the detestable device straight over her head. She laid her hands over her fabric-covered breasts and sighed. With all the perceived imperfections that Cerberus had eliminated … her scars and freckles … she considered herself lucky they hadn't decided that huge boobs were necessary to save the galaxy.

A bitter laugh crackled over her tongue as she flung her tunic in the corner then stripped out of her trousers and panties, piling them on top of the shirt. Maybe the boob job was scheduled for later in the rebuilding process.

Footsteps approached the door, but she didn't bother to scramble for cover up. "You're steaming up the whole apartment," Nihlus chastised, but his voice just brushed over her, a gentle caress without any heat. "You going to shower with half your clothes still on?" Gentle talons unclasped her bra, then held a bottle over her shoulder. "Here. I stole this from Garrus's bathroom." When she took it, he turned and stepped back over the threshold, the door whispering shut behind him.

Shepard stared at the bottle. Her shampoo. He'd kept it. She popped the top open and inhaled, her eyes drifting closed. There it was. There she was … or part of her at least … as familiar and close as her heartbeat. It seemed that Garrus and Nihlus's voices weren't the only things she'd missed without remembering them.

She set the shampoo on the counter and stuck her hand under the water. Roasting hot, just the way she'd liked it once. Not anymore, not with the crevasses in her flesh carrying the heat all the way to her bones. She turned it down a little and stepped under the stinging spray.

A sharp cry squeezed out between her clenched teeth as a thousand tiny knives carved into her. Breathing through her nose, she counted off … warrior inside and out. She just needed to tough it out for a minute or so. The pain would numb. She knew how to take pain … knew how to muscle through it better than nearly anyone.

"You all right in there?"

A soft smile whispered across her face as she opened her eyes. "Yeah," she replied, the expected lie. Of course she wasn't all right. She'd spent the past couple of days bouncing down the tick
marks on the left hand side of zero. So many had passed by that she began to hope the 'all-right scale' bottomed out at some point.

"You didn't even make the copy convincing. Dull, pale ... you didn't even bother with her freckles, and you expect us to buy this? She looks like ... a waxwork, and a nightmarish one at that!"

Shep[98]ard reached out, bracing her arms against the wall and let her head hang from her shoulders, chin to her chest. She just wanted to sleep. Who needed to get clean, anyway?

"What are you?"

She flinched as Garrus's words slammed through her head, a firework set loose to ricochet off the inside of her skull. How many times had she asked herself that same question over the past month? Too many, but damn it, she'd hoped to look into his eyes or Anderson's and see that they knew who and what she was. Naive to the point of stupidity, she supposed. They'd been there. They knew she died. Why would they just throw their arms wide and welcome her home?

"I held my Kahri as she died. I sat beside her body for three days before we buried her."

Oh, Garrus. A hiccupping sob erupted from her throat, collapsing her at the waist, her knees buckling as she folded down. He'd sat by her side, holding her hand for three days. She'd been so stupid, wasting the time they'd had being afraid. She crouched, splayed fingertips braced against the tile above her head, gasping for breath between sobs as a waterfall of hot water poured over her brow.

During their clean-up mission, Martin had brought her up to speed on her missing years. Garrus refused to move on, swearing himself to a dead woman. As much as the depth of his devotion moved her, being the reason he lived half a life ... it ground her heart under its heel.

And Anderson ...

"As for this desecration ... if there is the slightest sign of a VI or an AI, I will put it down myself."

Sliding sideways, Shepard sat on one hip, her legs folded under her. Once her shoulder and brow pressed against the wall, her hands dropped into her lap. She understood his anger, and in an odd way, his fierce defense of her memory touched her, but ... those words sliced like scalpels, cutting open dark, deep, and hidden parts of her.

"Don't come back."

The tears stopped, the pain sputtering as its engine ran out of fuel and died. Shep[98]ard closed her eyes, allowing the corner of the shower to hold her upright as Garrus's words punctured the tank, her will draining out, swirling into the water as it poured down the drain. Limbs heavy and numb, mind unable to form more than half a thought before the thread broke, she simply huddled, too tired ... too done ... to even move.

"Jane?" The worry in Nihlus's voice stroked invisible fingers down the back of her neck. Someone believed in her. Someone had looked into the glowing implants behind her eyes and still knew it was her. His low rubble shivered through the steamy air. "I'm coming in unless you can answer me in some sort of complete, coherent sentence."

What did it matter?

The door opened, and a long, whistling sigh preceded the torin over the threshold. "Yeah, that's about what I thought." Nihlus crouched beside her and ran a hand over her hair. "Been a hell of a
couple of days." He twisted around; she could just see his boots rotate on the white floor tile. A moment later, he lowered himself to sit next to her, his fully clothed legs stretched out in front of him.

Another low, almost purring sigh rolled over her. "We spend far too much time on bathroom floors, you and I." He produced her shampoo, popped the cap and squeezed some straight onto her head. "You know, hair seems like a lot of trouble. It's always in the way, gets full of filth, and ... it's just weird." His talons massaged her head a little, then he chuffed. "Hm. Feels nice though. Sorta silky, like *tussat* tassels."

As Nihlus played with her hair, scrubbing here and there, then swirling his talons to make spikes and whorls, she eased around to lean against his side. He felt warm and solid, the only real thing in the entire galaxy.

"All right, being able to sculpt it is fun," he said, finishing a line of spikes down the center of her head. "You look like one of those lizard things I saw in an Earth museum once."

"A dinosaur?" Shepard shifted the rest of the way, hugging her knees to her chest. She looked up into his eyes, soaking up all the confidence and belief she saw there. When he smiled, a flutter of mandibles, she rested her head against the breast of his tunic. "I'm so tired, Nihlus. I've been so very tired for the last month. I think half of me got left behind when they dragged me back."

A knuckle pressed gently under her chin, tilting her head back. "Close your eyes," he said, shielding her eyes even so, the side of his hand pressed against her brow. He rinsed the soap from her hair with gentle talons then bent down to nuzzle the top of her head. "Did you get clean at all?" he asked, gathering her into his arms, his chin resting on the top of her head.

Shepard just shook her head and leaned into him. The pressure of his arms and side helped ease the pain down to a dull ache. She plucked at the soaking material of his heavy tunic with the fingers of her one hand. "Probably going to get cleaner than you under all this," she said, trying for levity.

Nihlus ran the pad of his talon alongside a deep fissure that spiraled around her shoulder, a fractal covering the entire joint and down her shoulder blade. "Does it hurt you to wash?" He lifted his head to look down her back. "Damn, those wounds are everywhere, aren't they." A soft keen threaded through the words. "What are they from?" His thumb talon caressed her arm, sweeping along between two long canyons. "Does this hurt?"

Shepard shook her head and leaned in tighter. "It feels good." She closed her eyes and took a long, slow breath. "As for the wounds ... they hurt all the time. Sometimes it's an ache that I can't ease no matter how I sit or lie ... no matter what I wear or how I adjust my clothes. Sometimes it's raw and burning." She tilted her face into the water. "Showers mostly, and when I spray them with the antibacterial and sealant. And then, sometimes it feels like being eaten alive by varren." She shrugged. "Miranda says they're because my flesh is as ornery as the rest of me and refuses to grow over the cybernetics."

She slid one arm from between them and wrapped it around his waist. "They had to wake me up six months early ... the base was under attack. I refused to let them put me back under, even though sometimes I wish I had."

Nihlus released her and started to get up, but Shepard grabbed his arm. "Not yet, please." When he lowered himself back onto the tile, she stared into his eyes, searching for truth beyond the kindness, even beyond the love she knew he felt. "They should have just left me alone," she whispered, the words drifting like autumn leaves from the hollow place that howled inside her. The moment they hit the air, they turned to ash and dust. "Why didn't they just leave me alone?"
Nihlus's large hands cupped either side of her face. The rasp of his calloused palms burned against her cheeks, but the pain anchored her, cutting through the mess brewing inside her skull. He arched a brow plate. "I'm going to just say this once, so I really want you to listen to me, Jane." He pressed his mouth to her forehead for a moment before pulling back to meet her stare again. "We need you. That's why they did it." He shrugged and shook his head, a helpless, lonely sort of gesture. "The entire galaxy needs you."

Shepard reached up to grip his wrists, her smile sour and slow. "You don't need me, Nihlus. Look at all this. You guys did this without me. All of it." Blowing a quick puff of air out her nose, she leaned into his hand and closed her eyes. "You would be fine."

His grip tightened, the pain startling her and snapping her stare straight back to his eyes. "We'd be dead, Jane." His brow plates jumped toward his fringe. "Are you forgetting what you walked into here? Before your one woman wrecking crew showed up, we had maybe twelve hours left to live, and I'm not exaggerating that. All of us, myself … Garrus … the kid … we'd all be corpses on the floor."

As she looked into those … what had she called them that first day during her schoolgirl crush moment? … piercing green eyes, she saw unfettered, unembellished, unabashed truth. One corner of her mouth tweaked a little. "Okay, so maybe not entirely fine."

Nihlus grinned and nuzzled the end of her nose. "Not at all." He nodded toward the stream of water. "You able to take it from here?"

Slipping from his grip, she shifted around onto her knees and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Yeah, I've reached my pathetic quota for the day." She held him tight, a thin sliver of guilt stabbing into her. "I'm so sorry, Nihlus."

He held her gingerly. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Jane. Nothing." He nuzzled her ear. "Come on, up you get. Scrub the filth off, then let's get upstairs, and you can sleep while the doctor pokes you with her omnitool." He chuffed. "Why does she do that, anyway? It's not like poking us with it makes it work any better."

Shepard chuckled, quiet mirth welling up through the weariness, a bright spark. She drew back and kissed him. "Thank you," she whispered against his mouth before pulling away. Running a hand over his head, she said, "You know … having a fringe just seems weird, and I can't even sculpt it."

A wide grin and resigned head shake answered her teasing. Standing, Nihlus reached down for her hands, and pulled her up. One finger brushed her cheek, softer than an autumn rain but just as sweet and full of regret, then he turned and strode out.

Feeling lighter if not less exhausted, Shepard made quick work of cleaning off the built up grime, patted herself dry and wrapped the towel around herself before heading back out into the main room. She blinked a little, her eyes adjusting to the dimmer, red-tinted illumination. Her armour all sat piled, clean and shining, at the foot of his bed, and a pair of sweats and a t-shirt graced the corner of the mattress. He sat on the couch, feet up on the coffee table, a datapad glowing in his hand.

"Wow, look at all this. Who knew you had a caretaker in there? And a speedy one at that," she teased, bending to find her belt amidst her armour. Retrieving her antibiotic spray and sealant, she held them up. "Give me a hand?"

Nihlus kicked his feet off the table and stood, letting the datapad fall behind him on the couch. "Sure, what can I do?"
Shepard set the towel aside and sprayed the antiseptic down her front. "It needs to be sprayed just on the crevasses." She held out the bottle. "Please?"

He sat on the end of the bed and tugged her over between his knees. "I can probably handle this dangerous and skill taxing assignment." He sprayed her one shoulder, squinting, his mandibles held slightly spread and rigid, his concentration belying his teasing about the task being a simple one. "So, I thought humans were all uptight about being naked in front of ... well, pretty much anyone."

Shepard shrugged. "That doesn't last very long in the military. You change and shower where and when you can." She chuckled. "Although, I did shower in my bra and panties for about the first year."

He hissed softly between his teeth when he moved to the backs of her legs. "How do you wear armour with these wounds?" A soft, distressed rumbled rolled through his second larynx. "Spirits, Jane, I could lose a talon in the ones on your thighs." A gentle hand wrapped around her waist just above her hip.

"Painkillers," she said simply. She glanced back when the cool mist stopped hitting her skin. "Done with that one?" She took it, then passed him the sealant. "This one is really important to just get on the wounds, or I end up feeling like a Barbie doll all day."

"A what?" he asked, his brow plates drawing down tight over his eyes.

"Barbie is a plastic human-female-shaped doll made for little girls to dress up."

Drawing his head back, Nihlus chuffed softly. "Somethings are universal." He cleared his throat. "I had a doll as a perir. His name was Aurin Plavidus, a very noble name, I thought. My pari used to make me little sets of armour for him out of scrap ... the most beautiful, intricate ... ." He trailed off, then shrugged. "I still have him, and all his armours, back in storage on Ilium." He sighed. "I should go pick all that up some day. Anyway, I'd dress him up and take him into glorious battle on the back of the excavator while my pari worked."

Shepard grinned. "I turned all my Barbies into pirates and astronauts, cowboys and soldiers. It drove my mother insane. I swear she had Bunny just to raise a girl." A sad smile barely bloomed before it wilted.

"Here," Nihlus said, passing her the sealant. "All done back here." A perplexed frown met her questioning stare. "Although, having seen your ... what do you call it ... your backside? ... several times now ... I have to ask ... ."

Shepard's trap alert began to ping at the base of her skull, and one eyebrow headed for her hairline as she crossed her arms. "Go ahead." The smirk on his face told her that she was walking into it, but still ... .

"Does it come in adult size?" He stared at her, mandibles twitching. She punched him in the shoulder hard enough to lay him back, and his inordinately pleased, teasing laughter lit up the room.

"Har. Har. Go ahead, smart ass, laugh it up." Shepard hid her grin and shook her head. "I knew that was coming." She started spraying her front. "You think you're so clever." Finishing up her treatment as he chortled away to himself, she just let the easy camaraderie flow over and through her. Two years ago, she never could have imagined being so completely at ease with him, but the Spectre had changed ... settled. Garrus had been good for him.
Anderson's words barked through her thoughts as she reached for the blue t-shirt emblazoned with the stylized golden wings on the left shoulder.

"And how much have you had to drink?"

Questions lined up, pushing at the backs of her teeth, but she swallowed them. She could ask Nihlus about that later. She dressed in the t-shirt and sweat pants, then put the first two bottles away and pulled out a third and a mirror.

"What's this now?" he asked, sitting up. He took the bottle from her hand when she held it up and looked at the label. "I don't read human common."

"It's just the sealant. I can't spray it on my face." She chuckled and climbed up to sit cross-legged on the bed. "What if I accidentally sprayed it in my eyes or nostrils?" Bouncing a little, she looked down. "Damn, turian beds are nice. There's got to be forty centimetres of mem-cel here."

He turned around to sit cross-legged facing her. "It's the cowls. We need a lot of depth to get proper spinal alignment." He opened the cap on the sealant and squeezed some out onto the pad of his talon. "Lean in here."

She did as he said, her mind still on the bed. "Blessed Enkindlers, Garrus must have been in agony sleeping on the bed in the captain's quarters on the Normandy. That thing made me ache after a couple of hours."

Nihlus nodded and spread the clear ointment over the rents covering her face. "He started each day with a limp that whole last month chasing Saren."

Sadness clung to that thought. "I never knew," she whispered.

"Of course you didn't." He screwed his face up as he followed the convoluted lines of scarring. "He got up early to work the kinks out so that you wouldn't."

"I don't blame him, you know," she blurted out, her thoughts flipping at light speed. After everything Garrus suffered through, she didn't want Nihlus to think that she harboured any resentment for his rejection. "Same with Anderson." The air burrowed down into her lungs, sneaking out with her words, making them breathy-sounding, as if she'd been running. Her heart fluttered, rather than taking a full beat as he stared into her eyes, his attention almost daunting.

"I mean, it hurts, but how can I blame them for being suspicious?" She shrugged then planted her elbows on her thighs, leaning close and tilting her face up. "Archangel has been under attack for what … a week? Betrayal, traps, and attack coming at you from everywhere. And then, here I come … dead Shepard to the rescue."

His mandibles fluttered as he squeezed more of the sealant onto the pad of his first talon. "Dead Shepard?" His chuckle teased her face into a reluctant smile. "You going to make that official?"

Despite herself, Shepard laughed, the sound letting off a release valve. Rocking forward, she reached out and shoved him. "Might as well. Maybe as my middle name. Jane 'Dead' Shepard."

Pressing her lips into a considering scowl, she nodded. "I like it."

Nihlus shrugged and spread the sealant along the crack under her right cheekbone. "I don't know. I like it as a first name. If you're going to own it … own it." He finished applying the sealant. "All right. You're ready to face the galaxy."

She scoffed. "Ready to face the galaxy." Shepard opened the small mirror and held it up to look at
herself. "I don't even recognize myself; how are they supposed to?" She ran a finger across the bridge of her nose and across her cheekbone. "And they're right … no freckles … no scars … I'm just a cheap knock off."

Nihlus snatched the mirror from her hand and snapped it closed. "Losing the scars might just let you move past leaning on that crutch, and as for the freckles … ." He chuffed and swung off the bed onto his feet. "I don't know. I always thought your face was a little busy. How do you concentrate on someone's eyes with all those spots everywhere?" He shuddered. "It's weirder than the hair."

A small, strangled sound … half-sob, half-laugh … clambered past the sudden rockslide in her throat. Damn. Scrambling up onto her feet, she stood on the edge of the bed and wrapped her arms around his neck, hugging him tight.

"Okay, come on," he said, his voice soft and rolling. "Let's go provide the rest of them with proof." He tossed the tube onto the bed, then picked her up, long arms supporting her backside, and carried her to the door. "I need to document this … the great Captain Shepard being carried without protest." He set her down at the threshold then returned to the bed for her sweatshirt. "Put your boots on. I don't know if you noticed, but this place is a mess right now."

She slipped her bare feet into her boots then shrugged into the hoodie and zipped it up before heading out. Even in the short time they'd been in Nihlus's apartment, the cleaning crews had performed miracles, getting most of the lobby and first floor back to normal, if bullet-riddled walls could be called normal.

Miranda strode up to them as they turned toward the elevator, greeting them with a curt nod. "Captain … Spectre Kryik." She passed Nihlus a datapad. "Half the departments have reported in with their repair estimates. Most of the damage was restricted to the exterior of the base and, of course, the sublevels. Buildings two and three sustained minimal exterior damage. Body disposal crews are working in the sublevels and across the bridge. Three more crews are expected to report in within the next eight hours."

Shepard's eyebrows lifted, her earlier anger replaced by admiration for Miranda's thoroughness and willingness to work so hard for people she didn't even know.

Miranda continued, "The effects of Archangel personnel who perished in the fighting are being boxed up. A list of the deceased is enclosed in my report." She let out a long breath and backed up a step. "Relatives are beginning to call. I assigned half the accounting department to answering calls, but I left issuing official condolences to you or General Vakarian."

"Excellent work, Operative Lawson, thank you." Nihlus stepped back and activated the datapad.

The operative nodded in reply then turned to Shepard. "Captain, the team is aboard the SR2. Dr. Eis signed off their mission-end health reports, citing nothing more serious than bullet grazes and exhaustion. Yeoman Chambers purchased pizza and beer to feed them, which was greeted with far more enthusiasm than my proposed menu of steamed fish, legumes, and salad. Commander Javik refused to comment on his food preferences."

Shepard chuckled and shook her head. "Don't take it personally, Miranda. The team needs comfort more than nutrition at the moment. You can crack down on our eating habits in a couple of days." When the elevator opened, Shepard gave the operative a weary smile. "And Javik has forty years of paranoia to work through. Just stock precooked fish and fruit—nothing citrus—for him. Frozen or canned will do. Just leave instructions for the can opener and the microwave somewhere he can find them."
Taking note of the dark circles under the operative's eyes and the increasingly colourful mark spreading across her face, Shepard said, "When you wrap up whatever you're doing for Archangel … get some rest. Eat some pizza. Relax a little. It's going to get a lot worse from here."

She followed Nihlus into the carriage. "I'll make it an order if I need to," she said, the doors closing before Miranda could reply.

"Commander Javik?" Nihlus asked when the carriage started to rise. "The one in the unusual armour?"

Shepard grinned. "You're not going to believe me."

Crossing his arms and cocking a hip, he challenged her without saying a word.

"Okay, but you aren't." She stepped up to the door, her eyes on the controls as the numbers climbed. "He's Prothean."

"Prothean?"

She grinned. "I told you—"

"Now, wait!" he protested. "Give me a minute or two to process before you start your gloating dance." He chuffed. "It's a particularly ugly dance." After a second, he stepped up beside her, his entire body vibrating and rigid. "Wait … a … second … Javik? That Javik? The … ?" When Shepard nodded, he rumbled low and threatening. "It's a wonder Tashac didn't insist that you disembowel him. Where did he come from?"

Shepard chuckled. "Who says she didn't? And he came out of a stasis pod excavated from that cave-in on Eden Prime. Cerberus stole him. He was still in stasis when I got aboard the SR2." She cast a quick glance at him out of the corner of her eyes. "I figured we could use the help of a live Prothean."

The elevator doors opened to reveal a much quieter hospital floor. A few patients slept in beds and cots along the sides of the hallway, but for the most part, they'd been moved to rooms. Dr. Chakwas stood in a huddle of nursing personnel going over a very full board of patients. Looking up and seeing Shepard, the doctor gestured toward a room in the corner.

Shepard walked through the door into a small room with a medical bed and full bank of equipment along one wall. She stopped at the side of the bed, staring, daunted by the waist-high surface. Turning around, she held out her arms, and pitched her voice into a high, helpless, childlike plea. "Lift me?"

Nihlus gripped her waist and popped her up onto the table without any effort, but grumbled about not having video evidence yet again. "Lazy." His mandibles snapped, daring her to argue. She didn't. He had the right of it, but her weariness had driven all the 'give a fuck' out of her.

Shepard didn't have time to form a snarky comeback before the doctor strode into the room. "Lie back," Chakwas said, her tone warm despite its usual, brisk efficiency. She raised the head of the bed, then walked over to a metal unit in the corner.

"How did they get you off the Normandy, Doc?" Shepard asked, stretching out, a decadent groan celebrating the glorious state of horizontality.

The doctor unfolded a blanket and spread it over the captain. "I still accompany the Normandy when she ships out on missions, but the labs here allow me to conduct important
research." She smiled and raised an eyebrow. "Comfortable?"

Shepard pulled the heated blanket up to her chin and let out a happy moan. "I hurt everywhere, but lying down … heat … . Sweet baby Jesus, Doc … just glorious."

"Good." She activated her omnitool and tapped the interface, bringing up a large holographic projection over the bed.

Shepard squirmed a little as she eyeballed the complicated series of screens and readouts. "Ah, Doc … what is that thing? I don't have any bullets to rip out of me, but I do have a lot of metal these days."

Chakwas chuckled, but remained focused on her omnitool. "It's one of Mordin's creations, and don't worry, it will only be taking scans. No ripping will be involved." She closed the interface and patted Shepard's shoulder. "Just relax and get some sleep. I'm going to take a few tissue samples, and then the scans will take about an hour."

Shepard took a deep breath and let herself relax down into the mattress. "I think I can handle that." She jumped up to lean on one elbow when Nihlus stood. Hammering against the inside of her ribs, her heart threatened a panic attack and tears if the Spectre left her alone. Alone had once been her thing, but right then, right there, alone felt like an endless hole yawning below her. "You're not leaving?"

Nihlus slid his chair over to face the head of the bed and looked up at the doctor. "I won't interfere with the test results if I sit under this thing with her?"

Chakwas just shook her head and closed her omnitool. "I need you to just look straight at the ceiling, Captain. I'm going to use a very fine laser to harvest a few cells from the edge of the lens in your eye."

The smile that Shepard managed to bully onto her face felt strained. "Shooting lasers into my eyes, sure … that sounds awesome." She let out a shaky breath, her smile loosening a little as Nihlus took her hand between both of his. Her eyes slid closed for a moment as she savoured the rough, hard, warm … gentle contact. She'd forgotten that as well. The nights that Garrus had held her nestled in against his chest while he read to her, one hand always caressing her, soothing her to sleep.

"Shepard?"

The captain opened her eyes, quickly blinking away the burn of threatened tears. "Sorry, Doc. Laser away."

The procedure took only a second and didn't hurt in the slightest. The second one, to steal one of her oocytes, took a little longer and hurt considerably more, but then it too, ended.

"I'll be back when the scans are complete," Chakwas said. She walked to the door and dimmed the lights. "Get some rest, Captain."

When the door closed behind Chakwas, Shepard looked up at Nihlus. "Thanks."

He just nodded and turned his side into the bed a little. Shepard rested her head in the curve of his shoulder, then stared up into the holographic maelstrom, waiting for some sort of alarm to start screaming. When nothing happened, she closed her eyes and let sleep coax her with its siren melody.
Comfortable and thick, silence settled around them, her sleepy thoughts wandering back through the day. "What did Anderson mean when he asked about how much you'd had to drink?" she whispered, the quiet darkness lending itself to the question. She opened her eyes to find his closed.

"Functional drunk, I believe is the term," he answered, his subvocals rolling heavily despite his voice barely stirring the air. "Just go to sleep, Jane. It will keep. It will all keep."

Shepard started awake, her heart thumping hard and quick. Frowning, she leaned up a little, searching for the cause of her alarm. Darkness and quiet hung heavy and still, the air cool outside the covers. She took a deep breath, Nihlus's familiar desert and spice scent easing her back onto the mattress as it oriented her. The familiar rumble of snoring rolled over her shoulder and long arms wrapped around her, holding her against a turian-shaped heating unit. She lifted her arm to check her chrono. 0938.

How long had she been asleep? Lifting her head, she looked around the room. Nihlus's apartment. Had he carried her back? Damn, she hoped not. That was not an image she wanted imprinted on the Archangel personnel.

What had woken her up? A nightmare? She couldn't recall any images. Slipping a hand under her arm, she checked for sweat … nothing. So, not a nightmare. At least not one of the really terrible ones.

Someone pounded on the door, loud enough that Nihlus let out a couple of snorting breaths and lifted his head off the pillows. "What?" he asked, his voice low and thick with sleep.

"Someone's at the door." She rolled over onto her back and looked up at him. "A Spectre's work is never done."

A muttering grumble, heavy on the subvocals, answered her as he threw the blankets back and rolled over to sit on the side of the bed.

The banging returned, that time accompanied by the telltale sound of someone bypassing the lock. Shepard scowled and sat up. Where the hell had Nihlus put her guns? The door opened, bright light pouring in from the hallway, blinding her as a shadow stepped through.

She scrambled out from under the covers and crawled down the bed. Maybe her guns were with her armour.

"What in stinking pits of buratrum is this?"

Shepard froze at the sound of Garrus's voice. Rage, confusion, and disgust battered against her, the sheer force of it sitting her back on her heels. For breathless seconds, she stared into his eyes, the ice-blue of his glare closed to her. A sharp cough of disgust shattered the frozen silence, then he spun on his talons and stormed out the door.
Mass Effect - Future Complex Chapter Forty Four

Chapter Summary

Garrus up and out of bed with a brain injury. Some things just shouldn't be said or done with a brain injury.

29 Days ASR

Liquid nitrogen poured down Garrus's spinal column. Frozen in place, brittle and fragile, he stared at the two people leaping out of the bed, scattering to put themselves together. Disbelief screamed so loudly that it wiped everything else out of his head. His purpose … everything he'd intended to show Nihlus … everything he'd planned to say to warn his *fratrin* … Gone.

He said something. Sound came out his larynges, and his tongue and mouth formed it into words, but he didn't hear them through the crashing tide of pain and disgust and disappointment battering the inside of his skull. On the bed, the fake Shepard … of which he now had proof … just stared at him, wide-eyed. Did she know why he'd come to see Nihlus, or was it just guilt in the face of getting caught prying her way into the fold?

He looked over at Nihlus, the Spectre standing next to the bed, his tunic in his hands, and the ice shattered. Pity shoved aside the disgust. Spirits. He knew Nihlus missed Shepard … they all did, but sleeping with this … facsimile … his *fratrin* must have had a great deal to drink.

Fake-Shepard moved to get off the bed. No. Garrus spun on his talons and walked out the door. He couldn't deal with her. He couldn't look into that face and listen to her lies … or her delusions. He'd talk to Nihlus later … slap some bloody sense into him. Nausea from the storm raging inside his head and neck turned his insides to water, but he pushed through it, making it halfway down the hall before dizziness and pain forced him to stop. Buttressing a hand against the wall, he braced himself against the galaxy spinning around him far too fast for his medicated, concussed self to keep up.

"Garrus!" Nihlus chased him down the hall. "What are you doing?" His *fratrin* stepped in front of him and pressed a hand against his shoulder. Garrus shrugged it off and nearly fell, Nihlus all that kept him from hitting the floor when he leaped in and grabbed the general under his good arm. "Damn it," the Spectre said, his voice soft rather than upset. "Why are you out of bed? Does Chakwas know you're up and breaking into people's apartments?"

Garrus clenched his jaw, took a long breath and pushed off the wall. "I came to see if you'd checked your incoming messages. However, finding you in bed with her tells me that you haven't." He stepped around Nihlus and continued down to the lobby door. As Garrus hit the door control, he nodded toward the Spectre's wrist. "I suggest you check your messages before you allow that Cerberus weapon to sink her talons in any deeper." He stepped through, then, sharp-edged and bristled, turned back to block Nihlus. "And get dressed. Make sure that Cerberus whore is before she comes out here. The last thing we need is half-dressed drama in front of the cadets."

Nihlus retreated down the hall, shrugging into his tunic as he went. "Spirits, Garrus … you know that I—"
"When you're sober, I know exactly who you are and what you'll do," Garrus interjected, spinning away before Nihlus could protest his sobriety. Bracing himself against the wall as the inside of his head got left behind then whirled to catch up, Garrus closed his eyes. He really should just return to the hospital level and get back into bed. He didn't have the strength to deal with all the insanity.

"Shepard!" Nihlus's exclamation echoed out the still open door.

"Thanks for being there for me, Nihlus. I've got … well, I'll catch up with you later." Garrus heard boots striding down the hall, the steps quick, light, and determined.

He shoved off the wall and hit the elevator control. "Come on," he grumbled, staring at it, willing the damned thing to open and give him enough of a head start to escape, if only for a little while. He pushed through even before the doors opened fully, then hit the control to close them.

Shepard dove between the doors even as they closed, one gauntlet trapped under her arm while she pulled the other one on. Once she tugged both into place, she looked up, studying him with that eerily glowing stare. After a second, she let out a long breath and shook her head. "Garrus, you need to get back to the hospital. You look like hell." Her face drew into a pained grimace that pulled the skin apart over the cybernetics, their glow fierce and red through the raw meat.

Garrus stumbled, his stomach heaving, but caught himself against the railing.

She reached out to help support him, wincing as if he'd struck her when he yanked his arm away. Still, after a second, she stepped toward him again. "Nihlus has Archangel in hand. Give yourself time to heal."

Garrus let out a chuff that felt as though another rocket exploded against the side of his head. A soft grunt escaped between his teeth as he braced himself against the pain and answered her. "Nihlus has spent the last two years at the bottom of a brandy bottle. And after what I just saw, I can't say I place much faith in his decision making." Again, she jerked back as if he'd punched her in the gut. A faint, vicious satisfaction prickled under his plates, but after a second, it began to burn.

Recovering quickly, she came back at him with a very convincing replica of Shepard's stubbornness. "What do you think you saw in there, Garrus?" She cocked her eyebrow and shrugged. "Two clothed people leaping out of a dead sleep because someone was breaking into the room is what you actually saw." She cocked a hip and bulwarked her arms across her chest. "Forget what you think about me and what or who I am. You know, I understand your scepticism. I really do. Occam's razor is not my friend right now." A strangled sort of sigh cut from her throat, and she raked a hand through her hair.

She shrugged, a helpless flap of arms and shoulders, almost violent in its resignation. "So, go ahead, suspect me all you want … that knot will untangle when it does. But, you know Nihlus, and should bloody well know that he'd never hurt you … drunk or sober." She shook her head, her expression tugging at the unreasonably naive part of him that wanted to believe in the impossible. "So, yeah, I get you not trusting me, but the shit I just heard you say to him in that hallway … I hope to hell it's the head trauma talking." She turned to face the door, her hand stabbing back toward Nihlus's apartment. "Because that viciousness was not the torin I loved. And if that's who you've become … you're a bigger stranger to me than I ever could be to you." A choked, thick sob hiccuped through her, he watched it travel up her spine, but she bit it off before it escaped.

He forced his stare to slide over her rather than lingering to run comparisons with the woman in his mind. Had she been that skinny and frail, but sharp and hard like obsidian? The elevator saved him, jerking his attention away from her back as it stopped on the fourteenth floor. Her words added to
the shame simmering under his plates, flushing the back of his throat with bile, sour and metallic. The moral high ground was supposed to be his, but his anger kept turning the rock to mud beneath his feet.

The door opened, letting Martin in. The kid looked good, well rested and recovered. A splinter of envy slid under his plates to join the shame. Martin greeted both Garrus and Shepard with salutes, unable to hide the wide grin that greeted the replica. Spirits, not the kid too?

Still, Martin brushed past Shepard to stand next to Garrus as the doors closed and the carriage began to rise once more. "Should you be up? You look like you got shot in the head by a rocket." He cocked an eyebrow at Garrus when only a soft growl of subvocals answered him. "Right, in a mood. Understood." He sighed and held up a datapad. "To business then. First … Daro'Xen is missing. Her cell door was blown off, and she is nowhere to be found. No idea if she escaped or died." After waiting a few seconds for Garrus to answer, he shrugged and continued, "How many guards do you want assigned to the prisoners?"

Garrus frowned, then winced at the fireworks of pain going off beneath his bandages. Spirits, even blinking felt like someone taking a knife to his face. When he opened his mouth, the words came out with blades of their own. "Why do we still have prisoners?" That time Martin jerked back from the slap. Garrus felt Shepard's eyes on him, but focused on the kid.

"Sir?" Martin shuffled a little, his gaze shifting restlessly between his datapad, Garrus, and Shepard.

"Have they been questioned?" Garrus watched the numbers blink past, moving toward the doors even before they began to open. When they did, he pushed through, hurrying as quickly as he could manage without losing his balance, falling over, and vomiting all down himself.

"Yes, sir," Martin answered, jogging along to keep up as Garrus settled into a lengthy stride.

"Do they know anything?" Stopping, he spun to face the kid, managing to save himself and look fairly casual by slapping his hand against a door frame. He already knew the answer to his question. None of the mercs, not even the officers, would know anything more than that they'd been contracted to take out an enemy of their gang and the council. He glanced at Shepard, who stood back, her arms folded across her chest, her stare neutral. Fury rose up to meet that neutrality. Another weapon poised to take him out standing there like she belonged. The anger rose in his chest, magma bursting from the ground, threatening to blow him to ash and wash him away.

Spirits, how he wished it could wash him away. Then all the body bags lined up … all the friends lost to betrayal … all the waste and uncertainty—he glanced at Shepard again—all the confusion and fear could all just disappear into the undertow.

"No, sir," Martin answered. "They were all just following orders."

Garrus nodded, a sharp jerk of his head that rammed a solid steel spike down his spine. Good, he needed it. He needed to stay solid … strong. "Then empty the cells, Instructor Weaver." Out of the corner of his eye, Garrus caught the tightening around Shepard's mouth, the deepening of the furrows that dug into the skin around her eyes. She closed down and looked away, clearly understanding the order even if Martin didn't.

The kid's forehead furrowed, his heavy brows disappearing behind his prosthetics. "Let them go, sir?" He shifted foot to foot a little, looking as if he wanted nothing more than to turn and run, to pretend he'd never found Garrus, never asked about the prisoners.
A long grumbling sort of groan answered before Garrus opened his mouth. "No, Martin, I didn't mean to let them go." He turned back toward his office, making them chase him if they wanted to keep up. The faint satisfaction returned, penetrating his chest to slither around his heart, ice-cold scales abrasive and shameful. He'd upset her, and he liked it. Damn, he was a bastard.

"But, sir, they're unarmed prisoners," Martin stammered. "I can't … ." He looked to Shepard, who just turned away.

Garrus stiffened. Great, demoted in the course of two days from general to the torin standing two paces behind Shepard, and not even the real Shepard.

*How much would you have sacrificed for that position even three days ago?*

He stomped that thought to dust and glanced at Shepard. Having the real Shepard's back was a privilege. Having his subordinates look to that piece of fakery formed the worst sort of insult. The replica's expression didn't shift a millimetre.

When Shepard didn't step in, Martin shuffled a little more, then gave Garrus a stiff salute. "Yes, sir." Dropping his hand, he turned and wandered back toward the elevator, looking lost … no, looking as though he wished he were lost.

Garrus slammed back his office door with enough fury that Vortash didn't even look up. The batarian wore bandages on his face and neck, and what pale yellow skin showed between was mottled a terrible black and green.

"Good morning, Instructor Vortash," Fake-Shepard said as she followed Garrus through the door. "You're looking better."

The batarian nodded. "Captain Shepard. Thanks for pulling me out of that bloody tunnel."

Garrus glanced back as she pressed her lips tight into a sad sort of smile. "Thank the fact that you all wear identical armour. Only reason I stopped was I saw one set of recognizable boots amidst the mercs."

Storming past the desk, Garrus slapped the control into his office. Even his most loyal people were accepting her without question. When the door shut behind Shepard, he turned and, leaning back against the desk to steady himself, faced her.

"You didn't say anything about the order to execute the prisoners." Had he been hoping she would? No, the prisoners couldn't just be set loose. They endangered Archangel. Still, a tiny voice in the back of his head prodded him for the truth. Was he so desperate to rail against her that he was setting her up?

Fake-Shepard just shook her head and walked over to the miniature galaxy map. "It's not my place to question your orders," she replied, staring into the slowly turning display of stars and coloured dots.

The simple statement opened a valve, releasing the pressure that was keeping him upright. A hissing sigh escaped as he sagged down to sit on the edge of the desk. "But you don't like it?"

Her shoulders popped in a small shrug as she turned to face him, her face a careful, still-neutral mask. "Of course I don't like it, but I'm a soldier. I've heard a lot of orders I didn't like in my time. I've obeyed more than I'm comfortable with, and given more than I can hope to be forgiven for." She hooked her thumbs in her utility belt and drew her shoulders up around her ears in a bristling, defensive posture.
She sighed and shrugged, dropping her shoulders. "But, if it's what you feel you need to do to protect Archangel, that's your call. This is all you." Her stare held his for at least a minute before she walked over and lifted a hand to press against his keel, the first contact she'd made with him since before the surgery.

And whose fault is that? She kissed you ... held your hand ... told you that she loved you, and you told her to go away and not to come back.

She held his stare, those green eyes making his heart ache worse than his head. "But if you break that beautiful boy's spirit because you're angry and distrustful of me ... . By the glowing asses of the Enkindlers, I'll kick you so hard that you'll spend the rest of your life feeling like my foot is still rammed up your ass."

"I have other people who will be more than happy to finish off those merc bastards." He stared at her hand, unable to feel the light contact through the thick tunic.

Her hand fell away, and she nodded, her lips set in an expression that clearly asked him if those were the sort of people he wanted to have his back. He looked past her, allowing the message that had awaited him in his morning mail to play through his mind. He couldn't let his love for Shepard draw him into this replica's game. Swallowing hard, he braced himself, shoring up all the softening edges. Yes, he wanted to believe it, but he needed to hold himself to a higher standard of vigilance, for the sake of everyone ... even her.

"You expect me to believe that you don't intend to have any say in Archangel business?" he asked, enough of an edge in his subvocals to make it a demand.

She backed away from him. "I didn't say that. As pieces of the bigger war, I expect the troops and the fleet to be at the war council's disposal. But other than that? Of course not." Holding her hands out away from her side, she turned a little one way then the other. "None of this is me, General. This ... this is all you."

Damn her. Garrus let his eyes sag closed for a moment, then lifted his hand to his aural canal. "Weaver. One guard for every three prisoners. Make sure the kitchen knows how many extra mouths they need to feed, and that there is a two person escort per prisoner to the head. Strip them, search them, get them in basic gear. Confiscate all amps and omnitools, and process their belongings."

"Yes, sir, General Vakarian!" The kid's relief practically jumped through the radio and hugged him. "I'll have a report for you by the end of the day."

Garrus closed the channel and met Fake-Shepard's grin with a scowl. After holding her stare for a few seconds, he pushed off his desk and retreated around to his chair. "As for you," he said, taking a deep breath and steeling himself to administer the blow. "You are not welcome here. I told you not to come back, and that was a one time warning. If you set foot inside this base again, you'll be processed and locked up with the prisoners."

Looking down at the datapads covering his desk, he swallowed hard, a frozen fist reaching down into his throat to wrap around his gullet. "If you interfere with our operations against the Collectors or the Reapers, I won't hesitate to shoot you."

Fake-Shepard stepped up to his desk, her fingertips pressing against the top. "Why can't you see that it's me, Garrus? All that time we spent ... the long hours we looked after one another on Feros ... eating junk and watching the Maltese Falcon after Donovan Hock ... the nights you held me
and read to me … . Why can Martin and Nihlus see me, but you can't?"

The tears in her voice … the crystalline token of sorrow that bloomed as it hit his desk … lifted a
reedy keen from his throat, but he choked it down. Without looking up, he activated his omnitool,
pulled up the message that he'd received overnight. Guts churning, he looked away. He couldn't
watch it again. Thank the spirits, it didn't have sound. If he had to listen to it … if he had to hear
the sounds gasping from her open mouth ... he didn't think he could keep himself from throwing
up.

Shepard let out a faint hiss of what sounded like anger or disgust as the vid began to play, but he
didn't look up … couldn't look up. The … thing … standing before him had taken the person he
loved … the gift he'd never thought he'd receive and turned her into … his traumatized brain
struggled to find the words and failed.

"Garrus … ." Fake-Shepard sighed. "That was a fake … a ruse to protect Al—Specimen Alpha—
from Miranda and her bosses. I hoped that if they thought they could use him to control me, that
they wouldn't just shoot him in the back of the head while we were escaping." She muttered under
her breath. "We were faking it for the cameras. That wasn't real."

He deactivated his omnitool. "Don't come back. I imagine this vid will have lessened Nihlus's
sympathy for you."

"Garrus, please. We can talk about this. Don't just send me away."

He saw her shift, but didn't look up. His pulse pounded in his head like a timer counting toward
detonation, the pressure building until he began to retch. "I have a lot of paperwork to catch up on,"
he managed to say, his voice a thin rasp.

He knew the sound of a heart breaking. The sharp, resonating crack of his own remained ingrained
in his bones and etched into his soul … something he could never hope to erase. As Shepard
stepped back from his desk, a tiny sound crept from her throat, a soft mewl that he knew heralded
his blow striking true. The pain woven through that sound tore at his resolve, insisting that he look
up … that he at least acknowledge the damage.

Instead, he took a deep breath and flushed his veins with ice water. Picking up one of the pads, he
activated it, staring at the information there without seeing it. Her footsteps crossed the floor, and
the door opened.

"I love you, Garrus." The whisper tumbled to the floor, breaking into pieces on the tile, and then
she was gone.

Garrus dropped the datapad on his desk. Acidic, oily tears burned the corners of his eyes as a long
keen broke free of his control. Damn Cerberus. He'd smash the entire organization … bring it
down around their ears for dredging up all the old agony … for what Nihlus and Martin would go
through losing her again … even for the pain that the poor, programmed fake was going through.
They'd pay for all of it. Starting with Operative Lawson.

He lifted a hand to his aural canal. "Vortash, make sure the outer guards know that I want the
Cerberus operative, Miranda Lawson arrested the moment she sets foot in this base. The same goes
for everyone else on that crew, including Shepard if she returns."

"Sir?" Vortash's gravelly voice rolled with confusion. "Those people saved us. Captain Shepard
pulled me out from under a half ton of rubble herself."
"That's the only reason she's being allowed to leave. I'm turning off my comms, route any calls through my omnitool. Vakarian out." He closed the channel and forced himself to focus on the reports. He had a base to rebuild, outposts to secure, refugees to bring home. Enough time and pain had been wasted on Cerberus. As long as they stayed away from him, he'd return the favour.

Three hours passed in a heartbeat, his wounds straining his concentration to the breaking point, but he muscled through. As long as he didn't move or yawn or cough … or breathe, the pain remained bearable. His omnitool chimed incoming messages throughout the morning, but he left them. Anything truly important would end up with someone pounding on his door.

The first intrusion appeared not as a pounding, but a command override on his lock. Dr. Chakwas appeared in the open portal, one hand on her hip, the other holding a medical bag. "You're supposed to be semi-horizontal up on the twenty-fourth floor," she said, striding across the threshold. Without so much as allowing him a chance to protest or explain, she circled his desk and activated her omnitool to run her scans. "But since the mountain refuses to come to Muhammad, Muhammad will come to the mountain."

"That makes no sense," he groused, wincing away from the brilliant orange light. "And I'm fit enough to sit at a desk and read reports."

"You have a closed skull fracture and a severe concussion. That leaves you fit for drooling into a pillow, and that's it. By all rights, I should tranq you and drag you back upstairs by the foot." She tapped at the interface. "And if I could drag you, I'd do just that. Your intercranial pressure isn't subsiding the way it should."

She opened her bag, withdrawing several syringes. "I'm going to give you some painkillers, but they won't completely eliminate the pain. I want you to be able to tell if the pain is getting significantly worse. If it does, come upstairs. That's an order."

"Fine." When she shut down her omnitool, he looked up at her. "You ran tests to verify that Shepard isn't a clone or a VI driving her body?"

Chakwas stepped back and leaned a hip against the edge of his desk. "I did, but … " She held a hand up when he opened his mouth to ask her about the results. "I'm not going to break her confidentiality. I sent you a message an hour ago saying the tests had all come back. If she's comfortable with you being there when I give her the results, then you're welcome to accompany her."

"I ordered her to stay away from this base," Garrus said, fighting to keep his voice even.

She straightened and picked up her bag. "That would explain why I've tried several times to reach her, but to no avail. No doubt, she's turned off her comms. I contacted her ship, but her yeoman hasn't heard from her since yesterday." She strode to the door. "I've always considered it a good policy to not make major life decisions for myself or others while under the influence of a brain injury. You might want to consider making that one of your guidelines as well, General." She palmed the control.

"If and when I hear from the captain, I'll send a message that you will, no doubt, ignore."

About an hour after Chakwas departed his office, Garrus leaned back, intending only to rest his eyes … his sudden weariness probably due to medication-induced sabotage. He awoke a considerable time later, startling awake from a nightmare. Heart pounding, head and neck alternately slamming him with stabbing and throbbing pains at random intervals, he scrambled to keep from falling backwards out of his chair.
Damn. He braced his elbows against the top of the desk and lowered his head gingerly into his hands. Although the dream images had already begun to dissipate, he recalled the general theme. Trapped back on Haestrom, wounded and in agony, he'd wandered the ruins screaming for Shepard, but she never answered.

Of course not, you sent her away.

He focused back on his work, ignoring the pain, ignoring the growling in his belly ... blocking out everything other than budgets, repair schedules, and the hundred details needed to open the third building to house the refugees from their outer bases.

Chakwas returned to give him medication and thump a large container of liquid meal replacement down in front of him, but other than growling something about no one having heard from Shepard, she remained silent.

After a few more hours of work and another neck-breaking nap, Garrus awoke to someone pounding on his office door. He blinked, and activated his chrono. Damn. More than twelve hours had passed since he shut himself away.

"Open up, Garrus, or I'll bypass it," Nihlus called from the other side.

"Go away, Nihlus." He had no desire to see his fratrin. Nihlus had no doubt been drinking and would want to either discuss the vid or Garrus sending Shepard away.

Why wasn't Nihlus the slightest bit suspicious? He'd just climbed into bed with her. That level of trust ... without proof ... it just didn't make any sense.

Damn it. He wasn't jealous, was he? Yes, he didn't believe it was Shepard. He knew better. Dead was dead. But the anger that morning ... the viciousness ... had that all been pure pique because while he was lying in post-op, his fratrin had been curled up in bed with Shepard.

"I've sent you messages every half hour since just before noon. You've ignored them all, so now, I'm coming in whether you like it or not." A second or two passed and then the telltale bypass music of the Spectre's omnitool began. Thirty seconds after that, the door opened and Nihlus stepped through.

"You really can be a completely stubborn ass, you know that?" the Spectre said, his voice just shy of shouting. "You were all too quick to leap on that vid as proof that Jane was a fake, but when people try to contact you, to talk to you about it, you lock them out and shut them down." He activated his omnitool.

"Nihlus, I'm tired and in pain. Don't dance around ... what do you want?" He dropped his arms to the desktop and stared up at his fratrin with undisguised annoyance.

"About two hours after I opened the file we were sent, another message came in addressed to both of us and Operative Lawson." Nihlus brought up a vid file and pressed play. "I'm going to assume from your continuing foul demeanour that you haven't bothered to look at your messages."

"I don't want to ...," Garrus started to say, but then Shepard's face appeared on screen, a sincere expression of concern knitting the skin between her brows into a frown.

Taking a slow, deep breath, Shepard whispered, "Right now, you are etched in stone under the liabilities column on Miranda's ledger." She stared just past the camera. "She is working very hard to keep me from forming attachments to anyone who doesn't work for this organization. When the fighting breaks out, and it will, she'll have every gun under her command aimed at you."
A hand lifted into frame, skating the backs of talons along her jaw. "And you think this will shift me over to leverage? If Miranda believes she can control you through your attachment to me … ."

Garrus watched the vid playing on Nihlus's omnitool, the audio and different angle shattering the illusion. Shepard cackled helplessly over some strange human joke or pun, while Specimen Alpha muttered grumpily. Miranda and the others showed up, and the sounds of fake orgasms overwhelmed the laughter for a moment. The vid ended, but Nihlus didn't move.

Even as his gut sank, his ugly words lodging like stones in his gullet, Garrus looked up at his fratri, questioning. What else was there to see?

Movement on the screen drew his attention. "She has nightmares every time she falls asleep," Alpha's voice said, the darkened recesses of a hood appearing in frame. "She screams and calls out … thrashes like she's fighting off the forces of buratrum." The turian shook his head, revealing the pale shine of his eyes for a moment. "The things she says … bone-chilling. I've never mentioned them to her. She doesn't seem to recall them at all when she wakes up, and I'm loathe to dredge any of that up if being awake gives her peace from it."

Garrus glanced at Nihlus. "Last night … ?" Guilt, slick and oily, slithered under his plates, its scales rasping like a promise … an itch too deep to scratch. He'd sent her … .

His fratri just nodded without making eye contact.

"Apparently the blocks that Operative Lawson and her goons placed in Shepard's mind only apply when she's conscious, because she calls for Nihlus and someone called Garrus as well as Anderson, and her family." Alpha took a deep breath. "I know I can't convince you that she is Jane Shepard. However, having been resurrected by the same people, I know she is, because I am still me."

Alpha sucked in a deep breath and shook his head again. "She doesn't deserve what Lawson will do to her if you let her get away with this. Shepard doesn't deserve to be isolated and enslaved to this war. And trust me, that is why the vid of our little pantomime was sent to you. Cerberus wants her all to themselves. They want … no need … to control her completely." After another second of looking into the recording, Alpha shrugged, and the vid ended.

"She's a mess, Garrus," Nihlus said, his voice soft and nasal. "She's trying to act like she isn't, and while she's awake, I think she even convinces herself that she's same old Shepard. But if you'd seen her sleep, you'd know that she's just patches and ribbons." He blinked a few times. "I've done my best to help her deal, but the two people she loves the most think she's some … monster."

Garrus stared at his desk, Nihlus's words slicing through his plates to hit bone. The abrasive, icy scales of shame wrapped around his heart, strangling it until he could barely draw breath. Spirits … he'd let the combination of pain and … yes … jealousy … strike her far too hard and far too deep.

Nihlus closed his omnitool and turned to face Garrus head on. "Forget that you thought I would do that to you … that you think so little of me, you just assumed I'd have sex with her." The Spectre sucked in a long, ragged sounding breath. He laughed, but it came out all bitter nettles and thorns. "She was just trying to save his life, and you called her a whore. Guess I'm not the only jealous idiot around."

"How do you know it's her?" Garrus demanded but without any heat or malice. Standing, he walked over to stare into Nihlus's eyes. "You know Shepard died. We buried her three days after she was shot in the head." His pulse roared inside his skull, making it feel as if the entire room pulsed along with it. Lightning flashed, following the lines of his skull as the pressure built, throbbing behind his eyes. Spirits, what if it was true? Did miracles that huge even happen?
Nihlus laid his hand on Garrus's shoulder, the contact breaking through the pain. "You've looked into her eyes. Why don't you just know?" The Spectre smiled, but the pain running beneath it squeezed Garrus's heart tighter in the icy vice. "The universe has given you a miracle, Garrus, and you're spitting in its face."

All the strength in Garrus's muscles fled, and he sagged back, only the edge of his desk keeping him from hitting the floor. He stared into Nihlus's eyes, light-headed and reeling. For long moments he struggled against an ache in his chest so strong and so crushing that he reached for a waste basket, sure that he'd throw up.

When he managed to speak, it came out as a soft gasp. "It can't be her, Nihlus. It just can't." His stare drifted down to the floor, his voice burrowing down under a low, wavering keen. "I promised I'd never hurt her … that I would be the one person who never hurt her." Salt-laden tears seared his eyes before escaping, pooling above his cheekbones for a moment before falling.

Nihlus stepped forward, to grip him gently by both shoulders. "Welcome to the club, Garrus." He shrugged a little. "That day she brutalized her hands … all I needed to do was be kind. I knew she was just looking for a way in." He stepped back, and turned to pace to the door. "And now … even Anderson is treating her like she's some sort of bomb sent to take him out. She tried to board the *Normandy* to see Kaidan and Joker, and he chased her off."

That image hit like a grenade. Anderson? Damn, that would have broken her heart right in two. No wonder no one had heard from her. Where would she go?

"We've all let her down at some point." Pivoting on his talons, Nihlus turned back. "The true test is what we do once we have." The Spectre's mandibles dropped, sweeping in and out with his distress. "She's been missing almost twelve hours, Garrus. I've got to go look for her. I hope you'll come with me. The kid is already waiting down in the lobby."

Garrus nodded, his fear so huge, so overwhelming that it paralysed him, trapping the air in his lungs. What if it wasn't her? What if he let himself believe it? What if he loved her, and it turned out that she was a clone or some sort of trap? What if it was his *Kahri* … and she left him again?

"Garrus?" Nihlus stepped up beside him and turned, wrapping a leading arm around his waist. "Come on. Chakwas has the results. We'll contact Miranda, see if she can help us find Jane, and we'll get this all sorted. Trust me … trust Merol … we know it's Jane."

Garrus nodded, a sliver of hope cutting the shame away from his heart as he allowed Nihlus to guide him to the door. "Okay." Even if there was the slightest chance … didn't he have to take it?
Mass Effect - Future Complex Chapter Forty Five

Chapter Summary

Bonus Chapter!!! Garrus and Nihlus go looking for Shepard. What will they find?

30 Days ASR

"Spirits, why would Shepard come down here of all places?" Nihlus grumbled, shoving a very drunk vorcha out of his way.

Garrus stopped, leaning against a planter for a minute, panting weakly as he struggled to catch his breath. Once he recovered a little, he shoved himself upright and lifted a leg up to sit on the low wall. "I don't know. Maybe she just started walking, and this is where she ended up." He pulled his water bottle from his hip pack and sipped at it. He didn't dare to drink too much for fear of throwing up. His head felt as though it intended to explode off his neck, the throbbing overwhelming everything but the need to rinse the oily slime of Omega from his throat.

Breathing through his mouth had kept him from throwing up … mostly … but it allowed a thick layer of scummy pirate outpost to build up on the back of his tongue.

"What's even down here other than illegal pit fighting, gambling, and prostitution?" Nihlus froze, turning a horrified stare to lock onto Garrus. "You don't think she came down here to fight, do you? She'll be ground into varren chow in the pits."

Despite believing that Shepard may well have gone down there to fight, Garrus shook his head. "The information from Lawson's tracker suggests Shepard's just been wandering." That possibility worried him more than the fighting. At least if she was looking for a good pit fight, she'd have her guard up.

"Shepard would kick ass in the pits, even down here," Martin grumbled. He strode past Garrus. "She's not some helpless waif. She's Captain Jane fucking Shepard."

Garrus chuckled and took another couple of sips of water. "Either way, we need to find her now. I've got maybe ten minutes left before I'm ground into varren chow." He capped the bottle and pushed up off the planter. "Let's move."

Two batarians pushed past Martin, wobbling as they helped one another along, both drunk and looking beaten half to death.

"What happened to you?" Martin asked. "You look like you've been mugged."

One stopped to look at him, weaving unsteadily. "What? Mugged?" He hawked and spat a gob of blood onto the floor. "You could say that." He retched for a second. "Bloody red-headed she demon in the pit stole my last fifty credits."

"Red-headed … ." Martin glanced back at Garrus and took off, running in the direction they'd come from. "Come on. We've got to get her out of there."

Garrus pushed off, limping after the kid at a much more reasonable pace. "What happened to
Captain Jane fucking Shepard?"

Five minutes later, Garrus faced the front door of one of the filthiest, ugliest buildings he'd ever seen, complete with the filthiest, ugliest krogan bouncer he'd ever seen.

"What happened to you?" the massive door guard grumbled, nodding toward the side of Garrus's face.

"Stopped a A-61’s rocket with my face on a dare. Seemed like a good idea at the time." Leaning heavily on one hip, he stared the behemoth down. Spirits, he hoped the krogan just let them in. He didn't have a brawl in him.

The krogan laughed and stepped aside. "Yeah, that's stupid enough to get you admission. Enjoy your night."

Inside, Garrus pushed his way through the throng, the combination of sour sweat, fourteen different kinds of cigarette and cigar smoke, five different kinds of blood, booze, and vomit slamming against the inside of his nose like a battering ram. "I should have brought my helmet," he shouted to Nihlus, regretting the volume as quickly as the words came out. Still, the pain couldn't hold a candle to the reek that kept tweaking his gag reflex. As if it needed encouragement.

Before they'd left the base, Chakwas had cornered him yet again to change the bandage on his head and dose him once again. He thought for sure the doctor would try to talk him out of their rescue mission. Instead, she'd handed him three high energy meal replacement drinks and just walked away.

"I don't see her," Nihlus replied, shoving a massive krogan out of the way. Luckily, the behemoth was so drunk that he just laughed and flopped over onto his side amidst the filth.

Glancing toward the fighting at the center of the crowd, Garrus shook his head. "Why would she come here?" he asked, without expecting an answer. If he hadn't had Nihlus and the kid … and his promise to Shepard … where would he have gone the moment he arrived on the station?

Somewhere he could unleash all the rage he felt toward the galaxy without anyone batting an eye at it. Somewhere just like that place.

Spirits, he hoped they didn't find her body thrown in a corner somewhere. He met Nihlus's eyes and motioned for the Spectre to circle around the other side of the fighting pit. They'd drifted too far apart for Nihlus to have a hope of hearing him.

He stepped over a vorcha lying in a puddle of its own blood, the resilient flesh knitting together even as Garrus watched. In a half hour, the fighter would wake up and be ready to throw itself back into the meat grinder. Bodies pressed close, stomping on the fallen drunks and losers even as they lay there. Garrus bent down, grabbed the vorcha's arm and dragged him over against the wall.

Martin appeared at the general's side, grabbing the fallen combatant's other arm, and helped drag him up the stepped levels at the perimeter of the room, out of harm's way.

The kid glanced over at the pit, their view a lot less obstructed from a couple of levels up. A wide grin lit up his face, disappearing into a wince and then a grimace as one of the fighters landed a particularly hard blow. "Is it weird that I want to climb in there and give it a go?" Martin yelled over Garrus's shoulder, surprising the general who suddenly felt like a parent who'd somehow managed to raise one of those daredevils who jumps from orbit in wingsuits or surfs plasma eruptions. The kid flexed his armour. "I could take them all, make enough to quit, buy a nice planet."
Garrus let out a bitter laugh and shook his head, regretting the action the second he did it. Still, he let out a hearty chuff. "Pit fighting on Omega won't buy you a planet, kid. Might rent you an apartment in a better part of the station, but you'd had to fight every day to keep it." He shoved aside two humans. "Besides … look at them. No armour. They have to fight in their shorts so they can't hide weapons." He stabbed a hand toward a huge krogan on the sidelines and shouted, "As a bonus, if you fight naked, you can avoid having that guy shove his hand down your ass crack and into your sheath to check for blades."

"Ouch! Damn." Martin stopped to watch the human and batarian circling one another in the ring. "Guess the batarian decided he didn't want the krogan hand job." He winced and threw a hand up in front of his ocular implants. "I can't blame him, but damn, I didn't need to see that."

Garrus glanced back at the mostly naked fighters, his gut coiling tighter as his mind exchanged the batarian for Shepard, crouched, bare except for her underwear, blood streaking her skin. Skeletal fingers scraped down the back of his neck, sinking into the soft meat at the edge of his cowl. Why had she come to that hole? Dread pressed his eyes to the floor, gelid and implacable, insisting that he watch for a tiny, mostly naked body tossed away along with the empty bottles, food wrappers, and smoke butts.

Nihlus appeared halfway up the bleachers on the far side of the pit, one hand raised to catch Garrus's attention. When the general nodded, the Spectre pointed to a small door tucked in behind the stands. For some reason, that small, dark hole warmed the dank chill. Thank the spirits … maybe Shepard hadn't come there to fight. Maybe she just needed to meet a contact.

Or maybe, she's already been beaten to death and dragged out into the alley for the vorcha.

His eyes refused to give up their search of the floor in between, although Martin loped ahead. Far too much enthusiasm and pure joy celebrated Shepard's return for the kid to contain it. And why not? If it was true … and damn, if Garrus wasn't starting to let himself believe it … they'd been granted a boon worthy of having pleased the ancient gods.

Cool and effervescent, relief washed over his hide as he reached the door, no Shepard. A slow smile crept over his face as he glanced behind him before following Nihlus into the dark passage. Shepard always did know how to get him jammed into the weirdest spots. Forcing them to chase her into the seediest, foulest part of Omega … that was his Kahri.

The dark closed around them, gritty and stinking, as they made their way down the corridor. Two light bulbs hung crookedly from wires, sputtering with a weak, olive light. He stumbled over something, a foul curse slipping from between his teeth as his face threatened to fall off. Bare, five toed feet led to bruised and bloody legs and a torso twisted and slumped down the wall. The empty bottles scattered next to the batarian suggested a victory celebrated a little too well. A rumbling snore alleviated Garrus's concern, and he moved on.

Twenty metres down the hall, the roar from the fighting pit faded enough that Garrus could hear the activities going on behind the doors that broke the walls at three metre intervals. He clenched his teeth, then cursed and took a deep breath. He really needed to remember not to do that.

Places like that pit needed Archangel's cleaning services. Maybe now that the gangs had been all but run out, he could do something about them.

"Shouldn't we be looking in the doors?" Martin whispered. He glanced back, his grimace grishly in the faint light.

"Is that something you really want to see, kid?" Nihlus asked, picking his way forward.
"No, but what if she's … ." Martin sighed and shrugged. "... been drugged or something?"

Garrus patted the young man's shoulder and turned him around. "If we don't find her in the common areas, we'll do a room to room, but I'd like to exhaust the possibilities that won't involve some pissed off, drunken 'client' shooting me in the head first."

Nihlus stopped. A closed door blocked the end of the hall. "Gambling lounge, right?" he asked without looking back.

"Most of the time, yes," Garrus replied. "Nice and close to the back door for those quick getaways, not that you need them on Omega. The cops won't be busting in to this place any time soon."

Nihlus sucked in a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "Fine, but if I open this door to some kinky hanar … ." Garrus silently thanked his fratrin for leaving the rest of that image unspoken. After another moment's hesitation, Nihlus palmed the control and stepped through the door.

"Spirits!" Nihlus exclaimed, stopping so suddenly that Garrus ran up his heels. "What … ?" The question flailed a little through the Spectre's subvocals before dying. "Shepard?"

Garrus gave his fratrin a shove, pushing him far enough through the door that he could step around to see whatever it was that had rendered Nihlus speechless.

Shock slapped him hard in the face … and not the good side. "Spirits." The word whispered from Garrus's mouth as he stared, trying to process what it was he was seeing. Dizziness washed over him, leaving him stumbling to brace himself against the back of a tattered, leather chair.

The doorway opened into a small, dark room. Not two paces away, Shepard lay on her back on a couch. An asari straddled her hips, leaning forward with her forearms braced against Shepard's chest. It took him a full thirty seconds to register the blood coating Shepard's skin … the broken and bruised skin over her knuckles … the swollen, bleeding lip … the thick, black stream of blood flowing from her nose and across her cheek.

It took him another thirty seconds to realize both Shepard and the asari remained fully clothed, and were staring at him and Nihlus, their expressions surprised and amused, but not the slightest bit indignant or guilty. Fifteen seconds after that, he spotted the device in the asari's hand. A tattoo gun? Shepard had gone into the seediest, most violent and filthy part of Omega to get a tattoo?

"The big handsome ones with you, love?" the asari asked, turning back to wipe the blood from under Shepard's nose with a thin cloth. Its astringent alcohol pinched the inside of Garrus's nose. Antiseptic. The tattoo gun began to buzz, the asari returning to work as if they hadn't entered the room.

Shepard let out a long breath and raised a hand to block the gun. "Two of them are, or at least, they were." She nodded toward the door and when the asari shrugged and swung up onto her feet, Shepard sat up, slipping her legs off the couch. "Thanks Tamri, I'm going to need to deal with this. You probably want to get out of range and behind some cover."

Garrus stared at Shepard's face, again not comprehending what he was seeing. Brown dots covered Shepard's cheekbones and across her nose. Some of them looked fairly natural while others clearly hadn't been finished. Clear fluid leaked from her face, making her look as though she'd been sweating. She looked up at Nihlus, pointedly avoiding even glancing Garrus's direction.

"Shepard." The Spectre stepped out of the way of the asari, waited until the door closed, then moved over to sit next to Shepard. "What are you doing here?" he asked, his voice soft. He reached
up to touch the pad of a talon against her cheek. "And what is this?" He sighed and wrapped an arm around her. "I told you they were just weird."

She smiled and turned to kiss his cheek. "I was tired of not recognizing the woman in the mirror, Nihlus. I can't do anything about the scars, but the freckles … ." A soft, musical sigh trickled from her swollen, bleeding lips as she curled in against the Spectre. "I'm tired, Nihlus. I just want to go home, but … ."

Martin pushed past Garrus to kneel by the captain's feet, his hands resting on her knee. "Why did you take off, Shepard? We've been worried sick and searching for hours."

"I was told to go," she replied, her voice soft but brittle-sounding. "I didn't want to go back to the SR2 … it's not my home." She shrugged. "I just started walking, ended up here. Beat the shit out a handful of guys, which felt pretty good … won enough cash to pay for a tattoo." Reaching out, she placed a heavy hand on Martin's head. "I'm tired."

"And, ever so slightly drunk?" Martin asked, a heavy scowl creasing his face. He reached up and took her hand in his, holding it between both of his. The tenderness in that contact set Garrus's plates burning again, shame slithering just beneath them. Even if it wasn't Shepard, she believed she was, and his hurting her … .

Suddenly, it took every ounce of his will not to turn and bolt from the room. One of the things he loved most about Shepard was the sweet, sensitive heart under the soldier and all the masks. If the woman sitting in front of him was Shepard … spirits … he deserved so much worse than a rocket to the face.

Shepard shook her head, pulling him out of his stew. "No, haven't had anything other than bottled water to drink. I think I got kicked in the back of the head a little too hard. Must have rattled my cybernetics. That krogan was big."

"A krogan. You were naked wrestling a krogan? Of course you were," Martin said, matter of factly and sighed. "You asked someone to tattoo freckles onto your face, so I'm going to say that's a firm on something being rattled loose." His brows rose, and he grinned as he leaned in. "Although I can actually see the tattooed ones. That's weird. It's like there are glowing bugs on your face."

Shepard chuckled and gave him a shove. "You're nuts, kid. That's probably why I love you."

"Let's go back to base," Nihlus said, looking up at Garrus, who nodded. "Dr. Chakwas has your test results, so we'll run you through a shower to wash the blood off, seal you up, and the doc can convince you of what the kid and I already know. All right?"

Bloodshot green eyes looked up at Garrus for the first time, their gaze watery and unfocused. "I won't be arrested the second I set foot in the base?"

Garrus couldn't force any words out past the rock lodged in his throat, but shook his head and looked down. His silence was probably for the best. He'd said quite enough already. If she was Shepard, the base was as much her home as theirs, and if she wasn't … well, the least he could do was give her somewhere safe to figure things out.

Nihlus stood, pulling her up with him. She let out a strangled sort of moan-gasp combination, that spun the Spectre around. "What?" He lifted her tunic—spirits, it was just soaked in blood—and cursed. "Dear spirits, Shepard. What in the name … ?" He took her hand and led her to the door and through. "We need to get you to Dr. Chakwas. What were you thinking fighting with your skin … ?" The lecture trailed off as if he'd transferred power from comms to the engines, deciding to
just get her out of there.

"Hey, tiny!" a voice roared. "You owe me a hundred credits. I don't know how, but you cheated."

A flood of bodies poured into the hallway, pushing Garrus back the way he'd come, the crowd no doubt trying to escape the path of destruction. The old protective instinct kicked in and kicked in hard, driving Garrus through the crowd, his elbows punching him a hole as he fought his way to Shepard. He emerged from the darkness, the spotlights above the pit blinding him.

"Garrus! Jump back and left!" Shepard shouted out of the glare.

The general did as commanded, a krogan flying through the space he'd occupied the moment before, slamming into the bleachers next to him, the fight over before it began. Shepard just stretched her shoulders, rolled her neck and turned back to Nihlus.

Okay, one big tick under the 'real Shepard' column. Garrus's eyes locked on that thin back and the short, red hair that ended just above a massive slash of scar tissue across the bottom third of her skull. One mandible flicked. He'd obeyed her order without a second thought. Did some part of him know it was her? Or had it just been programming? Hear an order, obey it?

They grabbed a cab right out in front of the club, Nihlus guiding Shepard into the back seat. She tucked her feet up on the seat beside her and burrowed in against the Spectre's side. Garrus watched her surreptitiously through the rear mirror, as comforted by Nihlus's caretaking as he'd been disturbed by it before.

The trip back to the base took less than a half hour. Garrus let the other two take Shepard inside, pausing to talk to the cadets and friends in the lobby. He sat on a couch, trying to ignore the drumming pain and nausea for almost an hour before it got the better of him. For a day that should have been spent heavily medicated in a bed, he'd put on a lot of klicks. He excused himself, promising to spend more time catching up with everyone once he'd done a little more healing. Regardless of how the evidence fell on the Shepard issue, he intended to follow his doctor's advice and spend the next few days in bed.

Garrus walked into his quarters, his talons cutting into the floor with a faint screech as he saw Shepard standing next to his bed, her back to the door. A towel wrapped around her, the thick, blue material revealing what had upset Nihlus at the club. Huge black bands of bruising slashed across her pale, glistening skin, and the wounds from her cybernetics slowly wept blood, even after she'd showered. And she had showered. The smell of her filled the apartment, warm and soft and sweet.

The scent burrowed down into his chest, vivisecting him far more brutally than his abductors had. He swayed, the dizziness burning through his head until all he could smell was frosted metal. Lifting a talon to his nose, he brushed away a slow drip, his glove coming away blue.

She didn't turn around. "Nihlus thought you'd feel better if I showered here, where you could keep an eye on us," she said, her voice low and gentle. "He just went to get my belt. I forgot it when I chased you this morning. Once we get all these wounds sealed, we'll head up to see the doc."

Shepard turned just far enough to hold up the stasis cube containing the head of the lily he'd placed on Shepard's coffin. Examining it with a strange, haunted look on her face, she said, "These are my favourite. Nihlus says everyone placed one on my coffin." Looking over her shoulder, she held up the cube. "Not you, I guess."

Garrus sniffed and then cleared his throat, swallowing a mouthful of blood. "I'll leave you to get dressed." He spun and strode for the door, the urge to just throw caution to the wind ... the need to
hold that body in his arms again so strong that it came dangerously close to bulling aside his common sense. If he stayed there … if he looked into those eyes and had to explain about that lily … .

"Isn't there any part of you that wants me to be for real, Garrus?" she called after him, her voice drifting on that damned scent, softer and sweeter than the perfume of her shampoo.

Despite his best effort, his feet stopped moving just inside the door, two hand widths from escape. "I buried Kahri with the stem from that lily," he replied, his voice equally quiet, but coming out like sandpaper to her silk, "so that someday, I could give her the rest when death reunited us." Allowing his heart to reach back just for a second, he said, "There isn't a cell in my body that doesn't want you to be my Shepard."

He cleared the gravel from his throat and wiped his nose again. "That's why I've got to keep the walls in place. I can't afford to let you trick me." The pain … the empty aching hole that had awaited him each morning when he woke from his dreams of her, rose up … dark and terrible and hungry, a black hole desperate to drag him in. A sharp, ragged breath pushed it back far enough for him to say, "I wouldn't survive it."

Her bare feet padded across the floor, quick and light as they approached him. Slamming the walls back in place, he leaped through the door and rushed to the elevator. When the doors closed behind him, he sagged against the railing, quiet tears accompanying the keen that spooled from his second larynx … intractable and unrelenting. What was he supposed to do if it turned out to be a lie? Damn it all.

A sharp angry scream tore straight from his gut. Why? Hadn't losing her the first time torn enough of him apart? Gripping the rail with both hands, he slammed his foot into the wall. The pain, the longing, the fear all crystallized in the action as he kicked it over and over until he stumbled, nearly going down … spent.

The door opened on the twenty-fourth floor, revealing his father standing halfway down the corridor. Herros turned, no doubt alerted by the elevator chime, and bolted toward him, sliding the last metre before hopping the door track. He wrapped an arm around Garrus, truly the only thing that kept the general on his feet as his knees buckled.

"Pari." Garrus wrapped both arms around his father's neck. "I can't lose her again."

Herros nodded and touched his brow to Garrus's. "I know. Come on, Betru, I've got you. Let's get you back into bed." His father held Garrus up until the general's legs steadied enough to move, and then, still bearing most of his son's weight, helped Garrus down the hall to his room. Dr. Chakwas met them halfway and took the other side, saying nothing despite her disapproving glare.

Numb, cold, and exhausted, Garrus collapsed into the chair next to his bed, just staring up at his pari and the doctor as they worked, stripping off his armour and dressing him in a warm, light tunic and trousers.

"You've set yourself back days, General," the doctor said, her voice firm but not unkind. She ran her scans, tutting softly under her breath, and then gave him what felt like every injection available in the galaxy. Numb and placid, he just sat there, feeling heavier and weaker than he could ever remember feeling.

Rallying the last of his energy, Garrus reached up and snagged her hand. "I need to be there when you tell her." He didn't have the energy to argue. "Please, just help me stand there when you tell her."
Chakwas looked over his head at Herros, and suddenly Garrus felt nine cycles old again, the adults deciding his fate without consulting him. But then Herros nodded and Chakwas let out a long sigh.

"Very well, but as soon as Shepard has her results, you get right back into bed." She strode to the door. "I'll get you a mild booster, but with your concussion, I can't be giving you any stims, so stay put and rest until we're ready." Grumbling under her breath about having listened to her father and become a pediatrician, she palmed the door control and headed off down the corridor.

"Where have you been, Garrus?" Herros sat on the side of the bed. "The last time I saw you, you had just come out of surgery. Then you just disappeared, and didn't answer your messages. I've been worried stiff." The general's pari reached out and stroked his fringe and down the back of his neck, the touch soothing.

"I got a vid message … ." Garrus shook his head, just a slight, and gloriously pain-free, tremor to either side. "Doesn't matter. I have spent my day being a miserable ass to people who don't deserve it, and then trying to make up for the damage."

"And when did Captain Shepard show up?" The question came out carefully, as if Garrus's father expected it to provoke him, but it didn't. He'd fought through a very long day since that rage.

"She rode in with five people, completely obliterated the mercs. Sabotaged their mechs, turned them on each other … just … ." He leaned back and closed his eyes, letting out a long, weary breath. "She saved us all, and then I accused her of being a fake or a clone … and then I took a rocket to the face."

"So, a full couple of days."

His pari's tone tweaked him, provoking a low, rumbling laugh. "Yeah, I guess you could say that." He spotted Nihlus, the torin standing a head and neck above everyone else, and sat up. Shepard walked … well, limped, really … at the Spectre's side, leaning close against him. A soft smile greeted the sight, and once again, gratitude poured through him like hot amarceru on a cold day. Nihlus had really come through … for Shepard … for all of them, the voice of reason and compassion when all Garrus had been able to do was react.

Chakwas led them into the room across the hall, ushering Shepard up onto a bed, the ever present omnitool sparking to life. Whatever it showed the doctor, Garrus could read Chakwas's displeasure on her face. After more than ten minutes, both Chakwas and Nihlus walked out, leaving Shepard alone, sitting hunched over and looking very small on the bed.

"General." Dr. Chakwas's voice startled him. She nodded. "Come on. Anderson will be here in a moment as well." She looked up at Herros. "He'll need a hand."

Garrus looked up and slung an arm around his father's shoulders, more than willing to accept the help. Once up, though, whatever the doctor had given him helped, his legs a lot more stable as he walked across the hallway and entered Shepard's room. Circling around behind the bed, he stood near the foot, out of the way. His father backed away to stand in the corner.

For her part, Shepard stared down between her feet, eyes refusing to leave the floor. Garrus's stare followed hers, not sure what to say or do. He knew that the woman sitting in front of him believed she was Shepard. Whatever or whoever else she was, she believed it with every particle of her being. The anguish in her eyes when they'd found her at that dive assured him of that without anyone saying a single word.

And of course, Nihlus believed. The Spectre sensed the other half of the beacon memories, and
that was all the proof he needed. Garrus glanced up at her red, marked up face, mandibles flailing a little as he saw the tears rolling over the inflamed skin. He slid one foot a hand's width toward her, but stopped when she flinched away from him.

Chakwas walked in the door, Anderson close behind her. Nihlus followed them to the threshold, but then stopped in the open door. The Spectre smiled when Shepard looked up, then nodded toward the others as if asking her to give them another shot. Garrus's heart contracted, feeling as though a singularity pulled the muscle in on itself.

He was one of them … one of the others … the doubters. The ungrateful bastards who looked the miracle in the face and then spat on it. His stare slid back to the floor. Over the past two cycles had he fallen more in love with the memory … the idea of Shepard … than he'd been in love with the woman? A soft keen escaped his control, a mixture of sorrow and gentle laughter. She'd been so very restful, his dead love. Shepard … well, Shepard was anything but restful. She was impossible, and fierce … so fierce and so scared … but damn it, hadn't he loved her hard enough in those few months to pull him through two years?

This … he looked up at her face, red and weeping clear fluid …. Getting her freckles tattooed back on … that was so painfully his Kahri … . He reached out, bracing himself against the bed as the singularity released his heart, and it fell into his gut. Suddenly he felt as though he floated about three feet above and behind his body, watching himself through a haze of racing pulse and sweating hide. Chakwas didn't need to tell him what the tests said, not really. Only Shepard would go and torture herself to put her freckles back because he … .

Anderson walked straight over to Shepard, taking her face gently between his hands, and shook his head. "Nihlus and Martin told me where they found you." He looked her over, wincing at each wound and swelling. "Pit fighting? Have you lost your mind? What have you done to yourself, you crazy girl?"

She sniffed and shrugged. "Even you … ." She shrugged again, a helpless sort of gesture as she struggled to form words. "No one believed it was me." A careless hand flicked at the tears on her cheeks, and she winced away from the pain. "Hell, I don't even know if it's me. I was tired of seeing a stranger in the mirror, Anderson. So tired."

Anderson stepped into her, still holding her face between gentle hands. Garrus arched his neck, surprised as the stoic captain kissed Shepard's brow, aiming for the only place spared the needle. "It was shock, child. That's all. Someone gives you a gift this big … it just takes a bit to accept that it's real."

Shepard drew back, a mask of comical surprise greeting her mentor … her father's uncharacteristic display of affection, but it lasted only a second and then she threw her arms around him. Tucking her face in against the captain's shoulder, one of the toughest soldiers Garrus had ever met clung to Anderson like a frightened child and cried.

Anderson rubbed her back and whispered soft apologies and words of comfort into her ear. "I never meant for the things I said to hurt you." He pulled back a little and sniffed, cracking his neck as his throat worked, the stiff upper lip fighting against his tears.

"I kept asking them to let me contact you," she whispered. "I'm sorry, Anderson. I'm so sorry."

The captain shook his head and pulled her back in, one hand rubbing her back. "You've got nothing to be sorry for, child. Nothing at all." He let out a long breath. "I'm the one …. Martin stormed aboard the Normandy … read me the Riot Act, but he shouldn't have had to. I'm sorry, Shepard. I was just …. " He pulled away, taking her face between his hands again. "It was shock. All those
prayers answered … ." He looked down and cleared his throat. "It was just shock."

Garrus's eyes never left Shepard as, again, the purity of the woman's reaction pulled at him, insisting that he believe. He'd only seen Kahri cry once, but it had been the same, bared-to-the-soul deluge of emotion.

Chakwas stepped forward, her ever-present omnitool glowing on her forearm. "Well, I can assure you all that this is the original Jane Shepard."

Anderson stepped back, his hand sliding down Shepard's arm to grip her hand. Garrus took a deep breath, torn between the fear and the part of him that wanted to shove Anderson out of the way, scoop her tiny form into his arms and bury his face in her neck. The need to just breathe her in, to confirm through every sense other than his eyes that she was real, and there … . He clenched his teeth and stared into the doctor's steely eyes.

Chakwas glared right back, meeting his gaze with undisguised anger and accusation. He faced it without blinking. He deserved it. He'd told Shepard to get out of his base and let him do his paperwork.

"A great deal of her tissue has been replaced and regrown," the doctor continued, "but her DNA is all thirty-one years old, as are the cells of the inner lens of her eye and the oocyte I tested. There is intense cybernetic infiltration and cell replication going on, but her mitochondria are also an exact match to our Jane Shepard." She smiled and reached up to squeeze Shepard's shoulder. "Welcome back, Captain, you were sorely missed."

Shepard laid her hand over the doctor's. "Thanks, Doc. It's good to have someone I trust tell me that I'm not some sort of replicant." She glanced at Nihlus, who still watched through the window, the smile that warmed her face … the only word Garrus could think of was loving.

Why shouldn't it be? Nihlus and Martin were the only two who just accepted her. Nihlus had held her through the night while Garrus and Anderson were too busy worrying about what sort of security risk she posed to consider the person they loved most was metres away and in pain. He let out a long, deep sigh that came out a lot noisier than he intended.

Anderson drew back a little. "I expect you over on the Normandy for dinner. There are people eager to see you." A gentle, almost reverent hand caressed her cheek, careful of those horrible, glowing fissures in her skin. A quick glance over the captain's shoulder just brushed Garrus. "And if by then, you're plus one or two or three, bring them along." He kissed Shepard's brow again. "Use medigel. Get rid of the freckles."

She sniffed and nodded. "Yeah. Thanks …" A teasing grin broke through the tears to curl one corner of her mouth. "… Dad."

A smile brighter and wider than Garrus had ever seen on any man accompanied Anderson's sigh and a long-suffering head shake. "Forget the test results … now, I know it's you." He squeezed Shepard's hand. "I'll see you at 1800." Anderson looked back at Garrus, holding the general's gaze for long seconds before nodding and heading to the door.

Garrus nodded and let out a long breath. Yeah, they'd been frightened fools together, but now they both had their greatest love back in their lives … and neither of them deserved her.

Dr. Chakwas followed Anderson to the door, but kept her stare on Shepard. "I'll be admitting you as soon as you're finished here, and tomorrow we're running a full battery on those implants. I don't want to have to rely on that woman for my information." The glanced back when she reached the
threshold, sending her fiery glare straight past Shepard to Garrus. He bowed his head a little and nodded. Shepard had nothing more to fear from his disbelief.

The door closed, then the privacy curtains closed. Subtle. It drew a nervous sort of chuckle from Shepard, but she didn't move off the table.

Garrus frowned, his brain very suddenly and very completely blank.

"So, you're okay with me, now? You won't be second guessing my intentions and orders?" She slid down off the bed but remained facing straight ahead, holding herself stiff and crooked with pain. After a moment, she nodded. "I'll take your silence for assent. We can arrange a meeting in a couple of days to organize things. I think Nihlus will want to come with me aboard the SR2 for a while, but … ."

Before he even knew he was going to move, Garrus hit the floor on his knees in front of her. He raised his hands, a silent entreaty to keep her from leaving when she staggered back a step. One hand reached forward, just pressing against her stomach as if testing to see if she remained solid. Damn, did he still doubt?

When he looked up, he realized that their eyes were at a level. Had he truly forgotten how tiny she was? So impossibly tiny and so impossibly strong. What could he have done? What could any of them have possibly done to earn such a huge miracle? The fist closed around his throat again.

Five fingers closed around his talons where they pressed against her warm, soft flesh. "I'm real," she said, her voice barely stirring the air. "I don't know how or why … well, I know what Miranda says about why—"

"Shepard … " Forcing his voice past the choke hold, he broke through what sounded as though it was winding up into a lengthy, rambling explanation. "... Kahri, I don't care." He shook his head to stall any reply, and then she pressed his hand over her heart, and every single thing he wanted to say fled once more.

"It still belongs to you."

And then his arms were full of her and the soft music of her chuckle was everywhere. Gentle hands cradled his jaw, but he pushed in, tucking his face into her neck, half lifting her. She still weighed nothing. His other hand pressed against the site of the massive wound that had stolen her from him. For those moments, so much joy and love and terror roared through him that he felt sure he'd burn with it.

He took a deep breath, filling his entire being with her scent. It had faded from her pillow and belongings so long ago, and he welcomed it in. Muscles that tied in knots the moment she died, relaxed, and aches uneased in almost two years drifted away. That sweet, slightly spicy jasmine scent. Yes, the hot carbon scent of her cybernetics and the bite of medigel and sealant wormed their way through, but it was her.

Then her arms wrapped around his head and neck, careful of his wounds as she held him to her breast, and those soft, impossible lips pressed to his brow. "I love you, Garrus Vakarian," she said, the words strong and ringing, a declaration that dared the universe to deny it. "And I'm so very sorry I waited to tell you that in a stupid vid message."
Chapter Summary

The calm between storms.

Maribellu - Beautiful female … undercurrents of radiance and within a close relationship (wife, mother, grandmother, daughter, etc.)

30 Days ASR

Shepard pressed her lips to Garrus's brow and closed her eyes. The malaise and pain of the past few days disappeared into the texture of the tough plate, the subtle scent of his sweat and cleanser beneath the smell of hospital. She smiled, soaking in the warmth and strength of his long arms as they slipped around her and pulled her in tight against the side of his chest. Completely content to stay that way, she lay her cheek against him, not even the ache of her wounds enough to prompt her to pull away.

A soft breath from the corner of the room reminded her that they weren't alone. Without opening her eyes or moving a millimetre, she smiled and said, "Hello, sir. It's nice to see you again."

Herros chuffed softly and chuckled. "And you, Captain. And you."

Shepard kissed the top of Garrus's head. "How you feeling, big guy? We should probably get you into bed."

Garrus just shook his head and gripped her tighter.

Herros stepped forward. "Come, Betru. You need to get up off the floor before you're too stiff and tired to help me lift you. I'm getting too old to carry you around." He laid a hand on his son's head, then ran gentle talons over Shepard's hair. "Welcome back, maribellu."

Shepard pulled back and looked up at the older torin, remembering when they'd met. She'd trusted him instantly, the solid feel of his energy so much like his son's. Or the other way around. "Thank you, sir." She smiled and reached out to squeeze his hand, then placed a knuckle under Garrus's chin, tilting his face up to meet hers.

"Your father is right, Garrus, bed is where you need to be. I'm not going anywhere, and I'd much rather be laying down as well. As good as fighting was for my brain, it wreaked havoc on my poor old body." She bent and pressed a chaste kiss against his mouth. As his mouth nuzzled hers, a fiery blossom of happiness exploded like Armistice Day fireworks in her chest. Since that first moment she heard his voice whisper through her thoughts back on the Cerberus base, a huge part of her had been aching for that sweet connection.

She drew back and caressed her fingertips along his undamaged mandible. "Come on, up you get." Stepping off to the side, she bent and slipped a hand under Garrus's arm. Even with both Shepard and Herros helping, it took a bit to get Garrus up onto his feet, and she was glad they hadn't waited, allowing his muscles to chill and stiffen further.
The ridged plate along Garrus's forearm felt as though it might actually be stripping the flesh off her shoulder, but Shepard just breathed into it and let it burn. Sometimes life meant pain, and sometimes … like that moment … pain meant life. Her love's arm slung over her shoulder, accepting her care … yes, some things were just worth every twinge and stab.

All three of them paused when they stepped through the door into Garrus's room and saw two of everything had been moved into the room, the two beds pushed together at the center.

"Move it along," Chakwas said, her voice managing stern amusement. "The faster we get you two into bed, the faster you'll be out there getting yourselves blown to bits again." She pushed past them, then turned to meet their curious and amused stares, finally shrugging. "What?" She sighed and shook her head as if she'd been caught doing something wrong. "Okay, yes, I'm breaking my 'no two problem patients in the same room' policy, but when I weighed the odds of you staying in your rooms … ." She held out her arms as if that explained everything. Which, of course, it did.

Shepard grinned and gripped the doctor's hand on the way past. "Thanks, Doc. It's much appreciated," she said, leading Garrus to the free side of his bed. "I've spent far too long away from the big guy." She helped Garrus up onto the deep mattress and pulled the blankets over him. Leaning down to stare into his eyes, she frowned, his passivity worrying her. "You doing okay?" she asked, her voice soft enough to stay just between them.

"Yeah, I'm fine." His good mandible fluttered a little. "Just wondering if maybe that rocket didn't take me out after all." Extricating one hand from his blankets, he pressed his palm against her cheek. "When I saw you on the bridge, I thought you'd come to take me with you, and we'd lie together in the sunshine … and you'd call me Callor." The weariness and confusion in his eyes pulled at her, prompting an answering tightness in her throat.

"No. We're both here. At least, if we aren't and your idea of heaven is fighting Reapers and Collectors … we need to have a chat." She turned her face into his hand and kissed his palm. "Now, since you're comfy … I'm going to fall over next to you, and we can get some sleep." Truly, her entire body felt like a giant abscessed tooth, short, thin blades stabbing into her in time with the throbbing. Garrus wasn't the only one she'd been separated from for way too long, her painkillers calling her home to the temporary but welcome peace of their embrace.

The mattress felt like thirty shades of heaven and about twenty five shades of hell when she stripped down into a t-shirt and shorts and climbed under the blankets. After submitting to Dr. Chakwas's scans she rolled over onto her side to find Garrus fighting off sleep, his eyes riveted to her. He reached out a hand, exhausted talons clumsy as they caressed her jaw and neck.

She took his hand and pulled it in tight, hugging it against her breast. "Go to sleep, love. Once you're rested and healed, we can worry about what comes next."

"I don't want to wait," he whispered, his eyes fluttering shut.

"For what?" Shepard let out a long breath. The cool air and dim light coaxed her toward sleep, the room disappearing into liminal mist around the edges as she drifted.

"Anything." His voice slurred. "To be together. For the war to be over. For our lives."

Her turn to caress his face. "We won't. No more waiting."

Shepard heard long, lengthy strides approaching down the corridor and managed to lift her head just far enough to see Nihlus stop outside the door. She smiled and held out a hand to wave him in.
"Hey there," she whispered over the steady rumble from Garrus's bed. Ten different emotions surged through her at the uncertain way he hesitated at the door, as if he didn't have the right to enter … as if he felt it wasn't his place.

"You're supposed to be sleeping," the Spectre replied. He finally crossed the threshold and lifted a hip to sit on the side of her bed. "How are you feeling? The doc get all those wounds to stop bleeding?" He cradled her fingers in his talons, the pad of his thumb stroking her hand.

"Yeah. Medigel … you're my hero." She chuckled. "As for sleep, I'm going to be in just a couple of seconds." Letting her eyes close, she squeezed his talons. "You okay?"

A soft chuff answered her as he stood and laid her hand on her hip. "I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

"I can't help it." The words strayed from her lips as sleep pulled her down, her last thoughts indeed ones of worry for the Spectre and the sweet, biting scent of alcohol on his breath. "I love you."

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**33 Days ASR**

"So no one has heard from Liara since the siege?" Shepard strode down the SR2's CIC, a small herd of crew at her heels, all waiting for a chance to put forward their issues. Nihlus walked just behind her, on her right, a silent wall of supportive strength. He'd woken her that morning with the message from Liara saying that her contact, Dr. Gerret Bryson, had uncovered a lead in their research, and she was off to Thessia; would Shepard and Nihlus join her as soon as possible?

Miranda shook her head without breaking stride or looking up from the datapad in her hands. "The ship logged her return while you were still clearing out the mercs, then EDI had her logged onto the computer in the lounge but she managed to bypass our tracer programs and security."

Shepard paused and cleared her throat as she fought to keep the faint glow of pride off her face. Liara might just have a future in espionage if she managed to slip past EDI and all of Cerberus's spyware. "Right, so we don't know what she was up to." As had become her habit, Shepard found herself looking up as she spoke to the AI. "Or do we, EDI?"

The slightest hint of humour ... or maybe it was embarrassment that warmed the edges of the AI's response. "I would not have expected an archaeologist to circumnavigate my security protocols with such ease. Dr. T'Soni did not bother to mask her correspondence with Dr. Bryson, or the initial few vid-calls with a Matriarch Aethyta. After her second call with the matriarch, she eluded my ability to track her signal outside Armali on Thessia."

Shepard waggled her head a little. The information didn't offer anything unknown, but at least it confirmed their destination. "Which is where she wants us to go, anyway." She opened her omnitool and sent a message to Anderson and Garrus. Maybe, Liara sent more details to someone she knew she could trust with them. She shrugged and cracked her neck as if shaking off that problem. "Okay, we'll depart for Armali at 0800. Next."

Two hours later, she completed her walk-through debriefing and tour of the ship. Kelly reported that Jack and Javik were going ever so slightly stir crazy on the ship, so Shepard assigned them to escort the ship's alpha shift engineers to find a used replacement part, and to dig up some groceries with the cook, Sgt. Gardner. The refits she'd asked for, including a more useful shuttle bay, were well underway, Archangel's engineers polishing off her few requests in excellent time, despite Miranda's constant and strident insistence that only Cerberus personnel should be working on a Cerberus ship.
In the corridor outside of engineering, Shepard stopped and signed off on Miranda's datapad of details. Giving them a curt nod, she said, "Lots to do before 0800, people. Dismissed."

"So," Nihlus said, once the Cerberus employees boarded the elevator and headed back to work. He leaned back against the port overlooking the shuttle bay. "We're headed for Thessia?" He grinned, the 'itching to get back into action' grin of a torin well used to life on the move.

Shepard nodded and leaned forward, bracing her hands against the ledge. "Yeah. Anderson received a message last night from Liara. It asked him to forward a file to me. I told him to send it to Garrus's computer in his office. Figured that was the most secure place to look at it." She looked around. "I've got this amazing, albeit nameless, ship, and I feel like it's hostile territory. I'll be glad to have you along, although you're going to have to work with Javik." She grinned at the face he made.

The Spectre elbowed her. "It'll be fine. It wasn't my life … and really, it wasn't this Javik either. He's a long way from that gasin. Must be a hell of a shock waking up fifty thousand years later to an entirely different galaxy." He pushed away from the window. "You really should name this thing before we take off. It's bad luck."

Shepard chuckled and nodded. "Like it matters with us. We find all the bad luck there is anyway." Still, there really wasn't any point in inviting bad luck in. She hit the elevator control and stared at the wall, possibilities flicking through, most of them discarded as quickly as they appeared. "So, I started on the Normandy, which was named after a famous front in World War II on Earth." A thoughtful scowl pinched the skin between her brows and tugged at the wounds around her eyes. "What's the name of Garrus's ship? It's got a world war tie, as well."

"Passchendaele," Nihlus answered. "Try wrapping a mouth without lips around that one. It got shortened to Passch in the first minute."

She grinned. "A bunch of my ancestors fought there in World War I. So, we have world wars, my relatives … and I'd like to stick with the Alliance naming scheme despite the fact that I'm pretty sure I'm not Alliance anymore." Stringing the lines together, one name came to mind. "Okay, another World War II front where Shepard relations fought … and it's a pretty name. Ypres."

"Eepress?" Nihlus frowned, his mandibles spreading a little crooked. "You sure about that? It doesn't sound like a war ship."

A wide grin met his skepticism. "No doubt you think it should be called the 'Bloody Cudgel of Death' or something." Shepard elbowed him and stepped into the elevator as the doors opened. "Yes, I'm sure. It's the Ypres. I'll spell it for you later."

"Don't bother, you know I don't read human common." He stepped to the back of the carriage and faced the front. "And I think you should call it Cruentan Mirtus."

Even though she knew she was walking into it, Shepard cocked an eyebrow and looked up into his far too pleased, green stare. "And that means?"

"Bloody, terrible death." He laughed, then let out a pained grunted when she punched him. "Ow. Cerberus really jacked up the kilos per square centimetre behind your punches." He rubbed his belly through his armour. "So, what now, Captain Shepard?"

"Back to base, check what needed Liara's immediate attention, and ours." When the elevator opened onto the CIC, she led the way out, bypassing Kelly and the galaxy map, heading back to decon. "Then spend a quiet evening with the general before shipping out tomorrow." She trotted up
the stairs halfway across the deck and let out a faint, sad sigh. "It's going to be strange leaving him behind so much." She shrugged. "To me, it feels like a month ago we were the musketeers."

Nihlus led the way into the decon area and shrugged, his mandibles flicking with a teasing smile. "You still have me."

Shepard wrapped her arm around his waist and gave him a squeeze. "I do at that."

They grabbed a cab at the end of the docking bay, only to get stalled in a massive exodus of shuttles and vehicles.

"Looks like the fleet is starting to arrive home," Nihlus said, nodding toward the private bay where Archangel docked its ships.

Shepard just shook her head. "I can't believe what you all built. It's amazing." Thinking about it a second, she shrugged. "Come to think of it, I guess I can believe it. I knew he could do it. He always had that spark."

Nihlus let out a long breath, something in it drawing Shepard's undivided attention. "Despite all the pain he was in after you died, he saved me … gave me a purpose … something to hold onto when I was drowning." His eyes met and held hers, his expression one of mixed wonder and love … and sadness. "He's my fratrin … my brother, and he's the gravity that holds all of this together."

Shepard reached out to press her palm against his mandible. "Yeah, he is that." She let out a long breath and let the hand fall to the Spectre's shoulder. "But don't short change yourself, Nihlus. You've held him together as much as he's been there for you." She gestured toward the base as they closed in on it. "All of this … I see how much it weighs on him, and you've helped him carry it."

Her hand returned to caress his cheek. "He loves you too, you know. That's why he freaked out when he saw we'd slept together. It wasn't jealousy." She tipped her head in a half shrug. "Well, mostly it wasn't. He was just worried that you were going to get hurt again, and he wanted to spare you that."

Nihlus glanced at her then turned back to his driving without replying.

They landed right outside the front door, stepping out of the cab into complete mayhem. Nyreen Kandros, Vortash, Butler, and Martin all stood out front trying to sort refugees and get them sent to the correct building. Shepard just winked and gave Martin a kiss on the cheek as she passed.

"Meet you back down here at 0530?" Nihlus asked, at the elevator.

Shepard palmed the control. "Sure thing." She grinned, her eagerness to get back into action and her old life escaping. "It's going to be nice to get back in the saddle again, at least one of the old cowpokes riding next to me."

He cocked a brow plate at her and shook his head. "Sometimes I don't understand a single word that comes out of your mouth."

"I know," she said, stepping into the elevator, "it's brilliant." Lifting one hand in a small, teasing wave, Shepard hit the door control and headed up to the twenty-first floor.

Other than the geth and their technician assistants, the research level sat almost deserted. She checked the time, then realized that the dinner hour had long gone by. "2004, geez louise." Looking down, she thumped a hand against her belly as it growled at her. "Yeah, yeah, I hear you." She let herself into Garrus's office. As soon as they broke free of Dr. Chakwas's custody, he'd
given her back her omnitool, which was already keyed to all the locks, computers, and comm terminals. Despite her joy at seeing Ingrid again, Shepard just might have been slightly happier to see her omnitool. Maybe. A tiny bit.

She heard the faint murmur of Garrus's voice behind the door to his comm room, so just sat at his desk and woke up the computer. He'd already set Liara's message aside for her, so she just clicked the link. What was their lovely asari researcher up to?

Liara's face appeared on the screen, earnest and excited. "Shepard, Dr. Bryson and I have discovered some very exciting pieces of information. His daughter, Dr. Ann Bryson, has been running decryption on my mother's files ... apparently the encryption she used is based on a very ancient asari code." The researcher shook her head. "My apologies. As fascinating as it is, it's a matter for another time. She has uncovered something both remarkable and terrible. I don't want to say anything in a message, no matter how well I think my tracks are covered, but I need you and Nihlus to come to Thessia as soon as possible. It's about two very old friends and the work they left behind." After another second, she nodded again, and the channel closed.

Two very old friends. Shepard grinned. Way to try for subtle and fail there, but still ...

Shepard had intended to go to Thessia and see if she could find where Tashac and Merol lived. Somewhere on that mountain, they'd built a refuge. She had no idea what they'd stored or housed in that cave, but the possibilities were encouraging and exciting.

"So you and Nihlus are headed for Thessia?"

A wide grin spread across Shepard's face at the warm voice, its subvocals rich and rumbling. She turned to face Garrus, leaning back casually in his chair. "Hope you don't mind that I made myself at home."

His mandibles fluttered in a gentle smile. "I built all this for you ... to be our home, not just mine." He walked over and sat on the edge of the desk. "So, what's going on with Liara?"

She laid her hands on his knees. "I don't know exactly, but she's uncovered something to do with what Tashac and Merol left on Thessia." Standing, she stepped between his thighs and leaned in to wrap her arms around his waist. "I hate leaving so soon. We haven't even spent any time alone together outside that damned hospital room."

His arms slipped around her. "Well, we'll change that tonight." A long sigh rumbled from his throat. "Besides, Anderson and I have business in batarian space. We'll be gone for about a week." He leaned down to touch his brow to hers, and a long sigh drifted between them. "I admit, I don't like the idea that we're going to be going separate ways so often. I got used to having your six."

Nuzzling her hair, he whispered. "I could always quit, rejoin your crew."

Looking up into his eyes, Shepard nodded. "Yeah, you could, but they'd miss you around here." Standing on her tiptoes, she kissed him. "Besides, I sort of like being able to say, my boyfriend, the general." She grinned. "It's sexy."

A wide grin and throaty rumble answered that. "Well, then, in that case." He pulled back as her belly rumbled again. "Are varren eating you from the inside out?"

Shepard clapped her hands over her belly and grinned. "I think so." She nodded toward the door, the most wonderful feeling of peace greeting the simple normalcy of the moment. "Come on, General Boyfriend, let's go get some supper."
(A-N: So sorry this is so short and sorta just in between stuff. I had more planned, but I am moving tomorrow and our internet is going down soon, so I wanted to get something up. I may be a few days before posting again, so please bear with me. I promise it will be worth the wait. *whispers* One word … Thane. :D Thanks so much, and see you when I am moved.)
All the air and gravity on that floor collapsed into a singularity that hovered between Garrus and the assassin, sealing the three of them into a tremulous, fragile pocket universe. Shepard forced every cell in her body to radiate the promise that if the barrier shattered, hell would pour through the breech.

**Aligarim Dau** - Giant four winged bird from ancient turian mythology which was said to have stolen the seed of life from the Creator of All Things.

**33 Days ASR**

Shepard slipped her hand into Garrus's, the strength of the grip that encircled hers tugging a smile onto her lips. That grip anchored her; a lifeline and a promise stretching out into all their tomorrows. Like everything else in their relationship, physical and otherwise, his hand holding hers felt singular—different, unusual even—but perfect.

She'd never wanted to be touched. Hundreds of hands had traced her skin over the years. Merging into one, slightly repellant memory, they sent her into retreat as soon as touching loomed on the horizon. But Garrus and Nihlus had never provoked that ingrained response, their touch different enough to allow her to form new intimacy pathways through the terrified mess that was her head. Nihlus had scared her, but only due to his intensity, never because she associated his touch with her history.

That's not the reason you're with the big guy, though? You actually love him?

Shepard looked up only to find him staring down at her, those pale, beautiful eyes—alight with joy and love—setting her heart racing until she could feel the blood rushing beneath her skin. No, she wasn't with Garrus because he didn't trigger her. She'd fallen for him in a thousand tiny ways, starting the night he stood outside her cabin door and said he'd try to squeeze himself into that uptight asari's dress. She loved him because he was the best person and the kindest, most caring and patient friend who'd ever walked into her life.

Her father had believed in fate. Garrus ... and Nihlus ... took her as close to being a believer as someone like her could ever get.

"What?" he asked, his mandibles fluttering ever so slightly.

Shepard slipped her arms around him and laid her head against his chest. "I was just thinking how much I love the way your hand feels holding mine."

Pulling away just far enough to nuzzle the top of her head, he said, "I was thinking just about the exact same thing." He nodded toward the door. "Come on, let's feed the monster living in your stomach, then go relax somewhere Chakwas can't track us down."

Shepard took his hand again and let him lead her toward the door. "I don't have to hide from her; I'm free and clear." Laughing at the look he shot her, Shepard shrugged. "What? I'm not the one
with the closed head injury."

"No, you're the zombie," he flung back. "And if Joker's movies are true ... I just want you to know I have a very gamey, grisle-ey, not at all tasty sort of brain."

After a moment of staring at him, ten different smart ass remarks flipping through her head, Shepard just closed her mouth and turned away. "Nope, I can't do it." Grinning, she shook her head. "You made every single comeback I can think of just way too easy. I can't go there. It doesn't feel fair." A gentle shove sent her stumbling through the door. "Besides, if I was going to do the whole undead thing, I'd go with vampire. Yeah, definitely vampire. Graceful, ethereal, stealthy ... elegant."

Garrus opened the door, letting her exit the office first. "Now you're making it too easy."

Gasping, Shepard spun to face him, her face drawn in horror as she clapped a hand over her heart. "Are you saying I'm none of those things? Why, General Vakarian ... so cruel."

"Requisitions totalling twenty-five hundred ampules of medigel during our tenure on the Normandy." His shoulders rolled in an innocent, but assured wave. "That's all I'm saying."

Shepard grinned and tugged on his hand. "Come on, I'm starving, and I think I can smell your brain through the hole the rocket punched in your skull. Doesn't smell gamey at all." Her stomach chose that precise moment for another hearty rumble. Clapping a hand over her belly, Shepard cackled. "Sweet baby Jesus ... run, Garrus! It's coming for you."

He just pulled her in close to his side as he opened the outer door. "You're insane."

Shepard pressed tight against her love, not worrying about appearances when they stepped out into the corridor, hand in hand. During their convalescence, Dr. Chakwas's hawk-like scrutiny and refusal to allow them out of bed left Shepard and the general a great deal of time to decide several things about their relationship. The first of those being that life was far too short to hide how they felt for one another. Despite needing to maintain discipline and the respect of their people, they decided that hand holding and casual affection posed no threat to either. Perhaps even the opposite ... that it might help bond their subordinates much like a family with strong, loving parents.

As Shepard stepped over the threshold, an eerie, funerary silence pulled her from her cocoon of safety and warmth into vacuum. Although the entire building had been in mourning for days, at that moment, the pain felt fresh, cutting with a sharp, serrated edge. The alarm at the base of her skull let out a pointed shriek as rolling clouds of agony poured down the corridor, thick, fetid, and strong enough to stagger her. Slamming her hard in the chest, the sheer power of it left her gasping. What the hell?

Her alarm upped the shriek to a shrill wail, stabbing long pins into her spine. The air pressed heavier, a tight wrap of plastic clinging to her face, trying to suffocate her. She tensed and began to turn back, every nerve in her body screaming that everything—even the air—just felt wrong.

Then Garrus's hand tore free of hers, the thump of his boots on the floor quick, unsteady, and off balance. Whirling to face him, it took Shepard a handful of seconds to realize what she was seeing. Garrus stumbled, arched back and to the side, both hands scrabbling at the garrote cutting into his throat. The strangling bond twisted and bent the general backwards to make up for his assailant's lack of height. She tore her stare from the panic and pain in her love's blue eyes to the pair of large black ones that challenged her from behind the big guy's back. A drell?
Shepard stepped forward, the drell reefing back hard on the rope and cutting off Garrus's air in response. The next second, he jammed a pistol into the general's side. Shepard glanced at the gun, the angle and placement instantly thrusting home that the drell was a professional killer, and that Garrus had seconds to live.

Without thinking, her mind still whirling and screaming, trying to catch up, Shepard leaped forward, her hands held out. "No!" She stepped sideways far enough to stare straight into the assassin's eyes. "Not him."

Those fathomless eyes stared right back into hers, the agony she'd felt earlier rolled from the assassin in waves so heavy they bordered on insanity. "Why do the wicked live and become old, yes, become mighty in power?" The voice, deep and heavily flanged, didn't come across mad or even angry as it quoted the Old Testament, but rather resigned ... almost calm.

It took her a second to realize what he'd said. "Garrus is not wicked," she replied, a beseeching hand stretching out. Why wasn't the general fighting back? She shook that thought aside as it latched around her neck, squeezing tight. She needed to stay calm. What had the drell said? It was a quote from the bible ... Job. Thank goodness for her father's lectures on patience; he quoted Job frequently. "The general is not the sort of person Job was asking God about, but the very best of us."

Footsteps shattered Shepard's train of thought before it even managed to leave the station, boots pounding out a rumbling beat against the tile. As they stopped, a chorus of guns unfurling announced the arrival of Archangel security. The drell braced, keeping Garrus between him and unfriendly fire.

"I'm prepared to die here," the drell called, his voice calm.

"No guns," Garrus croaked, barely able to rake that much sound past the snare wrapped around his throat. "Grieving ... father."

"Get back," Shepard said, pushing the personnel down the hallway. She needed time ... just a few seconds to think. Why hadn't the assassin already killed Garrus? If it was just a hit, or vengeance, there was no reason to drag it out. Not if the drell didn't care about getting out alive. He wanted something. No. He needed something first. "Let him breathe, and we can sort this out." She lifted a hand to her ear. "This is Captain Jane Shepard. Stand down all security responding to Floor Twenty-one."

Muttering, the personnel backed down the hall, not putting their guns away until they reached the elevator and back exit. Once doors closed behind them, Shepard moved forward again.

"Okay, it's just the three of us." She held those eyes with a frank, businesslike stare. Pleading or showing weakness could well get Garrus killed. "You came here about your child?"

"I received word from a trusted contact that my son had joined a military cult run by a turian the citadel council has designated a traitor and a terrorist. One they wish to eliminate before he throws the galaxy into chaos," the drell replied, moving half a step out from behind Garrus. "I got here too late." He yanked hard on the garrote, making his next words a threat rather than a question. "Why is my son dead? What happened to Kolyat Krios?"

Shepard glanced at Garrus's eyes, not missing the sorrow and regret that flashed through them, nor the slump that relaxed his body. She shook her head, warning him not to broadcast any guilt. That road ended with his death, and no one was dying in that damned hallway.
Focusing back on the drell like a laser sight, she shook her head. "I wasn't here, so I don't have any answers." One finger stabbed at Garrus. "That torin right there is your best, and at this point, probably only shot at finding out what happened."

"Suns ... ." Garrus rasped, the word sounding like a dagger in his throat. "Kolyat ... defected."

The drell stiffened, his posture and expression almost gloating, as if Garrus had confirmed the assassin's every belief. "My son wished to escape your madness by defecting to the Blue Suns, and so you had him killed." He rumbled deep in his throat, an ugly sound full of fury and scorn. "Did you have some other terrified child do it? Threaten the masses to keep them in line?"

Rage overrode Shepard's caution, and she stormed to within a metre of them. "No! How dare you? You break into his home, threaten the safety and peace of his people, and then would condemn him by twisting his words when he offers you answers?" The blade of her hand sliced the air with every point. She pitched her head to one side, allowing the threat in her stance to manifest wholly through the stare hooked into his. "If you don't loosen that rope and listen to what he has to say, I promise you that, death-wish or no, I'll make you regret this moment fifteen ways before you die."

When the drell simply stared at her, she closed another step, hands and jaw clenching tight. "Let. Him. Speak." All the air and gravity on that floor collapsed into a singularity that hovered between Garrus and the assassin, sealing the three of them into a tremulous, fragile pocket universe. Shepard forced every cell in her body to radiate the promise that if the barrier shattered, hell would pour through the breech.

Garrus straightened a little, sucking in hoarse, whooping draughts of air between raw and scraping bouts of coughing. Each torment pierced Shepard through, a lance and brand worthy of inquisition. "Kolyat," Garrus gasped, "joined Blue Suns ... arrived on Omega." He slipped his talons beneath the rope, loosening it a little further, but made no attempt to escape. "CO ordered complete massacre ... civilians ... children."

Despite knowing that the drell needed to hear what happened from Garrus, the sheer effort and pain it caused the general to speak tore into Shepard, demanding that she minimize his suffering. For a half second, she nearly dropped the walls holding all her terror and horror in check. She slapped them back up as the emotion in the assassin's glare drained away, leaving his eyes cold, almost reptilian. Weeping wouldn't save Garrus; she saw that mirrored clearly in the black depths. She needed to be the north wind, frozen and intractable.

But, she could help Garrus get the story out. "Kolyat deserted the Suns when his CO ordered them to kill Archangel's civilians and children?" she asked, feeling as though someone should shout, 'leading the witness'.

Garrus's nod provoked a sharp yank on the rope, but at least his talons buffered the blow. "Crossed bridge ... Archangel outnumbered ... certain death, but brave."

The rope loosened a little, the drell demanding clarification that time. "Kolyat crossed to your side to protect the children?" The whisper of pride and love in the drell's words expanded their universe by a couple of heartbeats. The singularity relaxed, allowing the breath trapped in Shepard's bronchi to escape, a nebulous hiss ... pale and shivering in the dark.

"Yes." The single word dissolved into a choking fit, but the drell allowed the general to bend, bracing himself on his knee with one hand until it passed. Garrus's voice came out a bit stronger when he straightened. "He volunteered ... sniper ... covered my blind ... doctor ordered me to rest." He rumbled low in his throat, clearing it. The sound rolled down the corridor, echoing like the deep, earthy resonance of an earthquake.
It thrummed over Shepard's skin, hope made manifest. The singularity weakened further, light trembling around the edges, allowing for a tease of transparency.

"How did he die?" An elastic band pulled to the breaking point, the drell's tone snapped the boundaries tight once more—a guard sensing imminent escape.

"Lull in the fighting." Garrus straightened, shoving himself upright. When he tried to face the drell, to look into the assassin's eyes, the rope snatched at his air, greedy and strict. "He stood, turned ... out of cover ... second. I grabbed ... pull him down. Too late."

The drell tightened up on the rope again, the gun never waver.ing as it aimed upward from under the lowest plate ... a trajectory designed to pierce liver, gullet, lungs, and heart.

"What's your name?" Shepard demanded, whittling the question down to a pointed demand. She lunged into the assassin's space without making any move to rescue Garrus or snatch away the pistol from the drell's fingers.

Garrus's assailant just stared, startled by the question, as she'd hoped.

She pressed. "If you're going to attack and kill the best person I've ever known ... one of the only hopes this entire galaxy has to fight back against the Reapers ... I'll look you in the eye and know your name." She turned her back and strode three steps down the hall, eyes closed, praying the whole way that she didn't hear a shot. When she turned around, the drell stared at her as if she'd just peeled back her face to reveal a drell one beneath it.

"Did my son speak before he died?" he asked instead of answering, his tone losing most of its edge. Shepard sucked in a long breath. Thank god she'd been right about the reason Garrus remained alive. The drell wanted ... needed to reconnect with his child too strongly to kill outright.

Garrus let out a couple of harsh roaring barks, then cleared his throat again. "He asked me not to leave him. I picked him up and carried him to the hospital floor."

Sentences coming out whole sparked Shepard's hope even brighter. Somehow she'd get Garrus through. She'd accept no other result.

"In the elevator," Garrus continued, his croak barely audible, "we spoke of fathers and sons. He asked why you hadn't loved him and stayed with him after his mother died." He tried to turn again, this time making it around far enough to look down at his would-be murderer. "I told him that I knew you still loved him."

"How?" the grieving father asked, his voice like boulders tumbling downhill. Even with Garrus looking at him, the drell's stare remained fixed on Shepard. "Perhaps I couldn't wait to cut him loose in favour of freedom."

Shepard thanked every power in the universe that wasn't true. If it had been, she'd be on the floor, holding Garrus's body; the universe darker and uglier than anything she wanted to endure.

"He asked that as well," Garrus replied. "I answered by asking him if he'd stopped loving you. He said he hadn't ... that he had always adored you ... even wanted to be just like you one day."

The silence hovered, tipping back and forth on a delicate edge for a moment. "Thane Krios," the drell said, replying to Shepard's earlier question. "My name is Thane Krios." He backed up a step. "Did my son know what I was when he died?"
The short rope forced Garrus to stumble backwards a step as well. "Yes. I explained your absence as sheltering him from your work." Turning once more, the general said, "In his last few seconds, your son recited a prayer for forgiveness then apologized to you for not remembering more of it."

Escaping Thane Krios's suddenly slack hands, the rope slithered from Garrus's neck. Shepard's mesmerized gaze followed the weapon to the floor, where it pooled, its deadliness jumbled into impotence. The assassin collapsed sideways, catching himself on the sill of the window looking into the main research lab. His gun rattled against the wall then dropped to lie unnoticed at his feet.

"Kolyat prayed?" The raw pain in those words ... the years of regret and lost time never to be retrieved, shattered the singularity, allowing light and sound and life to pour in around them. "Before I left, he was already old enough to call my beliefs old fashioned and dull."

The research lab lights shone brilliant enough to make Shepard's eyes tear as she followed him. "The council and your contact misled you, Sere Krios," Shepard said, keeping a tight grip on the upper hand. "Your son did not fall under the sway of some charismatic, wicked cult leader. Kolyat fought to protect the innocent and died in compassionate arms. He died fighting alongside people who are trying to shield the galaxy from a terrible, oncoming storm."

Garrus staggered toward Shepard, his hand reaching out, talons fumbling for her fingers, then wrapping like vices around them. Keeping her eyes on the drell, she moved in against her torin, helping support him as she quickly checked his throat. Tar black, a thick band curled around his neck, disappearing beneath the bandage covering the side of his head. She opened her mouth to tell him to head up to see Chakwas, but then shut it, knowing that she'd just be wasting her breath.

Instead, she settled him onto one of the benches outside his office door, and followed the drell. "I'm very sorry for your loss, Sere Krios. Please, allow Garrus to give you Kolyat's belongings, and let us explain why the general carries a price on his head."

"All cadets are required to keep a personal log," Garrus said, stepping up behind Shepard as he shifted the conversation back to the dead boy. "Your son was not here long, but he was here during a high stress time. Perhaps what he wrote will ease your fears."

The seconds ticked by, their passage marked by the roar of Shepard's pulse in her ears. The drell stiffened.

"He clings to me, tiny hands wadding up fistfuls of my jacket. Please, don't leave me here. Why can't I come?" Tears wash his face. His eyes flash, the last glint of the sun before it sets. So strong. So like his mother. I lift him up. His cheeks are wet beneath my lips. He smells of soil ... the sandwiches we ate together ... and his mother. Setting him down, I pry his fingers from the leather. They tremble, fall's last leaves, within my grasp. I brush the tears from his cheeks with my thumb and look to his aunt. She takes hold of him so he doesn't chase me. He cries out as I turn away. 'Father, please don't go.' I step into the blinding winter rain."

Shepard stepped forward. "Sere?" A hesitant hand reached out to touch his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"Apologies. I slip into memories too easily, lately." He looked to Garrus, but gestured toward the geth working in their lab. "If I have been ill informed ... if I have been misled ... what is this place? What is Archangel?"

Garrus looked to Shepard, but she backed away, keeping herself within leaping range of Thane.
Krios, but distancing herself from the conversation. Archangel was Garrus's to explain, and the trust that needed to be built lay between them. A gentle voice whispered in the back of Shepard's mind as her alarm fell silent. Anything that she needed to prove to the assassin had already been settled.

Sere Krios's reaction to his son reciting the prayer before dying put her defences on stand down. A moral man of strong beliefs stood before her, but also one of intelligence and reason. Given all the information, she felt sure that he'd not only stand down, but become a fierce ally. She didn't sense any of the cold ruthlessness she'd experienced with other assassins … none of the contempt for life. However Thane Krios had survived life as a killer for hire, it hadn't been by selling his soul.

Although her eyes never left the pair as they spoke … well, Garrus spoke and Thane stared into the lab … she allowed the conversation to wash over her without paying it any attention. It wasn't until Garrus began to explain how the organization came by its name that she focused in on the words, a faint, exasperated flush crawling up her neck. She glowered at the general as he turned to look at her, the expression carrying no heat despite how badly the name embarrassed her.

"I knew that even dead, Shepard would be watching over us … protecting us." He smiled, a soft, sad sort of smile. "And then she returned to save her namesake … just … in a more literal way that I imagined." The smile warmed, a teasing spark igniting in his gaze.

Shepard sighed and shook her head.

Sere Krios turned from the glass to stare into Shepard's eyes. "Siha," he said, the word invoking a sort of reverent hush that pricked the hairs along Shepard's arms. "The word for such a being in my beliefs is siha … warrior angel."

The sudden softness in the drell's expression set off an altogether different alarm … that one in Shepard's gut. No. No no no. People believing she was the archangel balanced far more weight on her shoulders than she cared to bear. She shook her head. "Mere mortal here, Sere Krios, definitely nothing divine." Holding an hand out toward the elevator to divert the conversation, she said, "Please, allow the general to escort you to your son's belongings, then we'd be honoured if you would join us for the evening meal. We'd be happy to answer as many of your questions as we can."

Thane nodded once and followed her to the lift. He remained silent as they led him to the quartermaster's office, where they left him alone with the box that contained Kolyat's belongings.

Shepard sat Garrus down on a bench and crouched between his knees, her fingertips lifting to check the bruise around his neck. "Damn. You need to go up and let Chakwas look at that."

He shook his head even though his talons lifted to rub at it. "I'm fine. He never pulled it tight enough to crush anything." His hand left his throat to caress her face. "Good thing he wanted to know about his son. Otherwise … ."

Shepard leaned into him and wrapped her arms around him. "Yeah." After several minutes, the gravity behind the door to the quartermaster's office began to tug at her, and she pulled away. "I hope he's all right in there." A wince chased that idiocy as it escaped her mouth. "Well, he's not going to be all right."

Garrus nodded, then looked up as the door opened, Thane Krios stepping out, the small crate under one arm. Shepard and Garrus stood, turning to stand at attention, Kolyat Krios's honour guard.

"Kolyat wrote of you and this place with great respect." Thane held up a datapad. "He speaks of
many things I'd like to know more about, if you'd indulge my curiosity." Shaking his head, he looked at the text on the device. "These Reapers … the council declared Sovereign a geth dreadnought. It was a sentient machine … ." Looking up, he held Shepard's stare for a moment before turning to Garrus. "These things are what my son was preparing to fight?"

The general answered by holding his arm out toward the elevator. "Please, come join us for the evening meal. The kitchen will be deserted by now, the cadets up in their dorms. We can talk."

The dining hall stood empty, dim, and silent, Marcie and a few staff the only people still walking the main floor. After setting trays of food in front of the trio, even the staff retired, leaving them alone.

For three hours, Sere Krios posed thoughtful, intelligent questions, giving the answers his full attention. Shepard watched him, able to see him setting pieces into the puzzle, weaving threads together to create a whole deeper than even they gave him. As she watched, she hoped that the drell assassin would conclude that their cause was one worthy of his assistance. He'd make a fine addition to her little gang of misfits aboard the *Ypres*.

"And despite their treachery, you saved the council?" he asked, even though his expression told Shepard he already knew why.

She nodded, staring down at her tray as she drew patterns in the spaghetti sauce with the tines of her fork. "They're a known quantity. Besides, any replacements would end up indoctrinated as soon as they were appointed. Best to just leave things as they are, preserve the status quo as long as we can. Panic, market crashes … none of that would serve the cause." One hand covered a yawn, and she slipped a little lower in her chair as the hour closed in on midnight.

Across the table, Thane bristled. "Stealing people's souls, corrupting them silently as they go about their lives … as they sleep." He shook his head as if he couldn't comprehend that level of evil, or perhaps because he could. After a moment of silence, he spoke again, his words startling her.

"In his log, Kolyat mentioned a story I told him when he was a child. He asked for it over and over again." The drell shoved himself away from the table, leaping up from his chair to pace to the threshold of the lobby. "When I was a child, I begged my father to tell me the same tale every night. It wasn't a tale well-suited to settling children to sleep, so Irikah, my wife, protested as my mother had." A discomfited grumble rolled from his throat. "It is a hanar legend about a beast of shadow that creeps up on children as they sleep, wrapping itself over their nose and mouth, stealing their souls through their breath. In the hanar tale, they wrapped around the child's gills, but the idea remained the same."

Stopping a few metres away, the assassin stared into Shepard's eyes, the black gaze exhausted and haunted. "In the hanar version, a great hero descends from the stars to chase them back into the abyss." He looked down at his hands, folding them as if to pray. "In my father's and my own, Arashu sends her siha to defeat them. Kolyat believed the Reapers—their indoctrination and turning people into monsters—to be the origin of that story."

Shepard sucked in a long breath through a throat tight with both revelation and horror. "My father told me a similar tale when I was a child. I used to sleep with the cat next to my pillow to defend me against the monsters. The way I remember it, the old wives' tale was that cats stole children's breath, but my father assured me that the cats actually protected people … that the monsters were huge and dark … oily shadows longing for life and breath … stealing souls in an attempt to fill their own emptiness."

She shuddered, tucking herself in against Garrus's side. The general wrapped his arm around her as
if sensing that terror suddenly drained the heat from her blood, leaving her craving warmth and comfort. "Sweet baby Jesus ... the Collectors and Reapers ... they've been the monsters under all our beds since we huddled around fires at night."

Garrus nuzzled Shepard's ear, then rested his brow against her temple. "My father told a story as well. Shadows that clung beneath the wings of giant, nocturnal raptors, dropping down to drain unwary children of life, stealing the spirits tied to them. He said the famactylus were the shards of evil created by the Aligarm Dau's greed."

Shepard shook her head as possibilities unspooled in her head. Yes, the Reapers might be the galactic bogeymen, but maybe they were for a reason. "No one has ever thought to ask about real monsters hiding behind the myths ... well, except for Dr. Bryson. But what if they were put there ... if the stories were woven into our cultural memory for a reason and with purpose? Not just the figments of our ancestors trying to process a power they couldn't comprehend?"

Garrus shifted so he could look down at her. "You mean there may be some useful information in them?" He nodded, a thoughtful scowl pulling his brow plates and mandibles in tight. "It makes sense from what you've said about Tashac and Merol ... the Protheans' attempts to prepare us for the next cycle."

She sat up a little, resting her forearms on the edge of the table, her fingers threaded in a loose tangle, and met the black stare pinning her from across the table. "The whole idea of these aliens being seeded into our cultures as the bogeyman is terrifying, but ... " She grinned. "... I've got to admit it's exciting too. We may well have been given another weapon in this war."

Garrus sighed, his breathing still sounding as though the air had to fight its way out. He shifted forward, reentering Shepard's peripherals. "It certainly places a lot of importance on the work that Liara and the Brysons are doing. Everyone laughed at Joker's idea, but they won't be laughing if, in the end, the stories turn out to be more valuable than guns and ships."

Thane returned to his chair, his entire body held rigid, practically vibrating with tension. He didn't speak, however, just watched them.

Shepard stretched and chuckled, trilling a little in the back of her throat as she reached the apex of her stretch. "I'm suddenly a lot more excited to see what Liara has in store for us on Thessia. She seemed really excited about what Ann Bryson was able to decode, and said it was related to Tashac and Merol."

"The protheans the beacon downloaded into your head?" the assassin asked. "You're travelling to Thessia to investigate the truth behind these legends?"

A loose shrug rolled across Shepard's shoulders, and she pulled herself up in her chair. "I'm not exactly sure what we're going to investigate, but I'd really like to take some time to look for where they lived. I know they built something into that mountain." She turned to face Garrus. "I'm starting to fade fast, and I need to meet Nihlus down here at 0530." Shifting her gaze to the assassin, she asked, "I hate to lay all this on you and run. Can we help you in some way? Do you have somewhere you need to be? Is there anything else we can do for you?"

Thane stared down at his hands, resting between his thighs, fingertips pressed together. For long moments, he didn't move, and when he looked up to meet Shepard's stare again, he moved so quickly it startled her. "I'm dying," he said, simply and without any trace of melodrama ... just a statement of fact. "I sought to reconnect with my son, because I have only months to live." A soft breath struck a poignant, but peaceful-feeling pause. "That goal will now have to wait until I join him and his mother across the sea."
Shepard watched him, studying the carefully controlled movements and expressions, trying to read his intentions. Although she didn't believe him a threat any longer, he remained an unknown, and sweet baby Jesus, she hated those. As they sat there, a question burgeoned in the air between them, swelling until she began to fear it was headed toward becoming a thunderstorm.

"Kolyat believed this cause worth his dedication and his life." His dark, intense stare burrowed through Shepard's as if following it to find and examine her soul. Uncomfortable, she blinked and shifted her gaze to her hands for a second. He cleared his throat, a soft sound that came off as an apology. "Would you allow me to fulfill his promise … to take up his oath to help defeat the Reapers?"

He laughed, soft and bitter. "I took the contract to assassinate you," he said, looking to Garrus, "because I seek to balance the scales of my life … to make the galaxy a brighter place before I die." The chuckle died, but a much more genuine smile replaced it. "Perhaps Amonkira answered my prayers, and by leading me astray, the council guided me to my true purpose."

Shepard looked to Garrus as well, trying to judge how he felt about the offer. She didn't doubt its voracity, but the electric tingle that walked up her spine every time the drell looked at her told her that he didn't intend to stay on Omega with Garrus. He could be a hell of an asset, but the whole idea of him seeing her as some sort of angelic deliverance wriggled like maggots in the back of her throat.

She watched him sit there, a panther coiled upon a branch, waiting for the chance to pounce. Dying or not, uncomfortably weighted stare or not, Thane Krios was a living weapon … one that could deal a fuck-ton of damage against the Collectors.

And she had a team of five, one of whom didn't want to fight if he could help it, and another who'd be off on his own missions a lot of the time. She reached up and opened a channel to Miranda. The sleepy slur through the operative's greeting gave Shepard a twisted ping of joy.

"Operative Lawson, I'm sending you another member for the team. His name is Thane Krios. Please see to it that he is given accommodations that suit his needs and that he checks in with Dr. Eis for his combat fitness exam before we reach Thessia. Thank you. Goodnight." She closed the channel before Miranda could reply. The hour was far too late to argue.

Instead, she activated her omnitool and brought up the Ypres's berth information. "Satisfactory?" she asked, a half-teasing smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"Quite." He grabbed the information, then gave them both a stiff, half-bow. "Thank you, Captain … General … for this opportunity." His eyes shifted back to Garrus. "And for being a voice of kindness and care in my son's last moments."

Garrus stood, a starched nod preceding his offered hand. "Welcome aboard, Sere Krios."

Shepard stood, but didn't offer her hand. Then again Thane didn't seem to expect it. He merely turned on his heel and walked out the front door. When he disappeared from sight, she wrapped her arm around Garrus's waist. "Well, that ended not too badly at all."

He chuckled, the sound painful. "Let me grab something to drink, and then we'll head up?"

"Sure." She walked over to one of the refrigerators. "Think the horde left any good soda?" She pulled the door open, a small hoot of victory greeting a couple bottles of orange. "Glory hallelujah, an honest to god, praise Jesus miracle."
"Glad to see your priorities are intact," he grumbled.

Shepard stuck her tongue out at him and snatched up both bottles. Strutting ever so slightly, she headed for the stairs, waiting for him to join her before climbing to his door.

Garrus palmed the door, but allowed her to precede him into the cool, dim space. He entered, moving through the near dark to turn on a lamp by the bed … the light dim and golden. She watched him walk to his wardrobe, sensing something … hesitation or fear, maybe?

"Garrus?" She took a step toward him, but then hesitated. A wry smile greeted that. For all their talk of not waiting for anything, but rather grabbing hold of their life together and running with it … there they stood, both suddenly unsure and shy.

"I dreamed about you the whole time while you were … " He hesitated long enough that she knew he warred with using the most honest word. "... gone. We were always somewhere beautiful." She watched him swallow, his throat convulsing a little, the black band striking and horrific in the light. His words came out thin and stretched, mostly from emotion, although a salty sort of rasp spoke to the damage he'd taken earlier. "You were so happy … so free of all the weight and pain."

Shepard took another single step forward, but then he closed the rest of the gap. He reached out a trembling hand to touch her cheek. "Did they pull you out of paradise, Shepard?" Tears welling along his lower lid, he blinked. She saw his throat convulse as he tried to swallow a soft keen before it could escape. He turned away, his shoulders slumping as if something he'd seen in her eyes weighed on him.

Following him, heart beating slow but strong, she reached out, aching to take that burden back. "Garrus?"

"How could they?" he said, his voice a low grate of fury. "How dare they? I would have died a hundred deaths before I brought you back to this nightmare of Reapers and disappearing colonies … the endless struggle." He walked away another half dozen steps. "No matter how badly I missed you. No matter how badly I ached to touch you, to just … be with you like this." He turned, his hand lifting toward her. It hovered for a moment, then started to fall.

Shepard jumped forward and caught it, her fingers cradling his tough, calloused ones, then lacing into them. "I don't remember," she whispered, only putting enough strength behind the words for them to reach him. "I don't really remember anything after you fools cheering for my being made a Spectre." She stepped into him, slipping an arm around his waist. "And there were a couple weeks where I wished they hadn't bothered. I suppose if I'd been left to heal completely the way I was supposed to, things would've been different." Lifting his hand to her lips, she kissed each talon. "But I'm here now. I can keep fighting, help find out what is happening to our colonies. I'm content being back … with you."

He looked down at her and pressed his mouth to her brow. He nuzzled her, the sensation so tender that tears gathered in her throat. Closing her eyes, she savoured the contact as he whispered, "I wouldn't have asked you to give up peace for that." He kissed her then rested his cheek against her hair. "I'm so sorry, Kahri."

She pulled away, wriggling loose of his arms. Taking his hands, she laced every bit of love into the stare that met his. It ached deep in her bones that he thought her return hurt her, that somehow sorrow stared back at him instead of the sweet, warmth that shored her up, making every pain so very worth experiencing.

"I'm not," she said, the gentle rain of tears escaping to trickle over her cheeks. "I don't care if I was
there in those dreams, Garrus. As perfect as they may have been, this is better. Above and beyond every-thing else … all the other reasons I could be grateful to get another shot. . . . there's you." She squeezed his hands, the warmth of them … the slight pulse under her thumbs … so alive. He formed such a huge piece of her heart. How had she made it through the month without it? "Would you ask me to give up peace to be with you?"

Garrus winced, one hand breaking free to erase the tears, his thumb avoiding the splits in her flesh. She knew by the gentle, but stubborn set to his expression that he couldn't tell her anything but the truth. He took a shallow breath. "I wouldn't ask you to give up anything for me, Kahri, but I'd have walked away from even the most perfect paradise to be with you right now." He tried to pull her into his arms, but she resisted, backing toward the bed.

"This one looks a whole lot more comfortable than the last one." A tiny smile broke through the rain. "Garrus Vakarian, will you make love to me?" She stopped, standing next to the bed and looked up at him, feeling so very small right then, but strong beyond limit, ageless and wise. How had she survived the month without him?

He hesitated, cupping her cheek in his hand. "Shepard … ."

"You said it yourself, Garrus. No more waiting. I didn't come back from the dead to spend my life in fear." That time her hands escaped his grip and reached up to undo the fasteners down the front of his tunic. "Neither one of us is in any shape for gymnastics, but I miss you making love to me."

A confused frown dropped his brow plates and mandibles. "I've … we've never … ."

Shepard cocked an eyebrow at him. "Haven't we? I recall one night where we made love sitting on my bed and watching a movie. Another several where you held me in your arms and read to me." She brushed the backs of her fingers along the smooth blade of his mandible. "You've always made love to me, Garrus … even before we kissed."

Halfway down his tunic, she stopped, able to feel his heart pounding against the backs of her fingers when they pressed against his chest. He was afraid. After a second, she dropped her hands and backed away a step, suspecting the nature of the problem. Her eyes staring straight at his chest to remove some of the pressure, she asked, "Did we make love in your dreams?"

He sighed and closed his eyes as he nodded. "We did, but we never … ."

"We never went all the way," she said, her voice soft. "You woke up." Her hands pressed against his chest to either side of his keel. "Garrus, open your eyes." When he did, she looked up, a soft smile encouraging him. "Are you afraid the real thing won't live up to the dream or is it something else?" Shaking her head, she caressed his face again. "I'm really here, Garrus." She smiled, just a thin, tight press of her lips. "I'm here."

He bent down, pressing his mouth to her lips, his tongue flicking ever so slightly against the sensitive skin. "You won't vanish on me?" he whispered, pulling back a tiny bit.

"No. I'm not going anywhere." She unfastened the front panel, her hands slipping inside before she laid it open. He tensed, but she just closed her eyes and smiled. "Mmm, so warm, just like I remembered. My turian-shaped heating unit."

Following the line of his chest plates, she spread his tunic open, freezing as her fingers nudged into something hard and raised … and metal.

What the hell?
"Garrus?" Gently, but urgently, she pushed the material off his shoulders, exposing the damage. Holy shit … he looked as though he’d been torn apart. Horror, stark and excruciating, sucked all the air from her lungs and stole her tears before they could escape. Incisions circled his entire chest, thin metal slabs and pins holding his keel and plates together. Long, raised lines of scar tissue in his hide betrayed where he’d been cut open.

"Oh, my sweet baby Jesus," she said, her voice barely louder than her breath. Her heart contracted; a pair of pale, milky eyes flashed through her mind, the remembered stench of flesh decaying off a body still alive bit deep into her nose, and the soft moans of a suffering beyond imagining echoed inside her skull. "What happened to you, Garrus?" Shaking her head, she ran gentle fingertips over the damage, knowing all too well what had happened to him. "Oh my … holy … ." The only words left amounted to a string of profanity, so she just bit them off.

She left him to dispose of his tunic, her fingers fumbling with the fasteners on his leggings, frantic to see everything those bastards had done to him. "Is that the extent of it?"

He reached behind his back and pulled the sleeves off his hands, tossing the garment in the general direction of the couch. "Shepard, I'm fine." He tried to capture her hands, but she slipped them from his grasp, slapping his talons away, and crouched to free his spur.

"Like hell you are. It looks as though someone took you apart and some mechanic threw you back together in his wrecking yard." Her voice snapped with lightning ready to strike, but it stemmed from fear rather than anger and wasn't aimed at him.

Why? Why had they taken him apart? And how? When?

He sighed and straightened, letting her finish her taking his leggings off. "We never get this right, do we?" he asked, the soft humour in his words breaking through the frozen wall of her horror, letting the sorrow pour through.

Instead of replying, she fell back, leaning against the bed. She stared at the damage, tears raining thick and fast down her face.

"Oh my god, Garrus. Why didn't you tell me?" she whispered, reaching out a hand to touch the long scar down his thigh. Fingers as gentle as kisses caressed his hide, her face wincing a little every time she encountered a deviation.

"I'm sorry, Kahri. I … ." He paused, long enough that she knew he was searching … trying to figure out how or why it had slipped his mind. "Weeks back, Nihlus and I disappeared for ten days. We don't remember what happened to us, we just woke up like this. Dr. Chakwas fixed us up. I'm okay. We're both okay."

She knelt and wrapped herself around him, her arms raised to press her hands into the small of his back. Resting her cheek against his stomach, she just squeezed him tight. "I'm so sorry, Garrus. I'm so very sorry."

He bent down and slid his hands under her arms, gently lifting her onto her feet. As soon as she stood, she wrapped herself around him again.

"Why are you sorry?" he asked.

She just breathed him in for long moments, calming the frantic stilettos that stabbed into her heart with every beat. She knew she wasn't responsible, but pressure, like a hand, latched onto the back of her head, naming her responsible … as if she should have been able to do something to stop the
Cerberus bastards.

"Al … Specimen Alpha … the turian in that vid … ." Pulling away, she pressed her hands on either side of Garrus's keel. "They were trying to turn him into some sort of command unit or super soldier to fight the Reapers. They'd implant him with cybernetics … I think they were based on tech salvaged from Sovereign, then they'd make him fight … ." She shook her head, her fingertips tracing his injuries. "They tortured him for two years."

"And then tested their results on Nihlus and I?" he asked. She looked up, searching his expression when she heard no anger in his voice, not even a rumble. Well, maybe a rumble.

Garrus nodded. "Yeah, I've guessed most of that already, Shepard, and it's not anything you've got to be sorry about. You had just woken up, didn't know anything was going on." He kissed her. "I was supposed to be making love to you, not making you cry." Brushing the backs of his talons along her jaw, he nuzzled her lips. "I'd much rather get back to the first."

Shepard's breath left her in a muttered, barely-audible grumble about the impossible nature of all turians.

Garrus chuckled as his hands slid down her sides, moving to the waist of her leggings. "You can't possibly have met every turian." Pausing with his thumbs hooked into the elastic, he looked down at her. "You okay?"

"Nervous, but okay," she replied, slipping her hands down his arms, then back up, balancing with her hands on his shoulders as he pushed them down to her feet, and she stepped out of them.

"Oh, Kahri," he whispered, crouching in front of her. "They're everywhere."

She nodded and reached out to tip his face up to look at her. "You're supposed to be making love to me, not making yourself cry, either." Grinning, she leaned in to kiss him. "We're not going to be doing a lot of jumping up and down on one another for a while, but I want us to get as close as we can manage."

Garrus stood and drew her to the bed. He sat and drew her in to stand between his thighs. "Okay." Leaning in, he nuzzled her neck, the touch pouring warmth down her entire nervous system. As quickly and roughly as Shepard had removed his clothing, Garrus took his time, revealing her slowly, one fastener at a time, spreading the wide panel down the front open a little more as his talon tips slid over the heavy fabric. Those same talons barely kissed the skin, tracing just beside the deep rents carved into her flesh, his expression clearly displaying the war going on within him, battalions of sorrow and anger putting up a brave defense against the bright light shone by the forces of love and gratitude.

When he finally reached the last fastener, he laid her tunic wide, easing it just off the balls of her shoulders. Slightly narrowed eyes and gentle talons moved over her as if trying to learn her landscape. He'd barely known the old one, and this new one … . The pad of a talon followed a particularly long, ugly split down over her right breast. She looked down at the intense, unexpected combination of pleasure and pain, and then pulled away from him. God, her entire body was just so damned hideous, it seemed indecent for it to react with that flood of yearning, tingling warmth. Clambering up onto the mattress, she sat against the head of the bed, tucking her arms around the knees she pulled up to her chest.

_Damn it, Janey. Would you like to pull and push him a little more? If you work at it, you can probably come up with some even more mixed signals to send him._
The general … her general … sat on the bed, the outside of his thigh pressed against her feet. He draped one large hand over her knee, and stared into her eyes, waiting for her to find the courage to look up and meet the intensity … the laser sight focused on her. A soft smile brushed over her lips, and she reached one hand up to caress the plate over his right eye, careful to avoid the damage.

"I'm sorry. I'm still a complete basket case, but I do want this, Garrus." Her fingers wandered over his face and down his neck. "I just … how could you look at this mess and feel any sort of desire?" Misery, heavy and thick, packed onto her, fetid clay weighing her down. "How am I supposed to feel about this mess reacting with desire?" She sighed.

He just smiled. "We're quite the pair, aren't we?" The warmth in his voice lodged in her throat, a strangling ball of emotion that launched an uncomfortable heat and pressure up through her sinuses to burn in the corners of her eyes. Leaning ever so gently on her knee, he bent down to touch his brow to hers. "You never worried about me seeing the old scars or touching them," he said, his voice just soft rumbling tones and warm breath on her face. "Why the new ones?"

She felt the soft mewing sound that squeaked from her throat more than heard it. "The old scars were my armour, Garrus. They protected me. They'd grown into a part of me." One hand flapped at the damage tearing across her face. "Cerberus did this to me. They pulled my corpse out of its coffin and …." Her stare dropped to the pulse beating against the front of his cowl. "They turned me into a monster, Garrus. How could anyone ever want to make love to a monster?"

When he tried to speak, she pressed her fingers over his mouth. Her brows drew together, the skin between pinching uncomfortably as the coals trapped in her tear ducts formed themselves into molten pins. "The worst part about you turning me away because you didn't know what I was … I don't know what I am. Not really." A small shrug pushed her tunic back up over her shoulders. "I feel." She pressed her fingers against the top plate of his mouth, latching her stare onto that contact. "I feel all these things. This love and connection. I remember … not everything, but enough to believe that it could have been my life."

His eyes drifted closed, and he nuzzled her fingers. "I desire you, Kahri. You. And I know exactly what you are. I did before Chakwas told us it was you." His tone imparted an understanding that tore at her defences. "I knew it was you. Nihlus was right, it only took one look into your eyes, and I knew. But … if I let myself believe it, if I let you wake up that part of me again, and I lost you … ." He shook his head and then grasped her wrist. "It was just easier to convince myself you were something else."

Lifting her hand, he pressed her palm against his chest just over his heart. "Does the fact my chest is covered by plates—and now metal plates and screws—does it make me undesirable to you?"

She let her hand slide down his belly to rest on the taut, hard length of his thigh. The smile returned to warm her face again, pushing back the gorgon-cursed-chill that spread from all those fissures as if the silicate and carbon of her cybernetics infiltrated her flesh, slowly turning her to stone. "Not in the least." A slightly wicked gleam sparked deep in her belly, travelling along her muscles to escape through her smile. "I want to learn every centimetre of you … every place that makes you do that rumble in your chest."

"Then trust that I feel the same, even if I'll need to be careful for a while." Garrus stood, and sliding one arm under her knees, the other slipping around her back, he lifted her from the mattress to cradle her in his arms. He chuckled as she resisted. "You've always trusted me, and even though I understand why that trust might not come as easily after the way I behaved, please … Kahri." His voice lifted to frame a question even as the tone lowered, laced with an oh so familiar, comforting rumble.
She relaxed into him, reaching up with the hand not trapped against his lower chest to caress his mouth plates and chin with her fingertips. "Of course I trust you, Garrus. Always." She gripped the front of his cowl as he sat her down on the edge of the bed, holding onto him as he tried to pull away. "Where are you going?"

He bent down to kiss her, mouth moving softly against her lips, his tongue remaining firmly behind his teeth as his hands gently pushed her tunic off her shoulders and slid it down her arms. She kissed him back, parted lips damp, clinging to his hide, caressing as she lifted into him. She tugged at the sleeves that caught on her hands, suddenly wanting that last damned barrier gone. When she was free, her hands slipped around his neck, pulling him closer, deepening the kiss.

After a moment, he pulled back a little and answered her question. "I'm only going as far as the wardrobe." Chuckling, he kissed her again, then straightened and turned away.

Watching him as he crossed the floor, Shepard let a wide smile beat back the last of the earlier chill. As long as she had him, she could believe that she'd come back, that she was alive … not whole … no, not by a long shot, but alive.

He closed the wardrobe and turned, holding out a simple, emerald garment made of shimmering material. Shepard's grin widened until it sent stabbing pains through her cheeks.

"Holy crap … you saved it." She stood and lifted her arms over her head as he gathered the material between his hands.

"Of course I did." Slipping it over her arms, he released the silk to slither and caress its way down her body. His expression fell a little as he ran a talon along the underside of the neckline, his knuckle just brushing her skin. "You left it in my drawer … waiting for the next time you came to stay. I just couldn't throw it away."

She stepped into him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Let's get into bed. I need to be up in a couple of hours, and I want to squeeze out every last second I can of being tucked into your arms."

He nodded, but held onto her when she tried to pull away. "Do something for me?" he asked, his stare suddenly serious and hard.

"Of course." She leaned back against his arms to better meet his eyes. The worry she saw there started her heart pounding rabbit quick. "What is it?"

"I don't trust Cerberus. Keep Nihlus with you at all times." His head shook when she opened her mouth to speak, silencing her. "During the day, you don't leave his sight. At night, I want him in the same cabin … in the same bed, close enough to know if you hiccup. They don't get any chances to continue their experiments on you."

"Garrus … ." Fifteen different arguments formed to protest his request, but after giving them all their say, she let them go unvoiced. Her sleeping in the same bed posed no threat to her relationship with Garrus. She knew it, Nihlus knew it, and Garrus trusted it. "Okay." She nodded toward the bed. "Come on, I really have missed falling asleep in your arms."

(A-N: I'm settled! For a month or so, at least. Yay for that. I can get back on schedule. This is a long one, but I really loved the flow of it, so kept it as a piece. Yay Thane! I love that drell and can't wait to bring him into the crazy Sassy mix. He might strangle her. :D

Thanks to all my readers and my reviewers. I hope that everyone continues to love the story. Hugs to all who like the hugs.)
The medbay door opened, the space filled by armoured turian. "You're not quoting Henry the Fifth again, are you?"

Shepard made a face. "Shakespeare can never be quoted too often. Besides, I have to. Apparently, I've come down with a bad case of happy." The words came out tasting like parsnips … no … more bitter than putrid … brussel sprouts. "I need to cure it. Quick." She grinned and jerked her head toward the door. "Come on, let's go find some disaster."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

35 Days ASR

Shepard woke wrapped in strong arms, feeling very warm and very safe. Her mother's voice, so very immediate and real the moment before, dissolved into half-remembered images, the rare and happy dream fading. Keeping her eyes closed, Shepard stayed still and listened. A wide grin spread across her face at the deep, rattling throat-roar coming from behind her. Nihlus remained in his deep-sleep snore; she could move without waking him. Actually, she could have brought in a heavy metal band and held a party for fifteen krogan friends without waking him.

Garrus may have rethought her nighttime safety arrangements if he knew his brother slept like the dead. A good, noisy abduction might have stirred the Spectre, but she didn't have the heart to start kicking and screaming to see.

She turned over inside the circle of his arms, prompting no more than a couple of mouth smacks and a mumble before he burrowed in and resettled, his face smooshed into his pillows. Warmth spread through her as she watched him. He'd punch her for saying it but he was damned cute when he slept.

Guilt slithered in behind the warmth, forcing her to call her feelings what they were. She loved him. When they met, she had a stupid schoolgirl sort of crush thing going. Sweet Jesus on a cracker, she hated admitting that. But she had. It started at some insipid council function. She'd caught sight of Nihlus guarding Sparatus and sort of sidled up to him at the bar. She couldn't remember if he actually managed to stutter out a word or two, but it didn't matter … she was lost. The combination of bad ass operative and adorably awkward, it proved to be her catnip.

Then, of course, during their sparring match that first week, he'd shredded her heart when he intimated that she'd whored herself out. Yes, she'd pushed him, kept him pissed off and slightly off balance … and yes, she couldn't really expect him to know why, but still, after days of taking care of him, those words had cut straight through her. Then they'd begun to mend and before she died, they'd danced around one another and the fact that she'd chosen Garrus. If only choosing Garrus had changed the way she felt about Nihlus. She tried to keep it bottled up, tried to downgrade it to friendship, because it was wrong. Loving two people at the same time was wrong, and it was selfish.
Her parents raised her with a certain set of guiding principles; cut and dried rules for what was right and what was wrong. For all she railed against her mother's strict ideas of who Jane Shepard needed to be and how she needed to behave, those principles formed the very core of her, and she'd never questioned them. Never.

Although not at the top of the list, monogamy had definitely been something that always just was. People pair bonded unless they wanted to be considered outside the norm. One male or female could only truly love one male or female. The rest amounted to aberration. It was never considered closed-minded or old-fashioned, or even a human-centric norm … it was just truth.

As she watched him, seeing the first signs of rousing, her dream filtered back through. Her family had been sitting around watching some ridiculous program about this highly convoluted family all based around a human man with eight wives of different races: Galactic Family or something equally sophomoric. Despite being just about the most inane hour of programming in the entire galaxy, sometimes either channel turning inertia or the inability to look away from a shuttle crash led to them spending an hour listening to her mother rant about the selfishness and weakness of sapient life.

Apparelly, Shepard's subconscious had a bone to pick with her. She sighed.

"I can't believe they have the nerve to call this family entertainment," her mother groused. She bounced Bunny on her lap, cooing to her in baby talk. "Can you, little Beatrix? No, of course you can't." Her voice hardened as her eyes shifted back and forth between her husband and the vid screen. "How can he possibly love all of those … women?" She gesticulated at the screen and shifted into her 'I can't believe I'm debasing myself even talking about this debauchery' pose. "And those poor children. What are they going to grow up to believe?"

"The kids seem pretty happy. Well, except for having so many chores." Twelve-year-old Shepard shrugged and hunched down next to her father.

"Everyone has to pull their weight in this galaxy, young lady," her mother muttered, her neck still flushed from their row over the proper way to dry dishes. As far as Shepard was concerned, air drying was a completely legitimate option.

"Let it go, you two. It's done," Jane's father said, his voice soft. Jane turned to look up into her father's warm smile, returning it as she snuggled in tighter against his side. He winked at her. "What do you think, Janey? Could we handle two or three more of your mother?"

Tucked safely into her sanctuary, Janey looked over to meet the maternal glaring eye of doom, laughed, and shook her head. "Nope."

Her father chortled, bright green eyes sparkling as a conspiratorial elbow nudged Janey. "I don't know. She's pretty remarkable. If another woman like that came along … ."

"You wouldn't dare, Franklin Xavier Shepard!" her mother gasped. "Turn me into some mare in a stable? The Blessed Lord as my witness, I would end you."

"Who are you staring at?" a sleepy mumble asked, pulling her out of her half-doze. She'd missed the almost awake stuttering-purr-snore phase.

"My night guard." She grinned and leaned up on an elbow. "Or I was. Now he's been replaced by my day guard." Sighing, she shook her head. "You two look so much alike, I can't keep you straight."
Nihlus released her and rolled over onto this back, stretching out until his talons scraped the bulkhead. "Mmmm," he said and sighed, relaxing back into the mattress, "true." Looking up at her, eyes glinting mischief, he flashed her a cheeky grin. "Although, the way you snore, anyone trying to sneak up on you would think I was sleeping next to some sort of wild animal and run for their lives."

Her laugh came out harsh and mocking. "I snore? There are people in the Andromeda galaxy who are kept awake all night by your racket." Flopping onto her back, she stretched long, languid, and delicious, pushing her muscles almost to the point of gimbal-lock before slumping.

"We're due to arrive in Armali in three hours," she said, throwing the covers back and swinging her legs out to sit on the side of the bed. "Want to squeeze in a workout before we land?" Glancing back in answer to Nihlus's disgruntled groan, she shook her head. "Didn't you used to be a Spectre? Army of one? All go, no quit? Bad ass? I move faster on my own little human?"

He chuffed. "Then working with you aged me eighty cycles." A wide yawn emphasized his statement. "I plan to squeeze in another hour of sleep, then a long shower." Stretching again, he raked his talons against the metal, the metallic scream sending a shudder up Shepard's spine. "Ahhhh," he said, sighing. "That's better. Where was I? Oh, right, then I intend to eat as much breakfast as I can squeeze into my gullet before heading into the starboard observation lounge. The view of Thessia from orbit is breathtaking."

Letting out a long, noisy sigh of disgust, Shepard reached back, clipping his raised knee with a sharp smack. "You're pathetic."

"Gloriously pathetic," he agreed. "I'm going to rest up just in case the second we make planet-fall, everything falls straight into the pits." He sat up in a sloppy pigeon pose, his hands dangling between his thighs. "The way our luck runs, we'll spend half the day crouching behind cover and the other half running our asses off."

She shoved him back onto the mattress. "Blessed Enkindlers, don't jinx us before we even get started." Pushing off her knees, Shepard stood and headed up to the bathroom. The combination of her mother's strident assertion that only selfish deviants loved two people at once and Nihlus's paranoia tangled in her gut, until it sloshed and gurgled, complaining against the cramps.

The bathroom door closed behind her, blocking out the joyful, badly out-of-tune humming that started on the other side. Sweet baby Jesus, Nihlus couldn't be more tone deaf if he worked at it. Bracing the heels of her hands against the edge of the counter, Shepard breathed, taking long breaths to quiet the ache in her chest. The last few days, living their half life together made him so damned happy, and it was a lie. The worst part … it made her happy, and not because of Tashac, either. Surprisingly, the prothean remained silent in her head, a state that just added to Shepard's unease.

Looking up at herself in the mirror, Shepard sighed. "You just need to get back to Garrus. You'll take a couple of missions with him, and this other infatuation will fade away." Another long sigh hissed from a tight throat. "Yeah, that'll work."

"Captain?" EDI's brisk voice cut through Shepard's mental brambles with a welcome scythe. "The Armali Transit Authority just sent our clearances. The Ypres has been given Alpha Priority, which will subtract an hour off our arrival time."

Shepard turned on the tap. So much for the gym and Nihlus's parade of laziness. "Thank you, EDI."
"And Dr. Eis asked me to remind you of your appointment with her at 0700."

"How could I forget?" Shepard let her head hang from her shoulders. "Thank you, EDI. Is that all?" She glanced up at the intercom without raising her head.

"Yes, Captain. Do you need anything?"

The AI's tone forced a grin onto Shepard's face despite her mood. EDI truly was impossible not to like. "Could you let Sgt. Gardner know that Nihlus and I will be down for breakfast in twenty? I'd like a fried egg and bacon sandwich, please."

"I'll ask Spectre Kryik what he would like. Anything else, Captain?"

"No, thank you, EDI." Shepard cupped her hands under the water and splashed it over her face. Twenty minutes didn't leave time for self-incrimination and its accompanying personal morality debate.

"Logging you out."

Nihlus was already dressed and shifting foot to foot outside the bathroom door when she emerged. "Were you building another face in there?" he muttered, squeezing past her.

"Yep, and it's identical to the old one. Hope you don't mind that I kept you waiting to do that." She grinned and walked over to sit at her computer. "I ordered our breakfast for twenty minutes from now. Liara got us priority clearance to dock." After opening her messages, she glanced back over her shoulder at the closed door. "Guess she really is the queen of the asari."

She looked up at the clear glass of the display case above her computer as she waited for her messages to load, and after cocking her head one way then the other, shrugged. "Do you think this case means that Cerberus is trying to tell me to get a hobby?"

The door opened. "Do you have time for a hobby?" Nihlus walked up beside her and gestured toward the empty fish tank. "Or fish?" He trotted down the few stairs, heading over to put on his armour, which sat piled in the corner of the L-shaped sofa.

"Fish maybe." Her eyes drooped partially closed as she slowed her words. "I hear they can be very soooooothing." A grin replied to his snort. "I'll ask Kelly to feed them, or get one of those tank VI's that keeps everything at optimal." She opened the first of three messages from Garrus. He, Martin, and Anderson were headed off to batarian space to do some joint mission with C-Sec that he couldn't talk about until it was over. Top secret made her twitchy, especially when she was on the doesn't need to know list, and apparently, so was Nihlus. The message went on to say that Garrus loved her and missed her and hoped her arrival on Thessia went well. The other two read pretty much the same, just a few hours more advanced.

Liara messaged to say that she'd be at the dock to pick them up at 0815 precisely, and she couldn't wait to share what she'd found. Shepard replied to both Garrus and Liara, promising the former that she loved him and she'd reply in more detail when they returned to the Ypres, and acknowledging the latter.

"You ready?" Nihlus climbed the stairs, settling his armour onto his shoulders.

Shepard put her computer to sleep. "Let's get this party started."

Less than an hour later, Shepard stared at the Ypres's doctor, her mouth hanging ever so slightly. "So, my healing has sped up by five percent in three days?" She pulled her head back, cocking it a
little. "Can't complain about that."

Dr. Eis nodded and closed her omnitool. "Seven percent as of this morning. Dr. Chakwas and I are collaborating to figure out why, but …" The doctor hesitated, looking uncomfortable. "... I have a theory." She shuffled a little, looking far less confident than Shepard had become used to.

After waiting for a second, Shepard chuckled and shrugged, her hands doing a little enquiring flip at the end. "Well? What is it, Doc?"

Eis sighed and backed toward her desk. "You're going to roll your eyes at me."

"Well, glory hallelujah. I've only rolled my eyes once so far today, and I've been itching for another chance." The captain grinned, trying to ease the doctor's discomfort. "It can't be that bad." She pulled her shoulders up to her ears. "It's not like you're going to tell me that my aura is aligning with the ley lines of galactic power." Her shoulders slumped when the doctor winced. "No, really, you aren't, right?"

"Of course not." Dr. Eis paced to her desk and back. "But, it feels like I am." She let out a long sigh and shrugged as if deciding, what the hell. "Only one thing has changed in the past week. All your tests come back exactly the same except for the accelerated healing."

Shepard braced her hands against the metal edge of the bed and leaned forward. "Okay?"

"You're happy." The doctor winced, but then shrugged as if denying responsibility for the truth. "Since reuniting with General Vakarian and particularly since boarding the Ypres with Spectre Kryik, your mental outlook has brightened considerably."

Swinging her feet a little, Shepard thought about it. It was true that being back aboard a ship, heading up a crew—most of whom had proven enthusiastic about her leadership—felt good. So yes, being back at work and moving forward against the Reapers made her happy.

"Okay, I can see a positive outlook helping speed healing. All those happy chemicals swirling around in the blood." Shrugging, Shepard said, "As long as it's not because my repair nanites have lost their little mechanical minds, I won't complain. I'm ready to stop feeling like I've been stabbed every time I move."

She slipped off the table. "So, how is your research with the chiastyllia going?" The cuff lay out on a padded tray. Walking over, she reached out and touched it, able to feel the aliens' joy through the contact.

"They requested to accompany you to Thessia," the doctor replied, sitting on the edge of her chair. She leaned forward and stroked her fingertips along the length of the cuff, the touch looking uncomfortably like a caress. "They can sense many of their people on the surface, and would like to make contact if possible."

Shepard nodded, watching the doc with narrowed eyes. The little buggers could throw out a hell of an emotional whammy. It might be a good idea to remove the chiastyllia from the doctor's presence for a day or so. "Sure, I'll take them up and they can snap over my armour." Shepard picked up the tray, took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "Once more unto the breach, dear friends."

The medbay door opened, the space filled by armoured turian. "You're not quoting Henry the Fifth again, are you?"

Shepard made a face. "Shakespeare can never be quoted too often. Besides, I have to. Apparently,
I've come down with a bad case of happy." The words came out tasting like parsnips … no … more bitter than putrid … brussel sprouts. "I need to cure it. Quick." She grinned and jerked her head toward the door. "Come on, let's go find some disaster."

The Spectre stepped off to the side. "Now who's jinxing us?" He fell in behind her, walking just behind her left arm.

Shepard just flashed a grin over her shoulder, the narrow space between them soothing and comfortable, with just the slightest hint of electric tingle. "No comment. Besides, first to jinx takes the blame when it comes time to start throwing it around. It's tradition." At the elevator, Shepard palmed the control. "I'll meet you at the airlock in twenty?"

Nihlus shook his head. "I'll come with you. I know the seals on the back of your armour give you trouble with the wounds." He followed her in the carriage and stood, staring down at her with his arms crossed, apparently trying to make himself look immovable.

"I've got Vincent," she muttered, but without any heat. She didn't feel like fighting a battle she'd never win, and of course, she never would have asked Vincent anyway.

Fifteen minutes later, they walked into decon to find the rest of their ground team waiting for them. Thane stood apart from the rest, his back to the corner as if expecting attack, the rest of them almost looking like a unit, standing along the other side, not talking but keeping an eye on the new guy.

Shepard chuckled. Nothing brought people together like a good case of 'who the hell is he?'.

"Come on, people, let's go see what Thessia has in store for us."

Liara stood at the end of the docking arm, Shiala and Aethyta posing on either side, a tremendously unsubtle commando detachment ranged behind them, looking as menacing as asari could manage.

The second that Shepard stepped clear of the Ypres's hatch, the entire planet closed in around her. Even the gleaming blue-violet sky and puffy clouds pressed down, a giant, oppressive hand crushing the back of her neck.

"It's going to be one of those days," Nihlus grumbled, his armour a solid bulwark against the back of Shepard's arm.

She nodded, her stomach dropping into her boots. "So much for subtlety. Nothing says slipping beneath the radar like a platoon of commandos in full leathers and a motorcade that looks like Don Corleone just arrived." Blowing a noisy breath out her nose, she shrugged. "At least the commandos don't all have their guns drawn."

"Don Corleone?"

She glanced up, meeting his narrowed, emerald scrutiny. Too much … that stare asked too much, and she turned away, throwing up heavy barriers. Damn it, one of them needed to keep some distance, and apparently he was leaving it to her. "I'll educate you on the way home, Fredo."

Nihlus sighed. "Not a single word that comes out of your mouth. Not one."

Flipping a hand toward the commandos, she said, "So when do they betray Liara and try to take us out?" Oh good, gallows humour. Always a strong option.

The Spectre shoved her shoulder hard enough to stagger her, but she didn't smile as he grumbled,
"At the rate you're jinxing us, I'm refusing to take the blame when they shoot our cars out of the sky."

Liara hurried forward, a bright, fresh breeze to push back the storm as she wrapped Shepard in a tight, rushed hug. "Sorry for all the cloak and dagger," she said as she pulled away and nodded to Nihlus, "but I knew you'd want to move on this right away, so I rushed back."

Holding herself rigid despite returning the young asari's embrace, Shepard nodded toward the guard contingent. "What's with the commandos? Are we expecting an invasion?"

Liara flushed a brilliant violet across her nose and cheeks. "My aunt and the captain of my security insisted since we're going out into the Thessian Wastes," she replied as if it explained everything. "I have a lot to tell you on the way." She turned, leading the group toward the cars, the commandos forming a ring around the entire group. "Your team can ride in the second car. Aethyta is driving it. They'll be subjected to a little vulgarity, but nothing truly disturbing or life threatening." The maiden chuckled as the matriarch tweaked her on the way past.

Although pleased to see the warmth between Liara and her father, it didn't comfort or spread through Shepard as it should have. Something felt out of place, the air heavy, a storm looming on the horizon. She rolled her shoulders and cracked her neck, trying to shake the tension pulling her tighter with every second.

Glancing over at Nihlus, she saw him scanning the parking area, mandibles twitching, gaze in constant motion. Finding no comfort in his instincts backing hers up, she kept her senses on alert, reaching out. She'd never been to Thessia before, so she could be reacting to different air pressure, the presence of so much eezo within the planet itself … any number of things.

However, none of that explained Nihlus's reaction. He had been to Thessia before.

"Shepard?" Miranda called, her tone one of supportive inquiry, no doubt seeing Shepard's unease. The operative stepped up behind the captain, her palm resting against her sidearm. Thane moved up as well, earning a raised eyebrow from the Cerberus operative.

"It's fine, Miranda," the captain replied, despite feeling that the situation was anything but fine. Nothing presented itself to any of her senses, and her inner alarm remained silent despite feeling like a ladar installation scanning for the enemy. "Go ahead in the other car. We're all going to end up in the same place."

"Yeah, in flames at the bottom of a canyon in the wastes."

Liara led them to a line of expensive air cars, all gleaming black, reflecting the sky like mirrors. Yep, the Don was in town for a family meeting … or she'd been elected President of the Galaxy and no one told her. "Sweet baby Jesus," Shepard grumbled under her breath. She needed to teach Liara a few things about not drawing attention.

Opening the second car, Liara stepped aside, waiting for Shiala to climb into the back seat. Shepard and Nihlus circled around to the other side. Once all four of them were settled and buckled in, Liara waited until the first car in line took off, then followed it out of the lot.

"Okay," Shepard said, once they were sailing along in traffic, "you've sequestered us for a reason, so out with it. Where are we going, and what are we doing?"

The asari scientist stared out the windscreen, for a moment before she glanced over at Shepard and let out a long sigh. "I've dedicated my life to a narrow, fascinating field of study, not realizing until
very recently how blind I made myself. By focusing in on the Prothean extinction, I missed so much that could have enhanced my studies." A soft, sad laugh tumbled from her lips, her eyes never leaving Shepard. "My mother tried to tell me many times that I was limiting myself, and hindering my work, but I refused to listen."

"We all have to rebel at some point and in our own way," Shepard replied, then threw herself back, climbing backwards up the seat, a muffled scream and a flailing hand directing Liara back to the oncoming traffic, now actually oncoming. "Traffic! Cars! Death!"

She shot a death-ray glare behind her as Nihlus chuckled, low and merry. He shrugged. "That was very eloquent."

Liara just shrugged and swerved around a public transit vehicle then back into her lane, the speedometer registering slightly lower than ludicrous speed. "While I was a student of a narrow field of study, my mother called herself a student of sapience." A soft, sad smile followed. "I thought her obsession with the mechanics of sapient nature to be high-minded nonsense." The expression evaporated. "Then I inherited her estate. Her most important files were encrypted using a key that I could barely scratch the surface of, at least, until I started working with the Brysons."

Shepard bolted her eyes on the view of Armali streaking past her side window, trying to avoid looking ahead as Liara talked. If death came for her again, she preferred to be surprised. Still, she listened to the archaeologist's words and managed to squeeze out the odd half-squeal, half-humming noise as encouragement.

Horns blared and a siren started wailing somewhere far too close. Shepard closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable. When the cacophony passed without Shepard being slammed, bent, spindled, or crushed, she opened one eye and looked over at Liara. The asari stared at her, brow furrowed in consternation. Damn, Shepard had missed something.

"What?" she grumbled, shrugging. "I was expecting to die. Just keep going. So, Ann Bryson helped you figure out the encryption like you said in the message you sent me?"

Liara sighed and shook her head, looking poised on the cusp of telling Shepard off, but then just nodded. "One day, while I was working on the files at their lab on the Citadel, Ann looked over my shoulder and whistled, saying that my mother must have been a fan of obscure asari mythology and religion." The asari shrugged. "The encryption key is actually based on an ancient asari religious order that is contemporary with the beginnings of our worship of the goddess Athame. They were called the Order of the Shrouded."

A deep frown wrinkled Shepard's brow. "I've never heard of them." She glanced back at Nihlus, but he shook his head, doing his best to keep his laughter under control. Scrunching up her face in a narrow-eyed scowl, she did her best to glare a hole through his armour.

"Not surprising," Liara replied. "Only a handful of asari know who they were, because ten thousand years after the prothean extinction, the priestesses of Athame led a party of huntresses into the valley where the People of the Shrouded lived. They slaughtered the villagers to a one, claiming their doctrine heretical." She turned to look at Shepard, her brow lifted, eyes wide as if waiting to see how long it took Shepard to put it together. "They claimed that their Shrouded were not of this world."

"The Order of the Shrouded were based on Tashac and Merol?" the captain asked, putting the pieces together. Excitement flooded her veins … well, at least it seemed more like excitement than sheer panic. A real connection to the two protheans, even without any information … it was worth getting excited. "Makes sense, they wore hoods over their faces whenever they interacted with the
ancient asari."

"Although, sometimes one of the villagers would catch a glimpse of them under those hoods," Liara chuckled, her eyes sparkling as they focused on Shepard rather than the traffic. "They believed Tasac and Merol to be messengers of the gods." The car began to drift a little to the right, then a lot to the right.

"Eyes on your driving, sweet Jesus!" Shepard bleated, then closed her eyes and sent out a random prayer to every god and power and religious figure she could think of. Another horn blasted and the car swerved back into its proper lane. Swallowing hard, the captain managed to croak out. "So your mother put this together somehow?" Shepard shook her head, her voice rising as she spoke, the eagerness bleeding through to overcome the terror for the second. "I mean, how? Is there information on them somewhere that managed to survive?"

Liara chuckled and shook her head. "I don't know what information she has yet, we just began to scrape the surface of her encryption, but I did bring you here for a reason. Thousands of years later, after a religious reformation, the priestesses of Athame acknowledged what their predecessors had done to the Order." She looked around, head whipping from side to side, then pulled the car into a sharp swerve to enter another lane of traffic, that one heading out of the city center. "They built a shrine dedicated to the Shrouded on the spot where their village had stood.

"Program the car, Liara," Shepard wheezed, slumping down in her seat. "For the love of God, program the car. I'm going to throw up or have a heart attack."

The asari let out a derisive mutter and blasted the horn before sending the car into a sharp climb. "I can't program the car to our destination. It's inside a no-fly zone. Besides, I've never been in an accident."

"What about the cars around you? They ever seem to just smash into each other?" Shepard ducked down into her seat until the restraint dug in under her jaw. Maybe, just maybe, shrinking into the bulk of the car's body would save her. She covered her eyes, not missing Nihlus's cackle-laced remarks from the backseat about dramatics.

"Now you know what we went through in the Mako," he whispered.

"Anyway," Liara continued, cutting the air with the word, "the shrine was eventually turned into a protected landmark, and then a cultural center."

Shepard shoved herself back up. "You mean, there's something there? They know where Tashac and Merol lived?" Excitement … yes, definitely excitement roared through Shepard's veins; their destination suddenly well worth the almost certain death required to get there.

Liara grinned. "Nearly twelve centuries ago, a group of archeologists uncovered evidence of a dwelling a couple of kilometres up the mountain from the cultural center. Hidden within the site, they found caches of technology far in advance of anything the asari of that time were using. It was cited as an elaborate hoax for a long time, but eventually, Serrice University excavated and confirmed the site as a prothean dwelling."

Shiala let out a bitter laugh, the first sound she'd made, drawing Shepard's attention to the fact that she hadn't even greeted the other asari. "According to a few very biting notes from Matriarch Benezia, the asari owe several sudden technological advancements to finding that home."

Liara nodded. "Mother did not support the asari covering up the find."
Nihlus spoke up, a petulant grumble. "Hiding prothean tech would explain why the asari have maintained a position of dominance in the galaxy." He chuffed. "You've got to love the hypocrisy. Asari, upstanding peacemakers and lawfully just guardians of all that's good. Unless you look beneath the surface, of course."

Shepard let the debate about the asari keeping prothean tech to themselves wash past her. She cared more about the fact that Benezia had pieced so much together. Where did she get her information? Another beacon? Why had she teamed up with Saren? Sure, the whole guide him onto a better path, save the galaxy thing, but … this new information, the sheer amount of intel that Benezia possessed, hinted at another, deeper reason. Maybe she'd hoped to gain further intel, to discover what lay behind the Reapers?

A decided lack of swerving and horns drew Shepard's gaze out the window to note the sudden lack of tens of thousands of other cars in the sky. "Hold on, where did everyone go?" she asked, turning to look through the back window. "Did your driving scare them off?" In the distance, solid lines of traffic flowed, not one vehicle leaving to follow their path. Lifting up as far as the restraint allowed, Shepard peered down at the ground below. It looked like pleasantly rolling grasslands, but she didn't see any farms or other signs of habitation.

"Welcome to the Thessian Wastelands," Shiala called from over Shepard's left shoulder. "It's a no fly zone unless you have a permit, and almost no one ever seeks a permit." She grinned and nodded when Shepard turned to frown at her. "Since we started keeping records on such things, so about five thousand cycles, nearly a million people have disappeared in this hundred thousand square kilometre area. No trace of them or their vehicles are ever found."

Liara shrugged it off as if it didn't bother her in the least to be flying into the Thessian Bermuda Triangle. Still, her voice wavered ever so slightly as she said, "The mountain where they found Tashac and Merol's home lies at the very center."

"That's not a coincidence," Nihlus said, a deep undercurrent moving through his subvocals that Shepard recognized as worry. The hair on the back of her neck prickled like icy thorns as it stood on end inside her collar. That rumble said trap.

The next second, the alarm at the base of her skull agreed with it. The cuff around her wrist began to vibrate and her omnitool sparked to life.


People called? Indoctrination? Shepard turned slightly when she felt Nihlus's breath on her neck.

"This is the crying snow? The crystallized carbon lifeforms?" he asked, peering at the cuff. "I thought I was losing my mind or hallucinating." He reached out and touched it. "It's really warm."

"They want us to find their people first. They say that their people know what has been happening to the missing people." She turned in her seat a little, meeting his eyes. "Tashac has been completely silent in my head since I got Liara's message. How about Merol?"

He shrugged. "What little I get from Tashac has also disappeared, but Merol … ." Shaking his head, he shifted in his seat. "I think the warning just now was from him … his memory of that place, but he's not talking. It's just emotion." His mandibles dropped and swept wide, distressed. "It feels like shame, Shepard."

She nodded. "He's never really spoken to me, but I definitely got a warning vibe just now." Holding his stare for long seconds, she weighed their options, then looked down at the cuff. "Do you know
where your people are?"

"Mountain."

A sharp sigh cut between Shepard's lips. She needed to find more of the chia just so that they could
develop their speaking skills. "Handy but inspecific. Can you locate them?"

"Closer. We call," the chia replied.

Shepard snorted a laugh as the shortened name appeared in her head. A second later an image of a
clay animal covered in sprouts popped up on the cuff.

"What is Chia Pet?" they asked.

"Chee-ah pet versus Kiah," she explained, swallowing the laughter. "Don't worry about it." She
pointedly ignored Nihlus's exasperated glare burning a hole in the side of her head and focused on
the cuff. "So, you can direct us to where your people are when we get closer?"

"Yes."

Shepard looked up at Liara. "Do you need to alert your army to our intended course changes so
they don't shoot us down?"

Liara rolled her eyes. "They wouldn't shoot us down. They work for me; I'm not their prisoner."
She hesitated for a moment before moving to her radio. When Shepard laughed the asari flushed
violet again. "I still have to let them know what's going on."

Shepard shook her head and settled back in her seat. "You rolled your eyes at me. I can't believe it.
Whatever happened to that sweet, innocent … ?"

Liara let out a disgusted snort, flushing even darker as Shepard reached over and squeezed her
shoulder.

"Don't get me wrong, T'Soni … I like it." She chortled and looked back at the cuff, but it had gone
silent. She listened to Liara discussing the complications of changing their course in a permit zone,
her grin widening as Liara told her captain to just take care of it. The asari had grown a spine over
the two years. It suited her.

"Shepard?" Nihlus called over the seat, his long arm appearing next to her head, pointing straight
ahead. "What is that?"

"Oh fuck," Shepard groaned, her eyes following the gesture to the mountain, still fairly distant.
White and massive, the sun glimmering off its reflective surface, a funnel cloud rose from the
mountain peak, swirling into a monstrous cyclone. It lifted upward until it stretched nearly half the
height of the mountain. When it stopped growing, it began to roll, a thunder head or an avalanche
roaring down the mountain, flattening trees and laying waste to everything in its path.

"They can sense many of their people on the surface? No shit!" Shepard muttered, remembering
the pain of the Chia storm shredding her on Freedom's Progress. "Sweet baby Jesus, that was a
handful compared this. If it doesn't stop, it's going to destroy the cars … and it's coming this way."
Looking down at the cuff, she asked, "Is this your people?"

A blythe, innocent joy flowed through her. "We called! They come!"

"Tell them to slow down! They don't need to beat us to death to talk to us," Shepard cried, her
words raking through a clenched jaw. "Liara! Raise the blast shields, and get this car on the ground, now! We need to protect the cars!" Turning to look at Nihlus, she growled. "This is all your fault!"

(A-N: Once more unto the breach, dear friends. Once more unto the breach! Hugs and love to all of you. You keep me going, and that is all I have to say about that. ) )

Chapter End Notes

I need to speak to the nature of the conflict going on with Shepard, even though it is a bit of a spoiler ... although pretty sure people see the writing on the wall. :D Plainly, she is a woman raised with certain values who finds herself in a situation at odds with those values. She loves two torins. I do not intend to challenge the general validity of those values, because quite frankly, it's not my place to tell anyone how to love other people. Except to say, with all your heart. I am one writer with one situation and a set of characters who want to explore their possibilities. Some of the other characters will support their choices, some will not. Some might eventually change their minds, some won't. They are people. People have differing opinions, I hear.

I do hope this exploration won't cause readers to leave, but at the same time, I'm a realist and understand that not everyone will be comfortable with where these characters go. However, that said, this exploration isn't about kink. It really isn't, and both Garrus and Nihlus make a face when it is suggested and say ... but he's my brother. What? Nope. It is not going to the threesome sex place, so I know that too will disappoint people. Anyway, I hope I do a good job of honouring the honesty of her relationships, romantic and otherwise, with both Garrus and Nihlus ... and do so in a realistic way. Please do let me know if I fail. :D *hugs*

And if you want to discuss it, please feel free to leave a comment. I'd love to hear from you.
"Shepard," Nihlus said, the deep rumble she knew meant danger rolled under the words, sending the sharp skitter of giant beetles up her spine.

Plucking Ingrid from her back, she spun to face the darkness even as she lifted the rifle to her shoulder and looked down the sight. "Great fuck, the entire tunnel looks like it's moving." The beetles sank their needle-like feet into her skin, burrowing for the meat. For a moment, she jerked the scope here and there, following every perceived movement, but then slammed a lid on the fear. She'd been through a hell of a lot worse than being trapped somewhere and outnumbered.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Targismar (short form: Targis)** - The most vile curse in the turian language. Has its origins in turian prehistoric rituals involving the disgracing and execution of enemies.

**35 Days ASR**

Shepard grasped Liara behind the neck and shoved her head down below the dash. "Brace yourselves!" The way the chia had taken down trees, she held no doubt that they could toss the cars like leaves, even with the vehicles parked solidly on the ground. She cursed as she ducked down and covered her head with her arm.

There was no way to protect the cars, she just needed to pray that everyone was buckled in and the flurry of diamond-hard hail she'd felt pelting her skin didn't rip the vehicles to shreds. Their shields wouldn't be enough, and all she could do was wait it out. She closed her eyes, her memory latching onto an image of Garrus giving her one of his 'don't worry, I've got you' smiles, his arms strong and so very warm around her.

The storm hit, but instead of ripping the car from the ground and tossing it, the vehicle merely rocked a little. Outside, a sound akin to a hard rainfall rang against their metal and polymer skin for less than a minute before stopping. Shepard lifted her head a little, a soft hum rolling around in her throat. A scowl creased her brow. Being hit by millions—if not more—of the little beings came off with less of an impact than the flurry on Freedom's Progress? Tentative, prepared to dive back into cover, she sat up.

"Liara, open the blast shields, please?" Shepard's voice sounded tiny and distant to her ears, a mouse squeak against the roaring silence.

"Do you think it's over?" Shiala asked, her voice crawling up from between the seats. "Maybe that was just a first few ... scouts or something." Wide eyes stared up from the dim space behind the driver's seat.

Shepard turned a little further, meeting Nihlus's stare right behind her shoulder. He looked as though he'd been prepared to throw himself over her. Damned overprotective turians. "I think that
was it," she said, directing her words to Shiala even though she held Nihlus with a pitchfork and barbed wire laden stare. 'Keep your distance,' it demanded.

Liara finally seemed to process the request to lower the shields over the windows and reached up to press the control. She pulled her head back and scowled. "Are we buried in a chiastyllia avalanche?"

Shepard looked out the side window, unable to see more than an artist-palette blur of colour. "I think we are. I can't even distinguish the ground from the sky." The moment the words appeared in her head … even before they rattled loose of her lips, a shimmer passed through the chia outside her window: an alignment? Whatever it was, the view clarified. Not just a little better either, the tiny beings aligned themselves to provide a scalpel-sharp view of the deep, blue-green grass, the weeds in a myriad of hues … the mountains in all their violet-silver majesty, crowned in white.

"What the … ?" She looked down at the cuff. "What happened?" she demanded. "Why are your people encasing the car?"

"Will demanded protection," they replied. "They protected."

A frown sharpened the angles of Shepard's face. "Will demanded?" Reflex and confusion formed a denial, but before she shoved it up through her larynx, her brain interfered. She'd wished for a way to protect the cars from the chia. "Sweet baby Jesus," she grumbled and then sighed. "Well, that's one solution."

The mutter provoked a hearty chuff from the back seat. "And how do we escape our protection?" Nihlus demanded.

"We need to get back on course before gunships are sent to ensure we do," Liara said. The tightness in her voice wrapped the alarm at the base of Shepard's skull in thorns. Sharp and tenacious, they demanded action and quickly. For the first time since they'd landed, Liara looked over at Shepard, fear glistening, blue waterglass, in her eyes. "Who knows what they'll do if they arrive out here to find us like this?"

Shepard held the young asari's stare for a few seconds, trying to ease Liara's fear through the contact. "We've been in tougher spots, T'Soni. We'll be okay. We just need to work the problem."

When she coaxed a nod from the pretty blue head, she looked down at the chia wrapped around her arm. "Okay, let's think through this. Your people came because you called and then formed a shell around the cars to protect them? Even though they were the perceived threat?"

"Will shouted 'protect, must protect',' the cuff replied, glowing orange letters appearing in the crystal. "We protected."

"Why is my will the one you listen to?" Shepard asked. "I don't want the chia to be my slaves." The thought curdled between her synapses and deep in her guts, and for a moment she thought her stomach on the verge of introducing the floor to her fried egg and bacon sandwich.

"Not your will," the cuff declared, sending out a wave of emotion with a taste and tremor that she knew all too well.

Nihlus's overprotectiveness brought the chia down on them, causing their encasement. At least it was good to know that they didn't just mindlessly obey her every order. The rest of figuring out the chia's issue with their easily subverted will could wait until the whole party wasn't on the cusp of being bombed as an alien threat.
"We need to move the cars," she said. "We need to get to the mountain." She sighed as the cuff remained silent, the sigh belying the slow turn of dread working its way through her. "Right. I want your people to release the cars."

"Must wait." A number showed on her wrist. Eighteen … seventeen.

"What does this mean?" Shepard demanded, fear pricking her spine hot nettles. Nihlus loomed over her shoulder again, no doubt alerting to the sudden sliver of alarm in her voice. Why had she done as they wanted and brought them along? She didn't know or understand the chia well enough to have done so. Damn her impulse. Who else would follow up being attacked and basically taken hostage by a completely alien lifeform by bringing them aboard her ship and then just letting them do whatever they wanted?

An image of Amalair nested in the corner of the Normandy's cargo bay flashed through her mind followed by one of Legion fixing his armour next to Kaidan's station.

Yeah, you have a history of glaringly naive stupidity, Janey. Luckily, it's all worked out before now.

"A countdown?" the Spectre asked. He cocked his head. "To what? What are you doing?"

The cuff didn't respond, the countdown passing ten, then five. Shepard's mind raced. What could it possibly mean? And why wasn't it responding to her? It had never just ignored her before. Never, in all of the three times she'd spoken to them. Damn, she really was an idiot. Why had she imagined that their trip to Thessia wouldn't involve almost certain odds of death? Nothing they'd ever done had been easy. Hell, a shopping trip on the presidium had nearly ripped her brain out of her skull.

"We really need to … ," Liara said, cutting through Shepard's bewildered internal diatribe.

Then Shiala cut through Liara. "Um." The asari's voice wavered between alarm and wonder. "Where are we?"

Shepard looked up, the countdown running out. Her brow creased, her heart knocking against the inside of her ribs. Even before she looked out the side window, she could see that they'd moved, and no small distance. A solid wall of violet-steel rose up before them, filling the forward view. Looking out the side confirmed that in those twenty five seconds or so, they'd completed the journey to the mountains.

"Where are we?" she asked the chia.

"Mountain."

Shepard grumbled. "We need to get enough of you in one place to ease the communication barrier." Glancing down, she asked, "Are we going to be able to get out now?"

Her answer came in the form of a flurry of movement, then the sudden clearing of the windscreen. The car in front of them appeared through the haze, completely cleared. The top opened, five very stunned-looking commandos rushing out, guns drawn. Shepard didn't need to look behind her to know that the entire platoon had followed their lead. She let out a long, weary sigh.

"Note for your next briefing when bringing the commandos on an op with me," Shepard said, annoyance lashing out before she could get it under control, "don't leave out the part with the 'freaky shit always happens around Shepard' warning." She shot a glare over her shoulder at Liara, even though it wasn't really the asari she was pissed off at.

The entire mission felt completely out of control, and had since she stepped off the Ypres. Nothing
made her crazier than feeling as if she'd been caught up in a tornado, events flinging her ahead of
them, then dragging her behind. She hit the door control and swung out, her body tight, every
movement locked down and controlled.

The second she straightened and stepped away from the car, a small flurry of the chia attacked,
much less violently than before, swirling around her arm. The cuff expanded, intricately designed
cogs appeared, meshing into one another … some no larger than a speck of dust, some a centimetre
or so across. It built up her forearm, a lattice of chia creating who knew what. Her annoyance bled
away, transforming into wonder. She felt Nihlus step up beside her.

"Wha … ?" he whispered, his voice seeming to ask if she wanted him to smash it off her arm
despite the obvious wonder. Must have been the layer of subvocals that preceded and followed the
partial word.

The construction ended, the flurry of sparkling lifeforms vanishing in favour of a holographic
interface and screen. "Enhanced communication interface and intelligence upgrades completed," a
feminine voice said. "We apologize for moving the vehicles without alerting you prior," it
continued. "We sensed military vehicles closing on our previous location. Spectre Kryik's previous
command to protect you and thus removing you from the threat, seemed to take precedence over
providing an explanation."

Shepard looked at Nihlus, a wry grin greeting the embarrassed flutter of his mandibles. "Well,
thank you." Turning away from the Spectre, Shepard's eyes travelled down the line of cars, her
squad moving toward her, their attention divided between the commandos and the wall of chia that
climbed the cliff face. Beyond the cars, the long shoulder of the mountain swept down toward the
shadowed valley. Long, dark blue-green grass flashed silver as it blew in waves. Small flowers of a
cyan so brilliant it appeared to glow crowned the center of each plant.

"Blessed Enkindlers," she whispered, her chest and throat aching as awe seized hold, "it's
breathtaking here. No wonder they chose this spot for their retirement." Taking a deep breath that
 teased her nostrils with the spicy-honey-and-pepper scent of the grass and the whisper of ice
carried along the back of the spring wind, Shepard let out a long sigh. Maybe she could get
permission to take a vacation there. She could call it Spectre business … investigating the
disappearances.

Enraptured, Shepard wandered down the slope, the entire place feeling eerily familiar. A couple
hundred metres below her, a herd of small, wooly-looking animals grazed across the grounds of a
house that she knew all too well. A soft keen of sorrow and longing shivered through her mind.
Shepard nodded in mute understanding. "Nihlus … how did they know to rebuild it exactly … ?"
The question evaporated as the Spectre stepped up behind her arm, and Tashac let out another thin
wail of pain.

"What did you do here that hurts so badly?" Shepard whispered to the silent presence in her head,
not expecting or getting an answer. Something told her not to rush too quickly for answers, because
their reveal—coming up hard and fast—would change everything. So, she took a long breath and
looked back toward the mountain, her lips pulling into a wry smile as she saw the cascade of chia
flowing down the cliff, looking like a frozen waterfall despite the heat of the season precluding its
existence. The chia needed to learn a thing or two about subtlety as well. As the thought formed,
the chia began to move: one moment ice, the next water that flowed but didn't pool. She just shook
her head.

Nihlus turned along with her. She saw his mandibles give a bewildered flutter as he asked, "Do you
ever think that we all died at some point along the way, and this is some bizarre afterlife?"
Shepard snorted in the back of her throat, and turned her attention to the crystallized gauntlet that now covered her arm from wrist to elbow. "Do the chia retain the ability to reform even after they've become something ... like this gauntlet?" she asked, lifting it, wonder tinting her examination of its inner workings. "This is amazing. Completely mechanical."

"We retain some malleability for a time, but once we set to our purpose, our form locks. The form can be added to, and if parts are destroyed, it can be repaired, but the form cannot be reduced. Will assigns, but function maintains our form. Form is purpose."

Turning her back on the house below, Shepard walked toward the cliff. "How long have your people been hiding here?"

"The snows have come millions of times. Multitudes of our kind were destroyed as slaves of the suzerain. The rest fled our homeworld. Most formed the Cynosure. Others hid on distant planets, such as this one. We keep watch for the return of the suzerain or their servants."

Shepard wandered closer to the cliff as she listened to that voice, the midmorning sun warming her back. "What is the Cynosure? Are you in contact with it? Do your people share awareness?"

"The Cynosure is the center, the great intelligence of the chiastyllia. It contains decillions of chiastyllia, all hiding. So ancient, so clever that it shrouds itself, hiding in plain sight, yet so powerful that the suzerain dare not approach or be destroyed." The voice paused. "Yes, all chiastyllia can share thoughts, sensory stimuli, and pain across any distance. The only chia who are lost to the whole are those corrupted by the darkness. Many have been over the millennia. So many lost, their voices silenced."

Shepard stopped, catching sight of what appeared to be a road curving around the mountain slope. Touching Nihlus's hand to alert him, she set out, jogging to where it curled around the great shoulder of rock, leading down to the house below.

A thrill of excitement, electric and smelling of ozone, seared through her. They'd found it. She recognized the view from the opposite angle, having seen Tashac standing on the porch below, looking up at that very spot. Shepard spun back toward the mountainside, eyes narrowed and searching the rock for any sign of entry.

When she reached the wall of rock, she turned to her people. "Search the cliff face. Look for any sort of entry mechanism or lock ... anything that makes you think there might be a door." She looked back to the rock. "However, no pressing what you find. Call me. We have good reason to believe whatever lies inside the mountain is dangerous."

The commandos remained facing outward, watching for incoming threats as the team did as Shepard asked while giving the chia a wide berth. Liara and Shiala joined in while Aethyta stayed with the commandos, the matriarch appearing very much in command.

"Here," Nihlus called, his voice pitched low. "I've found it." He leaned in, talons scraping away at thousands of years of built up dust and muck. After a second, he activated his omnitool, fabricating a heated chisel.

Hope, excitement, dread, and fear all waged war, their battle twisting the knots in Shepard's gut tighter and tighter as she watched both the future and the past chipped from under the stone. The edges of her vision darkened, the spiders skittering like tar trickling through the grooves and fissures in her mind. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on driving them back ... at least until she felt the faint pressure of something pressing against the injection port in her armour.
Cracking one eyelid as the icy, sour relief of Dr. Chakwas's indoctrination serum flowed through her veins, Shepard looked up at Nihlus. "Do you feel it?" she asked.

He nodded, the effects clear in the haunted shadows flickering through the green stare and the tight, distressed set to his mandibles. "They're here, somewhere." After giving himself a shot, he turned back to his work. "I almost bolted last time, Shepard. They went straight for Tashac. She panicked."

"Do you have enough mojo juice?" Shepard asked, not missing that his talons moved to one of his belt pouches even as he nodded. Tucking that information away just in case, she forced herself to take long, even breaths, driving back the darkness. She needed to keep herself under control. Nihlus would need her if Tashac could throw him like that.

She swallowed what felt like a mouthful of chalk. "They don't feel like they're trying to take over like they've done before." Choking on a dusty laugh, she popped her shoulders in an embarrassed shrug. "It feels like they're afraid of what's inside." Stepping up beside Nihlus as he paused in his work, she laid a hand over his. "Whatever the hell is in here that has them all terrified … we'll face it. Right?" Pressing her lips into a thin smile, she nodded in answer to her own question despite the rapid thudding of her heart, the adrenaline that hummed through her bloodstream.

Nihlus's mandibles fluttered a little as he glanced back over his arm. "We've faced down Reapers. We can handle this." He rubbed the heel of his hand against the door interface, scraping away the residual film. "There's still power to this door."

Shepard shook her head. "Protheans built things to last." A terrible, and unfortunately likely, alternative whispered in the back of her head. "Or, this place has caretakers."

Taking a deep breath, she forced her attention to focus on one thing … what waited on the other side of that door. Whatever it was, letting superstition take hold wouldn't help her face it. Nihlus's failed attempts to override the lock shattered what fragile calm she managed to achieve. "What's going on?" she asked, the fear mutating into frustration and impatience.

He stepped back after another couple of seconds. "I can't bypass it or hack it." Holding out his hands as if to usher her in, he said, "I think Tashac has to do it. She locked it against Merol, and you know how their tech is."

Shepard just nodded and stepped around him to look at the interface. As she reached up to touch it, pain raked down her spine, spiking out when it hit her shoulders, someone stabbing a skeletal branch beneath her skin. Shoving it down the length of her body, they drove it into the ground through the soles of her feet, pinning her there.

"You cannot take the dark ones inside!" The wail slammed through her mind, smashing against the inside of Shepard's skull.

Shepard braced a hand against the wall of stone as a comet tore through her, the ice flaring into explosions … geysers of steam as it neared the sun. "I have to know how to fight them," she said, growling the words too low for it to carry past Nihlus.

A flurry of images, not unlike the beacon message burst through the fog of panic boiling inside her skull. Weapons, those images said, not understanding. Forcing them aside, fortifying the wall holding Tashac at bay, Shepard set back to working on getting the door open. No matter what the prothean commander's panic insisted, the protheans had possessed weapons far more numerous and powerful wielded by a greater number of more advanced races, and they'd all proven utterly useless. With far less advanced science, smaller numbers … understanding was Shepard's only
hope.

A sharp vibration resonated through the ground under Shepard's feet and the wall at her fingertips. She paused to ensure that Tashac remained walled up, closing her eyes to reinforce the seals before she allowed herself to wonder if she'd managed to open the door. Damn, she could use the prothean's help, but Tashac couldn't be allowed to distract Shepard the entire way through. As much sympathy as she felt for the commander, Tashac's screaming and grief would prove fatal.

"Ah, Shepard?"

She spun around, the quiet, 'I don't want to worry you' alarm in Nihlus's voice grabbing her by the scruff of the neck. Where'd he go?

"Nihlus? Where are you?" she asked, walking toward the cliff where he'd been standing.

"Shepard, those gunships are just pulling up," Liara called, the agitation in her voice completely undisguised.

"Handle it, Liara," Shepard snapped, glancing back over her shoulder. "You're the voice of authority on Thessia, not me. I'm a dead Spectre, and I've lost our live one." She took another step, losing her balance a little as she swung back around. She reached out to steady herself against the cliff, but instead of her fingertips pressing against violet-silver rock, they passed straight through.

Nihlus grabbed her as she stumbled into what had to be a hologram. "Well, you found me, but now you're in here with me," he grumbled, pushing her upright. "Since I can't seem to get back out, that's somewhat inconvenient."

Shepard staggered a little. Once balanced on both feet again, she turned a full circle. In front of her stretched a wide, dark tunnel leading down and into the mountain. Behind her, there appeared to be nothing ... an opening to the plateau as tall and wide as the tunnel, but when she tried to walk through it, she ran into an invisible barrier.

"Damn it. We can get in, but not out?" A thin cry echoed through the thick layers of cement holding Tashac at bay, sending Shepard's heart racing jackrabbit-quick against her ribs. Shepard sidestepped until she could see Liara approaching a gunship. Two others hovered in the air behind and above it. "No one's noticed we're missing," she grumbled. "I wonder if they can get in, or if we just got through thanks to the beacon?"

Lifting her hand to her radio, she opened a channel to Miranda. "Operative Lawson, Nihlus and I appear to have a problem," she said.

"Shepard?" Miranda looked around, suddenly and quite comically alarmed. She spun in place, then ran to look down the slope. "Where are you?"

_The best and worst game of hide and seek ever._

"Inside the mountain. Nihlus and I appear to be trapped in here. I need you to see if you can get to us." She stepped right up to the barrier and pressed a hand against it, as if that could help. "Walk toward the cliff," she instructed. Behind her, something moved in the darkness, and for the barest of moments she managed to tell herself the sound lived in her head. Then Nihlus pulled his shotgun and turned to face it.

"Just keep talking her over," he said, the words lashing her ever so slightly, as if transferring his default blame over to her. 'I've got your back."
Shepard snorted softly and looked back. Miranda stood face to face with the cliff, walking her hands over the rock. "A metre or so to your right." She pressed her face against the barrier—the surface of it cold and either resonating too high or too low for her to feel a vibration from it—to better see the Cerberus operative. "Yeah, a little more."

Miranda's hands brushed across the surface to press directly in front of Shepard's face, and the captain stepped back. "Well, if that isn't a great, glowing hemorrhoid on an Enkindlers ass."

She heard Nihlus's talons scuffle against the dust-covered stone as he drifted a few paces down the tunnel. "A what?" he asked, distracted.

"A sore on the . . . ." Shepard sighed. "An ass sore, let's just leave it at that." She crouched, feeling along the barrier for any sign of an opening. "You're right in the center of where I came through, Miranda. The tunnel extends about a metre on either side of you, down to ground level, and about two metres above your head." Thane and Jack alerted to Miranda's behaviour and moved in. The three spoke, then the other two joined the search for a way in.

Shepard opened the mission channel, so that they'd all hear her. "I'll back up," she said. "See if biotics have any sort of effect on it."

"Shepard," Nihlus said, the deep rumble she knew meant danger rolled under the words, sending the sharp skitter of giant beetles up her spine.

Plucking Ingrid from her back, she spun to face the darkness even as she lifted the rifle to her shoulder and looked down the sight. "Great fuck, the entire tunnel looks like it's moving." The beetles sank their needle-like feet into her skin, burrowing for the meat. For a moment, she jerked the scope here and there, following every perceived movement, but then slammed a lid on the fear. She'd been through a hell of a lot worse than being trapped somewhere and outnumbered. Garrus was just usually to blame for her entrapment rather than Nihlus.

"There's no cover," Nihlus called, pulling her back. She heard no fear in his voice, his tone merely listing their disadvantages. "We've got our backs to the light. We're preteril with our burrows covered." He moved toward the wall, stealing a little of their advantage, but it wouldn't be enough.

She followed suit and moved out of silhouette, glancing back as she heard the dull whomps of her squad's biotics impacting the barrier. A few seconds later, she heard an overload sizzle over the surface that the biotic attacks left undamaged.

"Shepard, are you standing clear?" Miranda called.

"As clear as we can be," she replied, sparing their efforts another glance. "Don't go crazy with bullets or grenades, though."

Turning back to the dark, Shepard squinted, trying to see through the shifting shadows. The shuffle and scrape of feet echoed off the walls, warping and multiplying until the sounds pummeled her ears. A drum beat pounded inside her head, the sound of it mocking the cadence of her warrior breathing. The black beckoned, a vacuum drawing her in to fill its void. As she had outside the cave, she got no sense of the spiders trying to infiltrate her thoughts or pull forward her memories. Unlike outside, however, she felt curiosity more than fear.

"Whoever is behind the orbs has decided they're glad we're stuck in here," she said.

"They want to know what's here," Nihlus said, his voice no more than a whisper. "They've been trying to get past that barrier for a long time."
Shepard reeled, Tashac slamming against the barriers in her mind. *They cannot get in. They cannot be allowed in.* "Wait a second," she said, glancing toward Nihlus. "Is she screaming about not letting the ones behind the orbs into this place? But that would mean … what?"

The *torin* reached up, pressing the heel of his hand into his right eye socket. "I think so. Like I said, Shepard, she doesn't talk to me any more than Merol talks to you. It's just impressions." He dropped his hand back to his shotgun and gave his head a stiff shake. "It doesn't matter. We're here, and by the sound of it, we're about to get hit by—"

A pale shriek ripped up through the mountain, the shrill of a damned soul screaming in rage, the very stone trembling at its passage. Shepard's gut froze into a tangle of acidic ice then cracked as another cry answered the first. "Oh, sweet baby Jesus, what the hell was that?" She backed toward the opening, the sound of gunfire pounding at the barrier far more welcome than those terrible cries.

Another scream ripped through the dark, everything about it so very wrong that the sound frayed the edges of Shepard's sanity, tugging at loose threads. She swallowed the panic and turned her back to the sounds. The sun, grass, the sights and sounds of life helped tie some of those threads back together. "Miranda? Any luck? We either need to get you guys in here or get us out and fast."

"Sorry, Shepard. Nothing we've tried has even disturbed it." The operative's omnitool streamed data as she tapped away at the interface. "We need stronger scanners. Maybe the *Ypres* could find a way to break through the barrier, or locate another access."

Shepard nodded and added Liara and Nihlus. "Okay, Nihlus and I are going to be in deep in a couple of seconds. We need you all trying to get in or find us a way out. Nihlus, send Liara your Spectre authorizations … anything she needs to get the *Ypres* above this mountain. We need deep, detailed scans." She paused, swallowing a lump of want … need. "I wish we had Tali and Garrus here working the tech angle." A sudden grin accompanied her hand lifting to add EDI to the call. "EDI, if you're not busy plotting a way to kill us all, we could use your help down here," she called. "I am not currently formulating any homicidal plans that cannot keep, Shepard," the AI replied. "How many I be of assistance?"

"Miranda, send EDI everything you've got on that barrier." Why hadn't she thought of EDI before? The AI's entire reason for being was situational analysis and problem solving, not to mention ground team support. Shepard really needed to get some missions under her belt with the ship and crew … figure out how all her new pieces slotted into place.

Nihlus backed into her peripherals, his omnitool open. "Authorizations sent," he said simply. "Good. Get the *Ypres* down here, Liara." Shepard barked the command, able to see the asari's mouth open and working on reasons it couldn't happen. Then Aethyta strode up, dismissed the asari from the gunship, and walked Liara away. She turned her attention to Miranda. "XO, EDI … find us a way out."

Miranda nodded. "Understood, Captain."

"Acknowledged, Captain," EDI replied.

The terrible shrieks continued, sounding closer with each scream. Shepard glanced over her shoulder, but nothing showed itself. The monsters could be a half klick distant the way the tunnel echoed. She turned back to her team. "I'll keep this channel open."
After a couple of breaths, she turned to face the darkness, sparing just a glance for Nihlus. "You're right, we're sitting ducks here. As much as I really hate suggesting this, we might find better cover further in, and we’re almost definitely going to need it. Maybe, in the meantime, the squad can find their way in, have our backs to check this place out."

Nihlus nodded. "We don't stand a chance out here, not if they come at us in strength." Letting out a long, rumbling sigh, he cracked his neck, then hefted his gun, couching it against his shoulder in high ready. "I'll take point, five metres on the left."

Shepard nodded. "Miranda, we're moving down the tunnel to find cover," she said over the radio. Reaching down, she snagged two trackers, sticking one to Nihlus and one to herself. "I'm sending you our tracker frequencies now. Don't forget we're in here and go clubbing." A cracked laugh tumbled from her lips as Shepard opened her omnitool and scanned both trackers to ensure they were working, then sent their frequencies to Miranda. "I know how much you like to shake it."

"Ready?" Nihlus asked, glancing over at her, his gaze sealed off and hardened: one hundred percent veteran Spectre on mission. That steel settled along her spine and around her heart, slowing and deepening the fickle organ's beat for the first time since she fell through the cliff.

Shepard nodded and moved to the right hand wall, allowing him to get ahead far enough that she could cover him. "Glory hallelujah, Brother Nihlus. Glory hallelujah."

Chapter End Notes

(A-N: I'm going to be taking a short, two week hiatus from posting. I am deep in the unfolding war now, and need to spend a couple of weeks brainstorming and writing out of order to make sure the seeds all get sewn where they should, etc. I may post during this time, but as far as I know, Aug 24th will be my next 'for sure' posting date. As always thanks so much for reading and reviewing. *hugs for all*)
"Your language has gotten a lot … saltier since you came back," Nihlus said between panting breaths when they stopped twenty minutes later. "I think I preferred the constant glorification of the Enkindlers." He chuckled, harsh and breathless, and sagged against the wall. "Never thought I'd say that."

Shepard heaved his weight up higher on her shoulder. "Shut up, Kryik. Save your air for escaping." She glanced behind them, the sound of pursuit closing fast.

35 Days ASR

"So, this could be going better." Nihlus pulled himself across the floor to lean back against the door frame. A sharp hiss and groan accompanied the movement, his face twisting with pain as he stretched out his leg.

"Shut up, idiot." Shepard hit the floor between his feet, taking cover behind his thigh as she finished off the third of the shambling, screaming things. Once sure the tunnel was clear, she launched Droney to warn them of approaching enemies and turned her attention to Nihlus's leg. "Where'd she get you?"

"Right hip," he gasped, listing to the other side. Pain cracked through his subvocals, the ice too thin to hold its weight. "It's okay, the damned knives on her hands glanced off the bone. Just hit my medigel, and I'm back in it." Despite his words, he made no attempt to get up, just leaning propped up between the wall and his elbow.

Shepard hit his medigel twice and turned up his heater, then tackled the seals on the armour covering that quarter of him, setting the pieces aside, except for the girdle, which she just cracked open and pulled out of the way. The sheer amount of blood squeezing out through the weave of his under armour called him a liar. "I believe my words were, shut up, idiot," she said. Growling a little, she pulled her knife and cut a long slit down the hip of his underlayer.

Blood poured over her fingers. Oh fuck. "Damn it, Kryik. I can't take you anywhere." Rooting through her hip pack, she pulled out a couple of bandages. Wadding them into a thick pad, she pressed the handful against the three long, jagged tears through his hide. One or more of them had bisected a vein. The medigel would seal it as long as they stemmed the flow long enough for the miraculous goo to work.

One of these days, you're going to take that field medic course you keep saying you want to take.

"Sure," she muttered under her breath, "I have nothing but spare time." Still, she missed Sparky's expertise. The amount of blood sticking up her gloves and puddling on the floor meant a major vein. He could lose his damned leg if she didn't get them the hell out of there.

The familiar pop-sizzle of Droney firing off a rocket slapped Shepard back to the floor. Leaning over Nihlus's leg, she peered up the long slope. More Collectors. At least they died a hell of a lot easier than the fucked up masquerade of asari zombies. She grasped Nihlus's hand and pressed it
"Hold this," she said, her words a hiss between clenched teeth. "As much pressure as you can apply." Picking Ingrid up off the floor, she used the Spectre to steady her shot as she sighted down the odd, insectile face in the center of the massive head. Two shots took it down with some help from Droney's rockets. Three more followed, the time it took to kill them pressing her into the floor until she heard her ribs popping from the weight.

They needed to get somewhere they could set up some sort of damned defense. Not that cover would do anything against the asari abominations that could charge biotically. That last one had closed in a half second, just appearing right on top of them. A giant of a thing, it had picked Nihlus up by the neck like he weighed as much as a freaking Shih Tzu. He only still drew breath thanks to her massively overclocked overload. While the creature stood, stunned, she snatched the Spectre's shotgun out of his hand and shoved the muzzle right in the damned thing's spine. At that range, the gun ripped the monster right in half.

"How are you doing?" she asked, casting a quick look over her rifle before focusing on taking down the last couple. Droney finished off one. Thank the ever-bleeding fluffy baby Jesus.

"Feeling tired. We need to find somewhere defensible, Jane." His voice told her more than his words. He'd lost enough blood to slow him down. They needed somewhere he could rest, drink, and eat.

She took down the last Collector, waited a few seconds to be sure that wave had stopped, then relaunched Droney. Scrambling onto her knees once again, she focused back on his wound. Lifting the bandages, she peered beneath. The bleeding had slowed to where she could use topical medigel to hold the wounds together. Setting the bandages aside, she looked to the pile of discarded armour, searching through for Nihlus's belt.

"Here." He dragged one end of the belt out of the pile, holding it out in a hand that dipped and swayed with weakness.

She snatched it from him. "Just lie there and rest. I'm not carrying your fragile bod out of here, you hear me?" She popped open all the pouches and dumped their contents. Shaking fingers rooted through until she found his topical medigel. "I'd better call Eis before I do anything."

Lifting her hand to her radio, Shepard opened a channel to the Ypres. "Doc, Kryik got himself clawed by a mutated asari. I estimate he's lost about a half litre of blood." She listened for a second. "I gave him two shots of medigel and applied pressure." After another second, she shook her head. "I don't have a medical scanning program on this tool."

"You do," the chia spoke up, activating the scanner. "Installed by General Garrus Vakarian four hundred twenty eight days ago."

"Well excellent." Shepard ran the scanner over Nihlus, then sent the data to the doc. A moment later, Eis came back rattling off instructions. "Wait ... slow down. Stims to get his blood pressure up? Okay, yeah, we have those." She dug back into the stuff she'd dumped out of his belt. "Two? Okay." A short cry of victory accompanied the discovery of two ampules, which she administered through his armour port.

"Okay, Doc. That's done." She started shoving things back into his belt pouches. "Water?" She could have slapped herself in the head for that one. "Right." She twisted the cap off a bottle and held it out. "Drink, as much as you can guzzle down." Turning her attention back to Eis, she scowled. "I'll do the best I can to get him up there, but we're trapped down here. There have been a
hell of a lot of bad guys, and I don't think we're done yet. He needs to be able to move."

She eyeballed the bandages. "Okay, so the internal medigel should have sealed the tears in the vein while still letting some blood flow through?" Looking up at Nihlus, she asked. "Does that leg feel tingly at all? Like it's asleep?" When he shook his head, she let out a sigh and reported that back to the doc. "Okay, so bandage it, stims every hour, as much water as he can drink, and food as soon as possible." Taking a deep breath, she nodded. She could handle that. All she needed was a plan.

"Thanks, Doc. Shepard, out." She grinned when she saw Nihlus had half the bottle of water down. "Feeling any better?"

He pushed himself up a little straighter. "Yeah, the stims helped push back the fog. Let's get moving." The Spectre reached for his armour. "You owe me a new underlayer."

She clenched her fists a couple of times to stop their shaking then packed the bandage back into place after checking to be sure the bleeding had stopped completely. Using wet wipes to clear away some the blood from around the wound, she swallowed a huge stone of sudden terror. A little more bad luck or a couple of more minutes would have seen her stuck down there alone in the dark.

"How's it coming, Miranda?" she called as she bandaged the Spectre's hip.

"Half the team are still working on bringing the barrier down, Shepard. The rest of us are following the asari commandos down the mountain, hoping that they'll lead us to another entrance." The operative paused. "Spectre Kryik is stable?"

"He is," Nihlus spoke up. He checked his bandages, then began putting his armour back on. "Just get us the hell out of here before we have to fight our way through this entire mountain."

"You heard the torin," Shepard said, a thin chuckle running beneath the words. "Keep this channel open. Shepard, over."

She gathered and stowed all the casualties to her scavenging and got up, checking the tunnel before offering Nihlus a hand. "Up you get, Spectre. Let's find somewhere defensible." Slipping an arm around his waist, she supported him until he found his feet and his gait leveled out.

A shrill, gut-freezing wail shrieked down from above. "Oh fuck me," Shepard said, a sigh sliding out of her, dirt rolling into a fresh grave. "You okay on your own?" she asked, fighting back the chill that froze her in place as she looked up into Nihlus's eyes. 'Get yourself into the tunnel on the far side of the chamber and stay in cover the best you can."

He nodded and pulled his rifle. "I'll cover your back."

"Okay." She clenched Ingrid in gelid hands. "As soon as she's in range, I'll launch Droney behind her and try to keep her away from you."

Couching the rifle tight against her shoulder, Shepard took cover at the door. "If she gets in the room, I'll try to lead her back out."

A flash of blue against the black set Shepard's jaw. "She's a closer." A spiked grin yanked one corner of her mouth back as Nihlus cursed. Yeah, that about said it. After priming Droney, she lifted Ingrid to her eye, lining up the asari zombie's head. Each of the monsters coming at them had been different, almost as if the Collectors were sending their trial runs, saving the better versions until all the weaker ones had been destroyed.

The current banshee—for lack of a better way to describe their cries—stood over seven feet judging by the amount of room she took up in the tunnel. Lights glowed along the heinous mockery of everything feminine that formed her body. Shepard waited for the thing to charge, then
More of it appeared in her flashlight beam. Nude, skin black and dessicated, her huge pregnant-looking belly and large breasts sagged and swayed as she moved. Shepard fired. Fuck that whole 'about to give birth and suckle hell at my breast' shit. Even the creature's hands and feet—elegant and long—moved like a dancer's, beckoning victims into her embrace. Shepard waited for the next charge then fired again. The thing teleported in Droney-range. Shepard launched him behind it, grinning a wild, fierce grin as it turned to engage the little guy.

As Shepard lined up her next shot, she caught sight of the monster's fingernails gleaming black and slick in the light. Sweet baby Jesus, this one's were twice the length of the one that nearly gutted Nihlus. They'd slice right through someone. After squeezing the trigger, she primed the heaviest overload she could manage without burning it out, then waited.

"Come on, you ugly bitch," she said, her voice a low, guttural growl. "I've got my partner at my back, my best girl in my hands … bring your worst."

Do you pray to the darkness that new battles fought against your old enemies will strip the taste of grave dust from your breath, Shepard? As long as you are surrounded by enough of the old faces and use the old weapons, can you believe that you are alive?

The voice roared like thunder, stopping Shepard's heart for the barest of seconds. She glanced over her shoulder toward the tunnel that led further into the mountain. Nihlus stood against the wall, ready to fire once the banshee entered his sights. A slight mandibular tremor betrayed that he'd heard the voice, but he remained solid.

Another unearthly shriek ripped through the room, shredding the air and clawing into Shepard's head through her ears as it pulled her back to her target. The monstrosity closed another ten metres, her horrific body wreathed in blue lightning, then flung a warp. Shepard triggered her overload, then ducked and rolled clear. When she got back to her cover, the banshee had charged out of reliable sniper range.

"Fuck," Shepard cursed as Droney went down. She hesitated for the barest of second to choose between relaunching him or cuing up another overload. Shepard opted for the extra firepower, and the little ball of light blinked into existence behind the banshee. Using the monster's slight hesitation as it adjusted to two assailants, Shepard switched out for her assault rifle and then emptied the heat sink into the creature's head.

"Keep right," Nihlus called. When she nodded, his sniper rifle let out a sharp bark, staggering the monster just as she set to charge, buying Shepard time to replace her heat sink.

Shepard backed away from the door as the banshee closed on her position, keeping the thing's empty, milky stare riveted on her. Amazing how a constant barrage of rounds pelting something in the face kept its attention. Whenever she paused to change heat sinks, Nihlus hit it from the flank, but it just kept coming.

"Fucking die, already!" she screamed, edging her way around the perimeter of the chamber. How the hell was it soaking up the rounds? She'd seen its barrier come down back in the tunnel. Circling around the side, she saw the holes Droney's rockets had torn in its back and legs. Then, she gulped in a breath so sharp that it formed a soft bleat that echoed, bouncing around her as she stared, watching the creature's dessicated flesh rebuilding itself.

"Shepard!" Nihlus shouted, the sharp crack of sound startling her into action. His shotgun fired, its roar huge in the cavern … and close. Very close. Too close.
The banshee stood closer still. It turned and with a rubbery, thunderous thwomp that compressed the air in front of it, the thing charged, stopping less than a metre away.

"Nihlus, keep back," Shepard shouted, even as she launched Droney right in the thing's face to buy her some getaway time. Spinning, she aimed for the tunnel back to the surface and bolted. Before she reached the opening, she heard the buzz-crack of Droney dying then the smaller biotic whomp of a warp. When she felt all the hairs on her back stand on end, Shepard threw herself into a roll and prayed.

Nihlus's shotgun blasts roared closer and closer, each emphasized by the drag and then quick step of his limp. Damn him for not listening. She flipped onto her back in time to see the warp sail over her head. Bringing up her Mattock, she opened fire on the creature's head.

"It's regenerating! We have to do a lot of fast, catastrophic damage." She launched Droney between her and the closing banshee. "Shotgun point blank, Droney's rockets, and I'll hit her in the head with Ingrid."

The Spectre grunted his reply, moving sideways to get directly behind the monster. Shepard scrambled backwards, trading guns while Droney kept the banshee busy.

"As soon as she starts to arm her charge," Shepard hollered, priming her overload. At the level she set it, it would take half an hour or so to cool down, but she needed to flambe every circuit moving that corpse across the floor.

Shepard waited until the aura crackled around the thing and it began to shimmer, ready to teleport itself, then hollered, "Now!" as she unleashed her overload. The energy arced and sizzled along every centimetre of the banshee, even between its teeth as Shepard brought Ingrid up, aiming for the zombie's right eye.

Ingrid's recoil slammed into Shepard's shoulder, her round tearing half the dessicated head away, at the exact moment Nihlus began pumping shotgun blasts into the banshee's spine. It wavered for a second, then crumpled. The Spectre moved in, tearing it apart with round after round. One last shot tore what remained of its head from its neck and the body crumbled into dust.

Allowing herself a half second of relief, Shepard collapsed against the left hand wall, Ingrid sagging to rest muzzle-down on the dusty stone. She met Nihlus's mandible flick with a nod and a weary grin, then pushed off and limp-shuffled down the tunnel to his side.

"Nice shooting, Tex," she said and wrapped an arm around his waist. "Let's get moving while the coast is clear." As they hobbled toward the chamber's exit, she dug an ampule of painkillers from her pound and injected it.

The Spectre sagged against her a little, his arm heavy around her shoulders. "It can't be much further, can it?"

"No. I don't imagine it can, even if our entrance was the back way—" Scuttling, shuffling sounds cut her off. Damn it. "Okay." She settled herself against him more securely, gripped his belt in her fist, and started for the far tunnel entrance. "We're going to have to make some time. You all right?"

Nihlus lifted into a rough, shambling jog alongside her, leaning even more heavily, but he nodded. She applauded his choice to save his breath for the run. Despite her assurance, she didn't possess the first clue how much further they had to go. And a set of teeth gnawing away at her guts warned that wherever they were headed … the monsters were herding them there.
"Your language has gotten a lot ... saltier since you came back," Nihlus said between panting breaths when they stopped twenty minutes later. "I think I preferred the constant glorification of the Enkindlers." He chuckled, harsh and breathless, and sagged against the wall. "Never thought I'd say that."

Shepard heaved his weight up higher on her shoulder. "Shut up, Kryik. Save your air for escaping." She glanced behind them, the sound of pursuit closing fast. How long could the fucking tunnel go before it gave them a room ... somewhere she could put up a defense? She pulled a bottle of water from her belt and drank a quarter of it before she passed it to him.

While he drank, she dove into her belt pack for a stim ampule. It might not have been an hour, but Nihlus was weakening too fast. She couldn't carry him, and—her heart let out a sharp, stabbing pain as her brain spat out a vision of her back running away from his prone form—she couldn't just leave him behind. Keeping him on his feet was her only option. She shoved the meds into the port in his armour.

"Here," he said, his voice hoarse and flat, "I can't drink any more."

Accepting the bottle, Shepard drained it, tossing the container. "You ready?"

After a couple of heavy breaths, he pushed off the wall. "Yeah." He wrapped his arm around her, then bent and nuzzled her hair. "For luck," he whispered.

Shepard listened to their pursuit, trying to judge how close they were. Close, but at least she didn't hear any of the banshee screams. She dug her shoulder into his side, hefting his weight. "We're going to need it. Come on, partner."

A guillotine blade hanging from a strand of spider silk, the feeling of being herded loomed overhead, the air vibrating with tension: strange music that whistled along the pitted ceiling. They ate the ground at a decent clip, Nihlus pushing himself hard enough that Shepard knew she'd have a crisis on her hands once they did manage to stop. No rose coloured lenses tinted the reality that from then on, she'd be fighting alone. Thank the Enkindlers' glowing hemorrhoidal asses for Droney.

Note to self: when you get back to Omega, get the turret upgrade.

At last the tunnel opened into another small chamber, that one lined with what looked like cramped cells made out of thin sheets of amber. More importantly, a door control gleamed on the wall next to the entrance.

"Here, brace yourself for a second, I'm going to try to scramble this lock, buy us some time." She guided Nihlus to the wall and waited for him to nod that he was stable before pulling away.

The door closed at a touch, but then Shepard hesitated. They needed to be able to get people through there. She and Nihlus might need to get out. Fuck. She scrubbed at a sudden itch at the base of her skull. What she needed was some sort of lockdown code. Something the Collectors or whoever operated the facility—and the spotless holding cells confirmed that it remained operational—wouldn't know.

"Come on, Tashac," she whispered, closing her eyes. "Tell me enough of you remained to embed something. Or Merol. Something ... please."

Silence answered her pleas. Absolute silence, not even a wail or a mutter. Shepard let out a shrill hiss of frustration, scratching at the spot on her head again. "Damn it, you were the strongest
commander in the prothean military. You fought off indoctrination for half a lifetime. You can find the courage to help us get through here."

"Haksaya kubenar," Nihlus whispered, his voice listless and flat. "Prothean characters."

Shepard glanced back, eyebrows raised in query. Nihlus just let out a long breath and nodded. Turning back to the panel, she entered the endearment, praying that Merol came through for them when his mate couldn't.

The panel flashed blue once then the controls began to blink. She let out a long sigh of relief, then turned to scoot back under Nihlus's arm, bearing as much of his weight as she could.

Pressing a quick kiss against his mandible, she said, "That one's for Merol."

Nihlus's breathy, wet-sounding chuckle killed her relief. He teetered on the edge of collapse. "How about we move a bit slower," he said, trying to make it sound like a joke.

Shepard hesitated with her hand on her belt pouch. Did she dare give him another stim? Too many would end up causing a crash in his vitals when they wore off. A slow, diffuse pounding began to resonate inside her skull like a vast, deep-bass drum beat … or a heartbeat, but slow … so slow.

"Yeah," she said. "The door should keep the ones behind us at bay for a bit." She let him set the pace, helping him more and more as he began to falter.

He stumbled, going down on one knee. Forearm leaning across his thigh, he panted, fighting for breath. Shepard could feel him shivering and reached down to turn his heater up a little more. She stripped off a glove and pressed her palm against his throat and inside his collar at the back of his neck, wincing at the clamminess of his hide. Shock was setting in hard and fast. She needed to find a place to let him rest for longer than five minutes.

"Here," she said, stepped in close. "Lean on me. I need my hands for a second." She braced herself against his weight then reached up to open a channel to the Ypres. "Hey, Doc. I need to send you another set of scans. He's starting to crash on me." Even as she spoke, the medical scanner popped up on her arm. After sending the readings, she dug into her pouch for another ampule of painkillers.

"You okay?" Nihlus asked, nodding toward the shot. "That's your second in less than an hour."

She injected it. "Yeah. Oddly enough, rolling around on the rock isn't good for the canyons of open flesh. Strange, I know, but true." The doctor came back, drawing Shepard's attention back to keeping Nihlus alive. "Okay, but … my supplies are limited." She opened the pack. "What have I got? Ummm … salt tabs, an analgesic, medigel—both kinds, antibacterial spray."

Rooting through her pouches in order, she listed off their contents. "Feminine hygiene products, water purifier, sugar tabs … ." She stopped as the doc called out. "They're my sugar tabs, Doc." Her eyebrows rose. "Really … sugar is dextro? How didn't I know that?" She cracked open the metal tube and passed two of the large, minty tabs to Nihlus. "Here, chomp on those."

She stuffed the tube into the front pouch. "Okay. So a salt tab and keep pelting the sugar into him, and then food, rest, and warmth. Okay, thanks, Doc. Shepard, out." She changed back to the open squad channel, the distant chatter comforting as she held out her hand. "Come on, old guy, up you get."

It took a bit of heaving to haul him onto his feet and get him sorted. They moved slower than a team of slugs in a tractor pull, but he'd used up his every resource getting that far, so all she could
do was pray that the door lockdown held. At least if the enemy had to take a different route or batter the door down, it bought her time to find somewhere she could build some solid cover, maybe even force them into a bottleneck.

"Captain," EDI called over the radio, "the Ypres has taken a stationary position above the facility. Beginning scans. I have located your position. A large chamber is located fifty metres ahead of you. Energy signatures present, but no life signs. There are three exits, all sealable with emergency blast doors."

A long, grumbling sigh greeted that news. "Glory hallelujah, EDI. Thanks." Shepard smiled at Nihlus and nodded forward. "Not much farther."

Shepard felt the air currents shift as they reached a fairly steep down-grade, the floor dropping away at enough of an angle that she had to lean back, keeping her weight on her back leg in order to counterbalance Nihlus. Halfway down, they stopped to let the Spectre regain his breath. Shepard tested the air, the quality definitely changed, a cooler draft curled along the floor. It smelled less musty and dank, but carried the scents of hot carbon and polymers … and something else. She couldn't put a name to the odour, but it crawled inside her, wrapping old, dry tentacles around her heart and lungs.

Through the arm wrapped around her shoulders and the hip pressed into hers, she felt Nihlus's trembling worsen. "Okay, partner, time to move," she said, forcing her voice to fake a cheeriness she most definitely did not feel. The entire mountain felt as though it housed a virulent cancer just waiting to find a way to spread. She shook that off, forcing herself to fight her own good sense as it tried to pull her back up the way they'd come, begging her to run until nothing but open sky hung above her and sunlight warmed her shoulders.

But no, that route led to nothing but death. As counterintuitive as it might be, salvation lie in pushing into the darkness. She needed to get them to the next chamber before Nihlus went down and couldn't get back up. As strong as Cerberus had built her, weariness and pain had begun to weigh heavily enough that she knew she couldn't drag him very far.

Light seeped into the gloom, making the rock shine, black and slick where it curved toward their destination. With every step Shepard took, the tentacles of doom wrapped tighter and tighter until they began to strangle her from the inside out.

"How far, EDI?" she asked, guessing their position no more than a dozen or so metres from a sharp corner into the chamber. "Any change in the energy signatures in there?"

"Negative on changes to the energy emissions. No life signs. You are currently fourteen point six metres from the door on the eastern wall."

"Thank you." Shepard glanced up at her partner. "A few metres out, I'm going to leave you behind. Don't fall over; I'm too tired to drag your asslessness even a few metres." She counted the steps, pausing when she figured them less than five metres from possible sanctuary. Please, sweet baby Jesus, let it be sanctuary. "Okay, once I make sure the chamber is clear and lock up those other two doors, I'll be back." She helped him turn so that his back pressed against the wall, then handed him the container of sugar tablets and a bottle of water.

"Five minutes," she said, backing away from him, a stern finger pointed at his nose. "Stay on your feet for five more minutes."

Nihlus merely nodded and opened the sugar, slipping a tablet into his mouth.
Shepard held his stare for another breath before tearing herself away. Covering the last few paces at a shuffling jog, she closed in on the doorway. She took cover then launched Droney into the space, giving him a count of twenty to find enemies before she stuck her head out to do her own survey.

What awaited her dragged a long, shuddering exhalation through a paralyzed throat and slack jaw as her eyes travelled up the monstrosity at the center of the chamber. "Oh … fuck … me."

The tentacles gloated, chortling happily to themselves as they finished crushing her pulse and breath into dust. Frost painted its way up her spine; her implants digging painful claws into her back muscles as they froze solid.

"What the hell are you?" she asked, not realizing she'd even spoken until her words echoed back at her.

Fifteen metres away, a massive computer erupted from the cavern floor, all oil-slick black and sinuous as if hell had spat it out rather than someone assembling it. Surrounding the computer, equally huge and undulous stalagmites and stalactites of the amber substance wove through the hardware, creating a Lovecraftian horror that filled her with an ancient, primitive terror. "Is there anything these bastards can't corrupt?"

Tearing her eyes away from the machine, she searched the rest of the room for any sign of Collectors. Something told her the banshees didn't excel at being covert. Droney floated around the perimeter, blithely blipping to himself, so she entered, sidestepping along the wall toward the door on the south wall. Other than the machine and a few medical beds, the room sat silent and empty. She closed the door, using Merol's override to lock it down, then ran across to do the same thing to the west door.

Nihlus had slid about a half metre down the wall by the time she got back to him, but remained on his feet. Sweat beaded along his throat, but when she touched him, he felt ice cold.

"Come on, there's a horizontal surface in there with your name on it." She wrapped her arm around him, shaking him a little when he was slow to respond. "Hey." Reaching up with her free arm, she patted his cheek. "We're both getting out of here, so come on … buck up and lets move."

He nodded and took a deep breath, pushing off the wall. "I'm with you, Shepard." Leaning heavily on her shoulders, he hobbled beside her, taking slow, painful steps.

"I think I may have underestimated how much blood you lost," Shepard said, trying to keep her voice light. "Even if I aged you eighty cycles, for you to accept help without bitching … damn. You must have lost at least three quarters of your volume."

He chuffed, but straightened a little and their pace picked up a touch.

"What in the pits of buratrum … ?" Nihlus staggered, pulling Shepard to a stop in the door.

Chuckling, she tugged on him. "Yeah, that was just about my exact reaction." She wagged her head a little. "Except saltier." She led him toward one of the impeccably clean medical beds. "This won't be overly comfortable, I imagine, but up you go."

Nihlus pretty much just lifted a leg up and rolled onto the surface, sinking in far more than Shepard would have expected. She pressed down into the gel … her heart suddenly thumping hard and fast. It was soft and deep. Crouching, she read the manufacturer. Elkoss-Combine Medical. Shit! Someone was bringing new medical equipment in there. Why? Keeping the place functional and
clean over time was one thing … upgrading it meant they had current plans for the nightmare in the center of the chamber.

"The door, Jane." Nihlus's armour clattered against the solid parts of the bed as he settled himself.

"Yeah," the word came out as much breath as sound, and she pushed up. "Yeah, the door." Plenty of time to worry about modern equipment showing up inside a fifty thousand year old house of horror. Still, her eyes darted around the space, searching out the traps she felt everywhere, jaws open and ready to spring.

_The Collectors don't exactly hide, Janey. It's not unreasonable to assume they have agents all over the galaxy._

She shut and overrode the door. It was true. Although certainly not ones to attract notice, the Collectors remained active, trading tech for all sorts of the strange and unusual. Once the room was secured, Shepard let out a small sigh. They were safe-ish for the moment, and she had a partner to tend to. She went into her pack, pulling out her thermal sheet and a bottle of water.

She ran a hand over Nihlus's fringe. "Okay, old guy, let's get you sorted." It took nearly ten minutes of prodding to get a high nutrition bar and a half litre of water into him, but then she covered him in both of their thermal sheets and let him sleep.

Stepping back from the bed once she got Nihlus settled and reassured herself that he was stable, Shepard let her gaze return to Computer Cthulhu, her brain refusing to follow any one line from beginning to end, eyes sliding off in the same way they had when she faced the Conduit. Although she didn't see any sign of an indoctrination field like the one around the Conduit, she reached into her pouch and took another shot of the counteragent.

"What are you for?" she asked, edging around the machine. "Help me out here, Tashac," she whispered. "You had to have had a hand in this. Is this your terrible secret?" An interface jutted out from the main body of the thing, but she continued to circle, using every bit of engineering knowledge and creative talent she possessed to try to figure out its purpose.

On the far side, a wide gap between two large of the amber constructs led into the heart of the beast. She activated her omnitool to scan the amber, but the chia interface activated.

"They are chia corrupted by the suzerain's servants," the chia gauntlet said. "They emit nothing for your scans to detect. In this state, they are drained of everything that defines our people. They possess no intelligence, their purpose subverted to that of the machine. This is why we fled, took refuge in inertia or within the Cynosure. This death of slavery is the worst fate the chiastyllia can imagine."

Shepard stepped closer, careful not to even brush against the amber. The technology involved definitely looked Reaper. How would Tashac have known how to construct anything that complex? She'd been a soldier through and through. Merol was the scientist. Of course, Merol hadn't looked into the vast, empty darkness. Perhaps the Reapers had just used her, a puppet to perform their will.

The circle completed, Shepard stepped toward the interface. She'd never learn anything without being a little bit brave and really, really stupid. "EDI, monitor this thing carefully. Don't interface with it at all, just in case its purpose is to hijack electronic defense intelligences. Just let me know if it looks like something is about to enslave my mind or chop me into varren kibble."

"Understood, Captain. Do you intend to access the machine's logs?" the AI asked, her voice taking a curious upturn at the end.
"That is my very great hope. Preferably without the brain enslavement or aforementioned kibble tragedy." Shepard eased toward the console and reached out a single finger. "If I get disintegrated or launched into space or eaten by sharks, tell Nihlus he's still to blame." Wincing, she closed her eyes, and pulled her head back. When she felt her finger make contact with the console, Shepard opened one eye. The interface was turned on.

Slowly, she eased back around. "No sharks. Okay then." She looked up, then gave her head a shake. "EDI, anything from the machine?"

"The computer core has power, but no processes are running at this time."

Heart pounding hard against her ribs, she nodded. "Keep an eye on it, I'm going in." After clenching her hands into fists a couple of times, Shepard started searching for some form of log to tell her what the computer did, and how long ago it had last been used. Maybe even why the place was being continually maintained and upgraded.

"Your armour's onboard scanners are displaying elevated heart rate and respiration, Captain," the AI stated. "These readings indicate a state of considerable stress."

Shepard laughed, a harsh, mirthless cough that startled her as it echoed back. "Yeah, well, that might be because I'm currently under considerable stress, EDI. Thanks for the update."

"If it helps relieve your state of mind, I calculate that your odds of being eaten by sharks are one in one hundred billion and twenty seven given your current distance from the nearest ocean."

A bright, genuine laugh greeted that fact. "Excellent, you're right, EDI, I feel so much better now." And in truth, she did. Between the interface proving thus far benign and the joking AI, Shepard's pulse settled a little and her breathing slowed.

"Okay, right, soldier mind on hold," she whispered, allowing the cypher to feed her the prothean characters and commands, "scientist mind in gear. Let's find out what you are, you ugly, mother-fu … " She glanced over at the sleeping Spectre. "... frickin' nightmare."

Once she set her mind to the task, time passed without meaning. After a half hour, Shepard's legs began to tremble with fatigue, so she paused to eat and drink, then dragged a crate out from under one of the medical beds and sat on it.

As she worked, she uncovered just a mind-boggling amount of data: genetic analysis of the asari over the entire fifty thousand years, results of experiments done to analyze how the asari developed their innate biotic talent, chemical and cellular breakdowns for millions of subjects … it would take an entire university of analysts and researchers to break down what all of it meant. However, even with her limited knowledge, an anomaly stuck out. Every once in a while the sample—she shuddered to think that the sample very likely was a terrified, screaming asari trying to claw her way out of bonds—ended up contaminated in some way, and it appeared to be those contaminated trials that interested the Collectors the most.

Rustling and then ceramic banging off metal pulled her attention away from her work. "Anyone trying to get in, EDI?" Shepard blinked rapidly, trying to sort her vision. "Damn, I've been staring at the screen too long … can't see anything more than a half metre away."

"There are no life signs in your area at this time," EDI answered. "However, Spectre Kryik's onboard scans report that he has regained consciousness."

"Oh good." Shepard leaned back and stretched. "How are you feeling?" She peered around the
computer, still seeing nothing but shadows and fog, then rubbed her eyes. A low purring sound accompanied the glorious pain as she dug the heels of her hands into her eye sockets. "Oh yeah, that's the stuff."

"Better," Nihlus replied. A heavy thump echoed around the cavern as he slid down off the table. "Hungry." He limped toward her, pausing to look into the gap in the side of the machine. "How long have I been out?"

Chuckling, Shepard shook her head. "No clue. EDI?"

"Three point six four hours."

Shepard shrugged. "There you have it." She stretched again, her muscles all humming happily as she cracked her neck and then pulled both arms across her chest to snap her shoulders. "I guess I was right about the Collectors herding us here. Doesn't make sense that they'd chase us halfway through the mountain and then just leave us alone." She pushed herself up onto her feet, groaning as her body complained. "It gives us time to figure this thing out, though."

Looking up, she saw Nihlus slip through the amber, entering the gap. "No … wait … we don't know if that's safe." She ran around the console, reaching through with one hand. He stood, half turned back as if he'd meant to leave, his face looking down and completely, horribly blank.

"Nihlus? You okay?" She glanced up into his eyes then lunged for his hand to pull it away from the tech. "Didn't the beacon teach you anything about touching unknown tech?" She pulled, his arm not just resisting, but rigid, unmoving in even the slightest degree. "Nihlus? Oh fuck, come on, old guy … you don't get to do this—" The words continued to appear inside her head, but her vocal chords and mouth stopped giving them form. She tried to release his hand, but her fingers refused her commands.

Annoyance exploded into terror. Fuck! He'd landed them both in a trap once again. That one far more deadly than the beacon if the computer logs could be believed. Heart racing, she tried to move anything … even blink her eyes, but nothing. Around them, the amber chia began to form, encasing her and Nihlus in a thick tube. Fighting, struggling with everything she had, Shepard hammered at the inside of her internal prison.

Move … anything at all, just move!

Not even her eyes twitched, her stare not wavering from Nihlus's by even a millimetre. Terror sloshed through her veins, setting her entire body on fire, every cell burning to escape, building up an explosion inside a prison strong enough to contain it. Diaphragm and lungs succumbing to whatever held her captive, Shepard's breathing slowed and then stopped. When her heart followed—a wind up toy with a slack spring—Shepard waited for the black. Seconds passed.

One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Three Mississippi … .

Nothing. No darkness fell over her vision. No peaceful nighttime to cradle the fear inside her body, wrapping it tight in her flesh until the sun broke through to warm her, dismissing all the monsters conjured within the void.

They struggle, they scream and rail as their insignificant lives end, but they amount to no more than bacteria. Your worlds become our laboratories, and then they fall. So it has been for millions of your years, Shepard. The harvest cannot be stopped, you have already failed.

Had Shepard been able to move, she would have cowered as that thunderous voice hammered at
her again.

*I am the Harbinger of your ascension. Face your annihilation.*

Shepard faintly heard the radio chatter from the other side of whatever barrier had been thrown up between her mind and her body. She stared into the blank emerald of Nihlus's eyes, only one thought roaring through her mind as the paralytic took hold, his hand warm inside her grip.

*Save Nihlus.*

$$$ … "What are they doing?"

… "I don't know. It looks like they've found a way in."

… "It's a door. It looks like a main door into the mountain. What we found up above must have been the back way in."

… "No! Stop! We don't know what's on the other side of that door."

(A-N: Surprise! This chapter flowed out really nicely, so I posted it. And yes, I'm still officially on hiatus, and the 24th is still the next chapter posting date. :D Thanks as always, love as always, and ... yep, hugs as always.)
Their memories danced, swirling and weaving into one another. Shepard resolved to remain in the shadows and not to intrude upon Nihlus's privacy. However, watching that beautiful child starve to death for want of comfort—even a scrap of contact—proved too much for her heart and she stepped out of the shadows. Once she'd looked deeply into those sad, green eyes, she had little choice but to keep her hand wrapped tightly around his through the cycles.

An unusual trip down memory lane.

**Caman** - Refers to both the central hearth of the domin and the kitchen area.

**Buratrum** - Turian equivalent of hell

**Tarc** - Vulgar expletive equivalent to shit

**Perir** - Turian equivalent of boy

**Pahir** - Son

**Merillien** - Tiny, scaled bird analogues prized for their intelligence and the beautiful scaled harmonies they sing.

**Regil** - Greeting friends or family outside the domin

**Trigger Warning:** Verbal child abuse, mention of physical child abuse, parental death.

**36 Days ASR**

Stripping her down past nudity, past skin, past muscle and sinew and bone, even past identity and self, the machine laid her bare. It tore away every comfortable hiding place and disguise … every lie and truth and belief until she stood naked, her essence vulnerable and open to the machine's scrutiny. Terror gnawed at what remained, for she knew herself trapped.

"*You will provide data to answer the question.*" Emotionless and without the roaring malevolence of the previous voice—the one that called itself Harbinger—the machine's statement amounted to an examiner telling a class to pick up their number two pencils and begin.

*What is the question?*

*I'm afraid.*

Then she felt him there with her; his being as shorn and exposed as hers. Unable to distinguish his
borders, she didn't know if she'd expressed the fear, or if it belonged to him. Perhaps it originated with both. The sensation of duality, of feeling his emotions and hearing his thoughts without the delineation … there were no words to describe the intimacy.

I'm sorry.

That thought belonged to him. Regret and guilt, his dearest companions, seeped through every moment of his life, his entire purpose aimed toward making up for his existence, as if his birth had tallied some debt he needed to repay.

For what could have been the barest fraction of a second or days, they waited, her being moving over and through his, silent and expectant. Then, as if someone poked a hole in the container that held them, they began to flow, oil and water dancing together. The stream carried them backwards, a river flowing uphill away from the ocean to its source.

...

A sliver of light under his door sliced across his talons as they peeked out from under his nightrobe. Huddling against the portal, he pressed his aural canal to the thin metal. The chill of midwinter crackled around him, sharp and damp, making it hard to keep still. He pulled the robe's collar tighter around his neck and wrapped his arms around his belly to hold in his meager heat.

He froze as the domin's front door opened, his mari's voice rising to drown out the door's closure. Too many rooms away to make out her words, he knew the tone all too well, shrill and filled with enraged accusation.

He pressed his eyes closed, straining to hear his pari's voice, one small comfort before he tried to sleep. His hand drifted up to touch the tender bruise that darkened his eye and ached under the plates surrounding it.

"... dealing with your son." The rant moved to the caman. "Don't make a mess in here, I already came home to broken glass everywhere."

Nihlus gulped back tears. He hadn't meant to break the plate. After he finished his schoolwork, he thought he'd surprise his mother by cleaning up the dishes. It just slipped from soapy talons. When those same talons touched his sore eye again, they came away wet. He just wanted to help.

"He's six. He's going to break things now and again."

"I work hard enough all day. I don't need to come home to his messes. You've got to get me off this filthy pit of a rock, Terrus!" His mari's voice ripped through the entire domin, its talons shredding everything it touched. He winced away from those knives even as they sliced into the soft center of him. "Every day, I tell you that I'm going mad trapped here, and I beg you to get me out of buratrum, and every day, all you give me is excuses. What happened to the proud warrior I bonded? That torin would never have dragged his mate to the end of the galaxy to die in some festering hole."

"Mallea," his pari's soft, resigned sigh cut deeper than his mari's raging, "you know I'd make half as much on Palaven. If we're prudent, by the time Nihlus is fifteen, we'll have enough set by to return so he can enter the academy."

"That mewling spawn of yours is the reason we don't even have enough to turn this tarc-riddled hovel into a decent domin." Venom dripped from every word, turning the air so toxic that Nihlus choked on it.
He jumped as something smashed into his door, crying out with the tiny, doomed squeal of a preteril in maraquil talons. He glanced toward the window, his flight response insisting that he run ... get as far away as he could. All his carefully contained tears bullied their way out into the dark, rolling thick and heavy down his face. Curling in on himself, he knew he'd never run; he had nowhere to go. Besides, he couldn't leave his pari. Maybe if he became very small, she might forget he existed. Maybe then she wouldn't be so angry and mean.

"Nihlus is not to blame for your malcontent, Mallea. He's a good perir, and he's ours, not mine."

"Your golus forcing him into me and his forcing his way out does not make him my pahir."

His mari's words yanked out a whimpered keen. The sound echoed, too loud, and the angry words on the other side of the door stalled. Footsteps approached. He jumped up, ran two steps, and leaped onto the mattress, the stuffing of dry vetri pods crackling beneath his weight. Lying with his back to the door, he burrowed into his blankets.

That was when he saw it, a silver form standing next to his window. He sat up, ready to run for his pari, but then he stopped. Something about the being seeming very familiar, like a rock or tree that you walk by every day, but never really look at. Then, one day you look and can't remember if is new or been there the whole time. The light from the moons glowed off the being's skin, pale and glistening like the scales of his pet merillien, Itia. In the corner, the tiny avian trilled a welcome as the door opened and his pari stepped through.

"What are you still doing awake, Nihlus?" His pari crossed the floor, the torin's tread slow and uneven. "You should have been asleep hours ago."

When his pari stopped next to the bed, Nihlus turned and looked up. "I can't sleep." His mandibles flicked in a hopeful smile. "Will you stay with me?"

"I can't, you know how your mari is." Gentle talons touched his brow, easing him down onto his pillows. "Just close your eyes; you'll drift off before you know it." His pari smiled and straightened. "I'll see you in the morning. We have a big day tomorrow. Derrios said he'd pay you for every nugget you find, remember?"

He nodded and watched after his pari, slow tears still rolling down his face. He knew his pari loved him, but in the gloom behind the closed door, the old longing grew. He waited a few seconds to be sure the door was staying shut then sat up and looked toward the window. The silver being remained, unmoving and oddly comforting. Hope and awe ... and a little fear wriggled through him, all fighting to be the first in line.

"Regil?" He winced at the way his whispered greeting seemed to explode through the silence. Disobedience would summon his mari, and where his pari touched, his mari hit.

As if summoned, his mari began to shout again. He held his breath, waiting, but she remained on the other side of the door. That threat vanishing, he fixed his attention on the wondrous being. It stood next to the shelving unit that held his meager but much-loved collection of toys, staying so still that it looked like a large doll.

Then it spoke, shattering the illusion. "Hello." The being's lips curled, and it showed its teeth, contradicting the gentleness of its voice. It stepped toward him, hands reaching out when he winced away from it, his fear winning. "It's all right. I'm a friend. I won't hurt you."

He frowned a little. The being's voice sounded flat and feminine, like the asari he'd seen in vids. Also like an asari, its hand had five talons but small and blunt. "What are you?" he asked, curiosity
pushing its way into the fray.

It showed its teeth again, but that time, the display didn't worry him. It … she smiled like the asari as well. She took another step, the smile widening. "Hello, Nihlus."

He straightened, but frowned. How did she know his name? "Can you hear thoughts?" That idea made his belly flop. What if she did? Could she see the terrible ugliness that made him so unlovable? Surely someone so beautiful would find him ugly and hateful.

Instead, she shook her head. "No." She walked over to the side of his bed and bent down, gentle fingers touching his cheek. "Your pari called you by name." Gesturing toward his bed, she asked, "May I sit?"

Heat crept up his neck, making him grateful for the darkness as he nodded, his heart pounding against his keel. Now, she'd think him stupid. Of course she'd just heard his name. His mari was right. He was a stupid little perir.

"Thank you." Another smile flashed her teeth. "You're a very brave young fellow. I don't think I'd be as brave as you if a strange-looking alien just showed up in my bedroom in the middle of the night." She reached out a hand to touch his shoulder, the contact gentle. "Now, to answer your question, I'm a female human. You won't see any more of my people for a few cycles yet. We're just starting to explore space."

"Are you real?" The moment he blurted out the question, he longed to pull it back in. If she didn't think him a stupid baby before, asking things like that would change her mind.

"As real as you," she said, her voice reassuring. She looked toward the door as the shouting grew more shrill and something else crashed. "That's quite the fuss."

He nodded, his stare leaving her face, falling to his blankets. "It's because of me." A soft keen drifted beneath his words, the tears starting again. "I ruin everything."

"Now, how could someone so small and so brave ruin anything at all?" Her finger lifted his chin until he looked into her eyes once more. "I don't believe it. In fact, you know what? I think, one day, you're going to do great things." She gripped his shoulders in her hands. "May I give you a hug?"

Brow plates pulling down low, he frowned at her. "Hug?" he asked, drawing back a little. "Will it hurt?"

Her strange, soft face smiled at him again. "No, it won't hurt at all. It's how my people comfort one another and show friendship and affection."

The old longing sang, a brilliant cascade of joy and hope and colour. Normally, he avoided strangers, but something about this spirit told him she wasn't a stranger … as if she'd been by his side his entire life. And so he nodded and cleared his throat, making sure none of his excitement escaped. "Okay."

She pulled him in close against her body and wrapped gentle arms around him. "There, see. Doesn't hurt at all." She rocked him a little. "Shush now. No more tears."

For a second, he froze, unsure about the closeness of the contact or the tightness of her grip on him. Then her warmth began to soak through his nightclothes and into his plates. Tentative, he reciprocated the embrace, slipping his arms around her and relaxing into her softness. The tears dried from his face as he rested his cheek against her arm.
"She hates me," he whispered, trying not to let the tears start again. If he cried, she might pull away. The old longing had finally discovered a name and satisfaction, and he didn't want to lose it so soon.

Her grip on him tightened a little, allowing him to snuggle in closer. "She doesn't hate you, sweetie." Her sigh brushed over his fringe. "Have you ever been so unhappy that you just needed to blame something for it, even if it wasn't actually to blame?"

He thought about that for a second, then shook his head. "I'm six."

She chuckled, the sound as bright as sunshine as it warmed him all the way through. His mandibles fluttered in an eager, astonished smile; how had someone so … his vocabulary failed him … how had someone like her found him?

She rubbed his back. "You're very cheeky for someone so small. I like it."

He giggled, wriggling a little as she tickled his side.

Letting out a long breath, she hugged him tight. "Your mari is just unhappy, Nihlus, and it doesn't really have anything to do with you or your pari." He relaxed into her, a new and precious seed sprouting inside him. As her hand rubbed gentle circles on his cowl, he felt the sprout start to grow … pretty, but too new to name. Her cheek pressed to the top of his head, tussat-soft. "Just try to remember that under all that unhappiness, she loves you. She just doesn't know how to show it." Her hands slipped to his shoulders and eased him away until their eyes met in the dark. "Okay?"

"Okay." He snatched for her hand as she stood. No! She couldn't leave. It was too soon. Too soon for her to take away her soft comfort and gentle hands. "Please. Will you stay with me until I fall asleep?"

She smiled and sank back. He grinned as his bed shifted, the stuffing crackling under her weight. Settling in, she said, "Okay. Lie down, get all tucked in." Humming softly, she nodded for him to pull his blankets up to his chin. "Close your eyes."

Doing as she said, he snuggled down into the warmth of his bed, mandibles fluttering happily as he gripped her hand tight and listened to the strange, pretty sound of her voice. "What's your name?"

"I'm Jane." Her other hand brushed his cheek, her voice lilting, not at all stern as she said, "Now go to sleep."

Nihlus opened one eye. "Will I see you again?"

She nodded and leaned down, pressing her mouth to his brow. "We're going to be great friends." Laughing, she tapped the end of his nose with a fingertip. "Sleep! You heard your pari … big day tomorrow."

He smiled, certain that he'd never be able to fall asleep. Not with so many questions left to ask. Would he truly see her the next day? Dare he wish that they'd be friends, he and this gentle, alien spirit?

…

Their memories danced, swirling and weaving into one another. Shepard resolved to remain in the shadows and not to intrude upon Nihlus's privacy. However, watching that beautiful child starve to death for want of comfort—even a scrap of contact—proved too much for her heart and she
stepped out of the shadows. Once she'd looked deeply into those sad, green eyes, she had little choice but to keep her hand wrapped tightly around his through the cycles.

"Anomaly detected. Data corrupted. Partition and upload to primary mainframe for further study."

The machine's voice shattered whatever kept the analytical part of their minds locked down. Freed, the entity that was Shepard and Nihlus's combined minds set to the task of finding a way out. The only thing they could think of was finding an answer to the question. Of course, that necessitated finding out what the damned question was. Perhaps the only way to discover the question was to extrapolate it from the answers … the data.

The data! Data was corrupted. Of course it was corrupted. They doubted that the machine had been programmed to deal with more than one subject at a time. It was the beacon all over again.

In case of capture and pending disintegration, break glass. Go, Nihlus, you sledgehammer.

But the machine held hundreds of thousands of entries on asari subjects, but never any other race. What could the machine possibly gain from analyzing the two of them? Unless of course, the question was broader rather than species specific, and the data related to that lie elsewhere … in this primary mainframe.

Their thoughts raced. At the speed the machine was going through their memories, they could have mere seconds before the process moved on to their cognitive selves, or turning their bodies into paste.

Think, dammit, think. Two heads are supposed to be better than one.

... 

Rain pissed down so thick Nihlus could barely see the entrance to the mine thirty metres away. The downpour had soaked him to the hide three steps from the school door, drenching him in freezing cold misery … the soul of that damned rock made manifest. As if he needed a more visceral reminder than the grim, drawn ugliness of his mother's rage, unabated day in and day out over the cycles.

And now … .

Yanking him from his schoolwork as the mine's siren blared, panic had thrown him across the settlement at a dead sprint. When he arrived and tried to enter—he needed to get in there, needed to help—the mine foreman and his pari's best friend had wrestled him to the ground, trying to explain what happened to ears deafened by pain.

And now, the chill, desolate rain flowed in rivers between his plates and cut canyons through the mud squelching between his talons. Some small, sensical part of his brain told him to get under shelter, but the rage and agony roared so much louder, drowning out every thought but one. He stared down the slope of dank, greasy sludge without blinking. His eyes burned, blind to everything but the flapping tail of the emergency tape, brilliant crimson against the grey.

Why him? Why the only person who has ever loved me?

She approached. Of course she did.

One of the two people who have ever loved me.

Over the cycles, she'd never failed him. Too bad that devotion hadn't extended to his pari. Would it
have broken some immutable law of the tarc-infested universe for her to have warned Terrus Kryik that he was about to leave his pahir alone?

Feeling her walking up behind him, he closed his eyes and walled up his anger. Someone deserved to feel its lash, but not her. She moved silently, but after nearly ten cycles of her presence, he always knew when she drew near, her energy as familiar to him as his own.

"They're trying to dig my pari out," he said, keeping his voice too soft to be heard over the rain. Nonetheless, he knew she heard him. A keen of combined rage and sorrow spooled in his throat, a ball of razor wire threatening to explode and rip him to shreds. "His machine malfunctioned and brought down a support." He turned to look into her eyes, seeing an echo of his grief mirrored in her red, glistening gaze. Tears traced shining paths over her pale skin. He looked back at the entrance to the mine. "At least, that's what the foreman said."

Her hand slipped into his, dry and warm, the rain not touching her. For a moment, his anger struck out again. Why didn't anything touch her? Why did she get to sail above the horror and ugliness of life while it swallowed him whole?

She spoke, the love resonating through her voice tempering his resentment. "I'm so sorry, Nihlus. I know how much you loved him, and I know that you were his whole world." She squeezed his fingers, then released him and held out her arms.

Shaking his head, he backed away, talons slipping in the greasy mud. Shame and guilt ripped through him at her words, their truth the cruelest wound. "I treated him like such tarc this last cycle," he shouted, spewing a massive abscess that dripped agony like pus. His keen escaped, riding his self-loathing to freedom. "I was embarrassed of my crippled pari … didn't speak to him any more." He swallowed, another keen breaking loose. "I pretended not to know him in public."

She wrapped her arms around him, tugging him into her embrace. "You're fourteen and trying to figure out who you are. Don't be too hard on yourself, Nihlus. Your pari understood, and he knew you loved him. He did." When he tried to pull away, she just gripped him tighter.

Unlike when she'd held him even a cycle before, he towered more than a head taller and had to bend down to return the embrace. "I did," he whispered, turning his face into the curve of her neck. "I do." He gripped her tight. "Please tell me they'll get him out."

She just kissed his cheek. "You'll be okay, no matter what. You're strong, and you'll be okay."

Silent tears soaked her shoulder. Strange how his tears touched her where the rain and mud didn't. The fact that they did and that he felt her tears cool and wet against his hide helped ease the pain enough that he pulled away. Sucking in deep breaths, her arm tight and warm around his waist, he waited, shoring himself up against the inevitable. She wouldn't leave him. No matter what came, he knew that she'd stick with him and somehow, with her arms around him, he'd pull through.

Before the foreman even made it up the hill, the mud rose up to smack Nihlus in the knees, the look on the torin's face telling the horrible truth. Jane knelt next to him, her arms wrapped around his neck as the foreman explained that he'd never get a chance to right all the wrongs he'd committed against the torin who'd given him life.

"Come and get dry," Jane said, her voice soft. She pressed her cheek against his. "They said it will be hours yet." When he just shook his head and wrapped his arms around her, she sighed. "Stop punishing yourself for things that aren't your fault, Nihlus."
He pulled away, but she grasped his face between her hands and forced him to meet her gaze. "Would your pari want this? Would he want you out here sitting in the freezing cold mud ripping yourself to shreds?"

Letting out a long sigh, he slumped and shook his head. "That's not fair."

"Yeah." She shrugged. "But not much about love is." She gathered him back into her arms. "Remember the love, Nihlus, and let the rest go. That is what will truly honour the torin he was. He wanted the best for you. Now it's up to you to make sure he gets what he wants." She released him and stood, reaching a hand down to help him up. "Come on. As soon as you're dry and warm, we'll come back and wait in the crew house."

When he took her hand, Nihlus pressed her palm against his mandible. "Thank you," he said, layering everything she meant to him through his subvocals.

As he knew she would, Jane stayed pressed to his side when the miners pulled his father out of the rubble, at the funeral, and through the terrible days and weeks that followed. His mother withdrew him from classes, and he took his father's shift in the mine, but digging by hand. Jane stayed with him even there, and he thanked the universe for that tiny, brilliant diamond of a miracle shining amidst the tarc.

…

Shepard and Nihlus lunged up out of the young torin's grief like drowning swimmers clawing at the surface, inhaling as much water as air. As they struggled to break free, to apply reason through the deluge of emotion, the dim light of a pattern began to glimmer.

The machine hadn't started breaking them down physically, and the fact the logical cognitive processes had been locked down suggested that they didn't hold immediate interest. Instead, the machine had gone straight for their memories. Why their memories? The day to day, even the gruesome, exhilarating and tragic events were just moments in time. Unless they weren't after the memories for their own sake, but rather for their emotional content.

*You never truly know someone until you've walked a mile in their shoes?*

… or a lifetime. Suddenly, what the Reapers may have needed from Tashac became clearer: the prothean ability to impart their entire self through touch and to read others the same way. The Collectors on Ilos had also hooked into Vigil. Perhaps they'd been seeking more than a way to transmit the Conduit's location.

And Saren gathering up the beacons perhaps as much for what they contained as for clues to the Conduit. He'd also needed the Thorian to get the cipher, but what if there was more to melding with the Thorian than that? It was a sapient plant … a completely unique life form as far as they knew. Had the indoctrinated Spectre also been trying to solve this question?

*Okay, rein it in ... we're getting overexcited and ahead of ourselves.*

Right, so what did the machine want to see in their pasts? She'd witnessed Nihlus's first six years in a quick flash of perception, but the machine didn't pause to examine anything until the night he huddled next to his bedroom door, listening to his mother blame him for her misery. Something in that child and his loneliness, his fear and guilt, his aching for connection called to the computer's programming just as it had called to her.

And then, the machine had paused on the death of Nihlus's father, his only tie to love, his anchor.
As his loneliness had, his grief … the horrible grief and emptiness, darker even than the vacuum between stars, called to Shepard, insisting that she remain at his side as he moved from perir to torin.

Secondary data recorded. File: Compassion. Filter appropriately. Send data directly to primary mainframe.

... Jane swiped the rain and tears from her eyes and looked up at the sky. The clouds darkened toward black, the weight of the huge, angry sky pressing down to squash her the way Bradley Buckler crushed ants under rocks. Snifffing back a head full of snot, she bullied her frightened tears into submission, hoisted her small backpack a little higher, and pressed on. She'd just turned seven, far too big to snivel like a baby just because she was lost. Instead of crying, she needed to find somewhere out of the rain and wait for her parents to come looking for her.

"Go to the woods. There are some big pine trees just at the edge."

Spinning around, Jane searched for the source of the familiar voice, not surprised when she didn't see anyone. Her friend didn't always show himself, blending into the shadows or the rain like a ghost. He wasn't a ghost, though. Even though he looked a little strange, mostly invisible most of the time, and when he wasn't, he looked like the aliens in the vids, he wasn't scary at all. In fact, she knew the baby Jesus had sent him to look after her like in the bible stories her mother read to her. He even had wings, although his were painted not feathers, and on his face rather than on his back like regular angels.

"Where are you?" Clutching her jacket tight around her, Jane obeyed the voice. She couldn't stop shivering, and her teeth sounded like the wind up ones in the cartoons. That meant she needed to get dry and keep warm. Daddy had taught her that when they went camping. Hippo … term … something.

"I'm right here," her friend said, his voice close, but muffled by the rain pounding off the hood of her jacket. "And the forest is just at the top of the hill."

Jane dug back into the climb, the slope so steep and slick that she needed to scramble up on all fours. As she climbed, her backpack slipped around to smack her in the head, first one side then the other. Finally, panting for breath and covered in mud, she reached the top of the hill and turned to look over the valley.

Once she realized that she was lost, she decided to climb the biggest hill she could find hoping to see the castle where she'd lost her parents. It had taken her too long to climb, though, and it was so dark that she couldn't even see the sheep grazing along the slope.

"Go on, get to the forest. It's too dark to find your way back now. It was a smart plan, though. Good thinking. You paid attention to all those lessons your father taught you."

She nodded. "Daddy's lessons are fun." As much as she trusted her invisible friend, when she turned to look at the black mass of trees, her guts gave out. It would be so dark and scary in there, and all she had was the little keychain flashlight hanging from her jacket zipper. She'd never been to Earth before; what if ferocious animals lurked in the trees? Scratching her backside—stupid wet, itchy underwear—she backed away a few steps. Despite being too old to believe in fairy tales and monsters, she'd heard an old man at the last castle telling stories about all sorts of monsters and strange creatures that haunted places like that. He sounded like he knew what he was talking about, and he said people went in and never came out.
"I don't want to go in there, it's too dark," she whispered, her heart fluttering like the wings of the hummingbird who ate from the feeder in her window. "I want Daddy. Please help me find my daddy." Tears sprang into her eyes again, and that time, she let them fall. No one could see them in the rain. "I want to go home."

"I know you're scared, Janey, and I promise that I'll get you back to your daddy, but for now, we need to get you dry and warm." A big, warm hand closed around hers.

Jane's heart leaped into her throat, forcing out a bleat of fear. Scrambling backwards, she looked up ... so far up. When she recognized the face with its white wings, she let out a growl of combined terror and embarrassment. "Nihlus! You scared me!" She punched his leg. "Big dummy."

When he chuckled and crouched down, she let out a jittery sigh and smiled, a slow grin of relief. She'd be okay now. Nihlus would look after her. He always had, all the way back to when he sat beside her crib, rubbing her back and telling her stories when she was sick. She didn't remember what the stories were about, but she remembered how safe she'd felt.

He reached up to brush her cheek with a knuckle, then offered his arms for a hug, his body solidifying next to her. "I'm sorry, I forgot I'm hard to see in the rain." He smiled as she stepped into his embrace and wrapped her arms around his neck. "That's better. Don't worry, I'll stay with you, and once you've stopped shivering, we'll get you back to your parents." His arms held her tight, strong and warm.

Pushing her back, he held her at arm's length, his smile as warm as his hug. "You've been very brave and doing all the right things. Your daddy will be very proud. Can you be brave for a little while longer?"

Jane swallowed her tears and nodded. She was very brave. Daddy told her that all the time. Too brave, he teased when she got herself into trouble.

"Good." Nihlus took her hand again, her fingers so very small engulfed in his long talons. "Your parents and about half the county are searching for you, but you're too cold to walk that far."

Straightening, he turned toward the forest, tugging gently on her hand.

"Daddy's going to be mad. He told me not to wander off." As her imagination formed the image of her mother's anger, she let out a long sigh. She probably wouldn't be allowed to leave her room for the rest of forever. "I'll never be bad again."

Looking down at her, Nihlus grinned, his mandibles flicking hard. "I sure hope that's not true." He tugged her in close and wrapped his arm around her, his hand almost as wide as her back. She leaned in close; he was so warm! "You didn't mean to get lost, did you?"

Jane shook her head, eyes wide as she stared up at him. He had to believe her. She really hadn't meant to be bad at all. "I didn't, honest. I went to look at the sheep. The lambs were so cute and wanted to play tag. I only played with them for a few minutes, and then I heard Daddy calling me, but I couldn't find my way back. It sounded like his voice was everywhere."

He nodded and shrugged. "Then, there's nothing to be sorry for, is there? Your parents will understand."

"Mother will be mad. She said that I've been nothing but trouble since we got here." She sighed and slumped along beside him. New tears fell in anticipation of her mother's scolding. "She said I'm an … ungrateful wretch, and a good girl would stand still and pay attention. But I can't help it. I try, but all we do is stand and stare at paintings while Mother talks about them."
Nihlus chuckled, lowering his voice to a secret whisper as he said, "I was falling asleep standing up ten minutes after we got to the first gallery." He squeezed her a little closer. "And you did an excellent dramatic reenactment of a starving child dying in the hallway on the way to breakfast this morning."

Jane wailed a little as she exclaimed, "Yesterday, my eggs were covered in slime and stared at me. And the peanut butter is all gritty and has oil on the top. Gross." She wiped her face again and sniffed. "You don't think I'm bad?"

"Oh, you're definitely bad, but almost all the really interesting people I know are at least a little bad some of the time." He stopped, and Jane looked up at the biggest pine tree she'd ever seen.

"This would make the most beautiful Christmas tree," she whispered, awe squeezing the words as they came out of her throat. When Nihlus pulled aside some of the branches, she ducked down and crawled into the dry little fort around the trunk. For a moment, she just clicked on her flashlight and sat there, savouring the respite from the rain, but then Nihlus crawled under, and she moved aside, making room.

"Okay," he said once he got settled, sitting cross-legged in the soft carpet of needles, "Let's get you out of as many wet layers as we can." He helped her wriggle out of her backpack, then with the tie and zipper on her jacket. He looked inside the jacket. "Soaked through." He hung it from a branch then nodded toward her backpack. "Let's see if your mother was her usual, thorough self when she packed that bag of yours."

Jane wrestled with the buckles for a moment, but her hands were frozen stiff. Nihlus took them between both of his and held them to his mouth, blowing on them until they warmed up. "Thank you," she squeaked and then opened the buckles and zipper. A sweater sat on top, then jeans, and a shirt, then two pairs of underwear and socks on the bottom along with a couple of fruit filled snack bars and a bottle of water.

"When you get back to your mother, you are going to give her a hug and thank her for taking such good care of you." He held up her jacket to act as a curtain while she wriggled out of her wet clothes and replaced them with the dry ones. When she was done, he held out his arms, inviting her onto his lap. "Best way to get warm is to snuggle."

Jane grinned and curled up in his arms, her tiny flashlight illuminating their snug little shelter. He draped her sweater over her like a blanket, then wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight. As her guardian angel's heat began to seep through her clothing, she sighed and closed her eyes. "Will you tell me a story like you used to when I was little?"

Nihlus gave her a squeeze. "To me, you're still little. I can fit all of you in my arms. But ... " His chuckle brightened the shelter more than her light and made it feel both safe and cozy. "... I will tell you a story. Do you remember the story of Callor the Wise?"

"Nope." Jane curled in tight, her head cradled inside his cowl as she tucked it under his jaw. She snuggled into him, completely content and safe. "Thank you for finding me," she whispered, a huge yawn following the words.

Nihlus nuzzled the top of her head, his strange version of a kiss making her giggle. "I'll always find you, and I'll always protect you the very best I can," he promised in a soft whisper. "It doesn't matter how lost you get or how big a fight you face, I'll never leave your side, haksaya kubenar."

Jane looked up through slitted eyes, giving him a sleepy smile. "That's pretty. What does it mean?"
"It means, 'my strong, true heart.'" He nuzzled her again. "Close your eyes. Stories are always better with your eyes closed. When you wake up, your parents will be here."

Even as Jane began to drift off, she whispered, "I love you, Nihlus. I'm glad the baby Jesus sent you to be my guardian angel."

A rough cheek brushed her hair. "I love you, too. Now, do you want this story or not?"

...

Compassion as secondary data. That seemed to confirm their theory.

But why had the machine flagged Shepard's memory of being lost? Certainly, Shepard had been afraid, but her father had taught her well, and her mother always packed her backpack with emergency supplies. Jane had climbed the hill, crawled under the tree, changed and buried herself in a thick pile of needles to keep warm. She'd suffered through more frightening moments even as a young child.

So why that memory? Maybe it wasn't about Shepard. They were both caught in the machine, both being dismantled from the soul out, their memories and emotions as tangled as their thoughts. Perhaps the machine wanted to test something else. But that meant … the computer and machine weren't just about data collection. An intelligence lay behind it capable of running experiments on its specimens and changing the conditions.

And if that was the case, their captor had chosen that memory to test Nihlus's reaction.

As if answering the question, the computer intoned, "Altering input parameters to test viability: dual subjects. Accepting new data. Hypothesis uploaded to primary mainframe for analysis."

Fear exploded from them both, flaring bright and needle sharp for a second before cooling into anger and solidifying into resolve.

*We aren't lab rats, you bastards. You'll discover that soon enough.*
Nihlus sucked in a quick breath, the air razor sharp, slicing its way down. Damn. Batarians. So soon? His heart dropped as he ran the math, and it threw his denial back in his face. Jane was just about to turn sixteen. He stepped forward out of the shadows. Despite knowing it was a memory and unchangeable, there had to be something he could do. Or maybe … maybe he should just … .

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Although I don't mention any details, this chapter deals with Shepard's experience on Mindoir, so warning for implied rape and torture in the section after the first … to the second … The rest of the chapter is trigger free.

Nais - (pronounced nah-ees) Asari above the age of majority (75 cycles)

36 Days ASR

Logic and reason became harder and harder for them to keep hold of as Jane sensed the years passing, drawing them closer to the event the machine wouldn't just flag, but devour like a shark in a feeding frenzy. No! The denial came from them both. Whoever hid behind the tar-black spiders and the orbs had tortured her with those hours and years more than enough. They tried to withdraw, to take refuge from it, but the machine left no place to hide … no solace in any of her usual retreats. Odd how people always called flesh weak when it provided so much cushion, so much strength.

And yet, he surrounded and intertwined with her, providing a thin barrier to keep the pain at bay. Thin, yes, but perhaps thick enough that she could face it … just one more time.

If ever there was a time for a guardian angel, it's now.

...

The darkness shrouded Nihlus, disguising his constant presence. A chill breeze blew through the open window, but just as the rain didn't touch Shepard in his memories, the cold didn't penetrate. He sat in the corner of Jane's room, his arms wrapped around his legs, head back, eyes closed. Pulling in a deep breath, he savoured the sweet scents of spring and the soft sounds of the young woman settling to sleep a couple of metres away.

Where he'd grown up surrounded by mud and rock and soot, she'd grown up amidst forest and grass and the meadow flowers that she wore woven through the fierce red of her hair. Feeling no envy or bitterness, he simply revelled in the wildness of her … and sympathized a little with her mother. For all her bluster, the woman shone love from every pore, and Jane truly had been born to test the patience of everyone who loved her.
Unlike Shepard's broken oath to remain distant, Nihlus had insinuated himself into her memories practically from the moment she'd entered the world, screaming and purple, her head already covered with a renegade shock of bright red. He cherished every moment as a gift, a chance to be a part—albeit an invisible one—of a loving, beautiful family.

The sound of bare feet padding over the hardwood pulled him from his thoughts. He grinned as they hesitated for a moment at the threshold of Jane's room. He suspected that Bunny had been the universe's attempt to give Jane a mild dose of her own medicine.

"Janey?" When the child didn't get an answer, the footsteps continued across the metre of floor, stopping at the edge of the bed. "Janey?"

Moonlight glinted in one half-open eye, then Jane sighed. "Your dolls aren't staring at you, Bunny, and I'm not going into your room to check. Those things freak the crap out of me, you know they do." Nihlus's smile widened as Jane glared at the adorably earnest face staring at her from less than a hand's width away. The teenager grumbled, finally giving in to lean up and face her sister. "Maybe, if you didn't rescue every creepy, broken doll in the known universe to nurse it back to health, you wouldn't have this problem."

"I was asleep, honest," the child insisted. "But there's a monster in the house. I saw it downstairs. It has four eyes."

Nihlus sucked in a quick breath, the air razor sharp, slicing its way down. Damn. Batarians. So soon? His heart dropped as he ran the math, and it threw his denial back in his face. Jane was just about to turn sixteen. He stepped forward out of the shadows. Despite knowing it was a memory and unchangeable, there had to be something he could do. Or maybe … maybe he should just … .

Damn it, knowing that she'd suffered it was bad enough. To watch her go through it … .

No! Even if it was memory and he couldn't change what happened, this time she wouldn't suffer through it alone. He could endure it for her.

"There's no such thing as—" A crash from the main floor stopped Jane's protest. She sat up, covers clutched to her chest, and called out, "Mom? Dad?" The words drifted pale and helpless into the darkness, the brash teen returning to childhood from one breath to the next.

A shriek of mingled pain and rage—Lucy—ripped through the darkness. Jane let out an answering cry, fragile and helpless. She threw back her covers and scrambled off the bed, snatching Bunny's hand in a grip so tight, her knuckles shone white in the moonlight.

For a moment, they stood frozen, terrified into place as they watched the door. Despite his gut knowing better, Nihlus found himself watching, hoping that Franklin would appear at the top of the stairs with some sort of rational, non-batarian slaver explanation.

Then Jane whirled around to face him. "Nihlus, what do I do?" she asked, looking to him with the same trust and love as she always had.

He took a quick, deep breath and nodded. All right. He'd promised to protect her, and while he might not be able to save her, he could fucking well try. "You need to run!" he said, keeping his voice strong and commanding, its subvocals warm.

"Janey?" Bunny squealed, so shrill and loud that the intruders below couldn't help but hear it. They needed to get out! The squeal upgraded to a scream. "'Where's Daddy? I want Mommy!'"

"They'll know you're here." Nihlus ran to the window, but his hands passed through the screen. A
rough growl of frustration rolling from his throat, he spun back, waving her over. "You'll have to do it. Come! Quickly! Your parents are buying you time to get out!"

Instead of moving toward him, Jane stopped, turning to face the thunder of running feet on the stairs. Nihlus leaped to grab her hand and drag her to the window, but then her father raced down the hall and in the door. Both Jane and Bunny let out soft bleats of relief that wrapped a sorrowful garotte around Nihlus's throat. If only Franklin possessed the power to protect them the way they believed. If only hell wasn't roaring up the stairs behind him, just two heartbeats away.

"Daddy?" Jane's bare foot slid forward a single step, all her usual vivacious energy folding into wide-eyed docility.

Her father slammed the bedroom door and locked it. "Get to the window," he shouted, his voice hitting a hard enough blow that she stumbled away from it. Franklin grabbed the chair from under Jane's desk and jammed it under the doorknob. It would buy them only seconds, but … maybe …. He jerked his head toward the window. "Hurry!"

Finally doing as she was told, Jane ran over and yanked the screen out. Nihlus steadied her as she lifted Bunny through onto the roof, then gripped her elbow to help lift her out. Pounding fists rattled the door on it's hinges.

Her father's hand grabbed her other arm, and between them they practically threw Jane through the portal onto the shingles. Nihlus clambered through on her heels, taking advantage of being able to just walk through everything but Jane.

Behind him, Franklin whispered, "Run to the woods. Head for the big rock across the creek. Hide. We'll come for you when we can." Nihlus heard the door start to give. "Move fast and keep to the shadows," their father called over his shoulder. "We'll come for you."

Jane hesitated, looking on the verge of turning back. "Dad? Daddy . . . why . . . what's going on?"
Nihlus grabbed her hand, pulling her the other way. Why wouldn't she just do as she was told?

Inside the room, the door gave way with a crash. "Run!" her father bellowed, the single word lost as Bunny began screaming. Nihlus didn't wait to see what happened inside. Jane could figure things out as he dragged her across the settlement. He allowed her to pause long enough to snag Bunny's hand, then they both hauled the wailing child to the eaves.

"Run and don't—" A muffled crunching sound accompanied a thick, wet scream ... a broken sound Nihlus knew all too well. Franklin's fight was behind him until he regained consciousness, maybe not even then, depending on the severity of his broken jaw. Behind him, Jane vomited down the front of her pyjamas, but Nihlus didn't let her stop. She'd face a lot worse if he didn't get them out of there.

It took about ten seconds for one of the batarians to climb out the window. Nihlus didn't look back, but the struggle and cursing told the tale of large male trying to squeeze through small space. Jane yelped, the sound as furious as it was startled, and when Nihlus looked back, she'd latched her teeth into the batarian's hand. Blood stained her nightshirt where the slaver had grabbed her, sharp talons piercing her skin, but a hell of a lot more blood poured down her chin.

"Let him go, Jane," Nihlus snapped, proud that her fight had kicked in, but losing patience with the endless stream of delays. It hadn't been more than four or five minutes since Bunny said there were monsters, but it felt like a half hour had dragged past. "The two of us can't fight every slaver on Mindoir."
The command in his voice snapped her back, and she nodded, running the last few steps to the edge of the roof. Across the street, a woman raced out her front door, screaming bloody hell while three batarians tore the nightdress off her back and dragged her into the dark.

Nihlus shoved aside the ten different emotions threatening to rip him into varren bait and dropped face down onto the shingles. "I'll lower you," he called, waving Jane over. The batarian was still holding his nearly severed thumb and howling, but he wouldn't be for long.

The teenager gulped a couple of times and spat a huge gob of blood out onto the slate as she crouched, dropping her legs over the side before rolling over and grabbing his hands. Below and behind her, gunfire pounded out a brutal beat that kept people marching down the street, their heads bowed, cowed and passive before their captors.

Jane left her hands raised when her feet touched down. "Come on, Bunny. Jump. I'll catch you."

"Come on, little one, you can do it. That's a girl," Nihlus whispered as Bunny lowered herself, little feet kicking as she wriggled over the edge.

"Good girl, that's the way," Jane called in a hoarse whisper, encouraging her. "Okay, you're only a few centimetres away from my hands, just let go." Nihlus spun when Jane whined a little under her breath, and he heard the slaver working his way down the roof. Damn it. He clenched his fists and placed himself between the slaver and the child despite knowing it was pointless. He was useless.

"Come on, baby, you know I won't let you fall," Jane pleaded.

Bunny let go, landing heavy and awkward. Finally! Nihlus leaped down, landing nimbly next to Jane, his energy taut, alert, and frustrated. He wrapped an arm around her, leading them into the shadows as soon as Bunny's feet touched grass. The moment Jane caught her balance, she took off, racing between houses, as quick and silent as she could manage dragging her baby sister along.

Nihlus sprinted ahead and behind, reporting slaver patrols back then dashing off in another direction. If it came to a fight, he couldn't help … hell, he couldn't even scoop Bunny up and carry her. Being helpless to save them from the horrors coming for them filled him with a panic he'd never experienced. A fear that insisted that he run, spare himself what was to come. Jane had already suffered the reality and lived with the memory since. His avoiding it would change nothing.

Except … he'd never be able to look her in the eye again. He'd never be able to look himself in the eye again. How could he claim to love her if he abandoned her? So he raced back and forth, leading them along the clearest path through the settlement. Once they broke free of the houses, they left the streetlights and screaming behind. The ground was soft and wet along the trail, and the prints of two barefoot girls wouldn't be a challenge to track, but leaving the path would slow them to a—

Bunny stumbled and fell face down in a bawling heap. "Slow down," the child wailed, tiny fists pounding at the mud. "Where's Mommy and Daddy?" Holding up a heavily bleeding hand, she screamed, "Janey, I want Mommy!"

Nihlus paced as Jane bent to lift the child onto her feet. "They'll meet us at the rock." She kissed the cut across the child's palm. "Come on, we're just about to the creek."

Nihlus listened for Jane's breathing as she spoke. Her breaths came quick and deep, but not exhausted; she still had lots of run left in her. They just needed to keep Bunny moving.
"You can do it. Just keep running." Jane and Nihlus spun in unison, her eyes holding his for a second before they both drew in a long breath and dug in.

"Look what we've got here."

Nihlus's heart stopped as a shadow unfolded from the darkness shrouding the path ahead. Damn it! Where had the bastard come from? Nihlus threw himself between slaver and the two girls, cries of impotent rage lashing out alongside equally useless talons.

The large male laughed and lunged at the girls. "Thought you could outrun us, did you?"

Jane flung herself backwards and slipped, dragging Bunny to the ground along with her. Nihlus leaped after them. At least he could grab Jane, but her pyjama sleeves slipped through his talons. For the second time that night, the sickening crunch of breaking bone split the air. Bunny let out a squawk of pain, but just wrapped her arm around her belly and pressed close, seeking shelter in her big sister's side.

Two more batarians ran out onto the path, gasping and wheezing for air. Another one stepped out behind the first, all four of them moving in to circle their prey.

"He's going to take Bunny first," Nihlus said, crouching at Jane's side. His eyes darted, searching for an escape route. "You—" He clamped his teeth shut on the rest as the batarian reached down, lifting the five-year-old by the collar. What advice could he give? Leave Bunny and run? Fight back? What could Jane do against a squad of armed men?

"There's nothing you … ." Again Nihlus stopped himself. Had he really been about to tell her not to fight back, to just submit and maybe spare herself a couple of blows? That was rich fucking advice coming from the Spectre who couldn't do anything but stand by and watch it happen.

The leader looked Bunny over with an appraising eye. "Take this back to the cages for their street. I might keep her for myself" He shoved the five-year-old toward one of his compatriots. Then, cocking his head a little, he leered at Jane. Nihlus's talons twitched, begging to tear those eyes right out of the bastard's face.

"Come on, damn it! Think! There has to be something you can do. Anything."

But no. Fuck! Why did he keep forgetting that the horrendous things about to happen had already happened? And an amazing, powerful woman had grown out of them. It had already happened, and she'd pulled through. She'd made it. His vision blurred, and when he reached up to rub his eyes, his talons came away wet. He stared at them for a moment. Tears?

The batarian circled her, a pathetic scavenger sussing out whether its prey still possessed any fight. "Going to take a little time with this one." Sharp-taloned fingers stabbed into the tussled length of Jane's hair and yanked her off the ground. He shoved his face into hers, and gestured to the bastard holding Bunny, the slaver's free hand wrapped in a rag and clutched to his chest. "Like to bite, do you?" He bared his sharp, needle teeth. "Oh yeah, we've caught us a tasty looking piece of young meat here."

The one holding Bunny stepped forward, his expression an almost laughable combination of petulance and anger. "You sure you don't want me to stay, Remit? She looks like a fighter." He stalked Jane in a wide circle, his face twisting into an ugly sort of begging. "And I deserve a little payback." If Nihlus had been holding a gun, he'd have given him some payback … right between the eyes.
Nihlus winced as Remit's laugh rang, deep and vicious, off the thick forest surrounding the muddy trail. Try as he might to believe that it would be over and done quickly, that laugh said otherwise. The batarian spat in Jane's face, his dark stare looking past her. "You just want to stuff yours into whatever's left over. Ha! I guess you could call that payback."

Nihlus leaped forward again, fury roaring through his veins, molten magma that demanded action as the batarian forced Shepard's head back until she had no choice but to look into those soulless eyes. Rough fingers shoved themselves past her lips and into her throat. Nihlus's gorge heaved in empathy, his eyes stinging, salty and bitter. Jane convulsed, choking and gagging, her whole body heaving.

For a moment, she sagged, teetering on the edge of unconsciousness, but then Nihlus saw her fight kick in. Her jaw bulged as she clamped down on those fingers, biting down until Remit howled, beating on her head with the hand that still clutched her hair. Slamming her hand down on the slaver's knuckles, Jane broke his hold on her hair and twisted hard to the side. Sweeping out with her leg, she dumped Remit onto his ass then kicked straight out, catching him under the chin with her heel. He yelled, but fell back, stunned.

Nihlus reached out to grab Jane's hand. She spat a huge gob of blood in Remit's face, then launched herself toward Bunny. Nihlus's instincts threw him between Jane and the slaver, shielding her. Before Jane wrestled her baby sister free, Remit's hand punched straight through Nihlus's chest to bury itself in her hair.

Jane dropped like a stone, puddling on the ground. Then, his heart feeling as though it would burst straight out through his keel, Nihlus saw her clawing at the ground, fighting to stand, her unfocused eyes searching for Bunny. Spirits, she was magnificent. She'd been born braver than any three other people combined, and even as he fought to hold back a keen of sheer, impotent agony, beneath it his subvocals thrummed with awe at the beauty and fury of her.

"Look, meat," Remit said, his rolling growl pulling Nihlus's attention back to him, "if you fight me, I'll tie you to that tree over there and make you watch as I do every single twisted, agonizing thing I plan to do to you, 'cept on that little one over there." He yanked her onto her feet, his bleeding and torn fingers digging into her jaw as he forced her to look over at Bunny.

He snapped her head back around and leaned in, close but not too close. His wariness of her teeth pulled a fierce grin onto Nihlus's face. Damn right he should be worried. Unfortunately, frightened cowards just became more vicious.

Remit sneered. "So, what's it going to be? You going to pucker up and bend over like a good little whore, or do I tear your baby … sister? niece? cousin? to shreds?"

Nihlus winced as Jane spat blood into the slaver's face. If she got the batarian any more angry, she'd end up dead. But then she turned looked over her shoulder at Bunny, and her head tipped once. As her entire body slumped, defeated, Nihlus stepped up behind her, talons reaching out to grip her shoulder, needing to let her know that she'd make it through.

The next second, she doubled up, spewing blood and stink over Remit's boots. Nihlus rubbed her
back as she retched and retched, her gut determined to turn her inside out. Finally, she stilled under his hand.

Gasping, she called out, "Look away, Bunny. Don't watch."

"Who knows … " Remit said. The batarian wrapped his fingers around Jane's neck and laughed. The sound pierced Nihlus's hide, saturating his entire being with poison, black and corrosive. The slaver snapped his teeth. "... you might just like it." He snifed then made a face. "This meat stinks like it's six days dead." He spun, dragging Jane further into the forest. When he reached the steep bank of the creek, he tore her pyjamas off and heaved her down into the frozen, mucky water. "Wash the stink off, whore."

Panic threw Nihlus down the steep bank after her; time was fast running out. Sliding down the last of it on his hip, he landed feet first in the frigid water and crouched next to her. "They won't hurt Bunny," he said. "She's too valuable. Run. You know this forest, you could lose them in seconds … disappear."

Above, the batarians threw handfuls of filth at her, jeering like teenage bullies.

Ignoring them, Jane shook her head, wincing as globs of mud slapped against her skin. "I can't chance it. She's five. If they rape her … ." Jane swallowed and shook her head, scooping the icy water over her skin, scrubbing off the sick and the blood. "I promised Daddy that I'd look after her." She splashed more water down her front, scrubbing off the blood and vomit. "I'll be okay. They can't touch me, not really, not if I don't let them."

Nihlus nodded. He'd known she wouldn't run. He scraped the mud from her back. "I can't do anything." Half a keen escaped before he swallowed it. "I want to, Jane. Dear spirits, I want to rip out their throats, but … ."

She nodded and turned to meet his eyes. "I know." She pressed her lips together, sucking a deep breath in through her nose. "You've always been my guardian angel." Reaching out, she gripped his talons. "Thank you for trying."

"What can I do?" he blurted. "There must be something." He lifted her hand to his mouth and nuzzled the backs of her fingers. "I can't just stand there."

She took another deep, noisy breath, then squared her shoulders and clenched her jaw, pulling herself together even as his resolve began to crumble. "Hold my hand. Don't look, but hold my hand and don't let go, no matter what." Her eyes looked past him to the gang of slavers standing along the top of the bank. "I'll be okay. My parents didn't raise a porcelain doll; they raised a fighter."

Nihlus nodded and pressed his hand against her cheek. "I know you'll be fine. You're the bravest, toughest pain in the ass I've ever met."

That drew a startled chuckle that died the second it hit the air.

"Don't make me come down there, meat!" Remit hollered. "You don't want me to get bored up here with the little one."

"I won't let go," Nihlus promised, packing down all the explosives threatening to blow him apart. Damn it, for her sake, he could hold himself together half as bravely as she did. Still, when she stood and he felt her shaking through their joined hands, his other hand slapped his thigh, looking for a flask that wasn't there.

They clambered up the bank, hand in hand, neither one loosening their grip. When Remit grabbed
Jane, dragging her away from the bank, Nihlus ran to keep up. No matter what, he wouldn't let go. When they stopped, he turned his back. As much as the batarians would take from her, he could leave her that last shred of dignity.

"And talk to me," she whispered, her hand yanking against his. Her voice tightened down to a shrill sort of pant. "Your voice … it's always made me feel safe."

Nihlus's brain went suddenly and completely blank. What in the pits of buratrum could he talk about? Nice weather we're having? Are you ready for next week's calculus exam? That stew your mother made last night sure smelled rank. What was that girl's problem at school on Thursday?

His eyes slammed closed as a harsh cry shredded its way from her lips. Her hand clamped down, grinding the bones in his talons together.

"Going to … make me do all the work?" she gasped. Another ten seconds of his brain spitting nonsense passed before she said, "Okay, storyteller … got any good stories?"

Realization dawned, bright and clear. What he said didn't matter. His function was to be a lifeline, an anchor to her sanity. Keeping his eyes closed, he took a deep breath and started talking. After all, he was her guardian angel.

"A guardian angel … that's close to what my people believe in, but our spirits are more representative of qualities and ideals. They don't intercede in our lives, they just watch on, I suppose." He let out a bitter chuff. "My father used to tell me stories, fanciful things passed down from when turians hunted and lived in clans, and they believed in great spirits that governed everything from the seasons to the weather and animals … even war and love had their spirit champions."

Her hand yanked from his grip, and he spun, gripping her wrist with his other hand as he fought to keep hold of her. Opening his eyes for a second, he saw her lying face down in the mud, blood covering her face. He crouched, gathering both of her hands in his. Jane showed no response, her eyes dazed and staring. He took her pulse, a rough sigh of relief greeting the strong thump against his talons.

Another batarian reached down. Nihlus slammed his eyes shut and held onto both of her hands. "My favourite … ." The story of the praela known as Raeil spilled out of him, taking him away from the mud and blood and the stink. He prayed to Jane's God that she journeyed with him, leaving her body behind in favour of wandering a realm where mortals could win the favour of the gods and the love of a magical being.

Finally, what seemed like hours later, when Remit threw Jane's battered body over his shoulder to carry her back to the settlement, Nihlus let out a long, tremulous keen of relief. Of course, it wasn't over, not by a long measure. He steeled himself. Still clasping her slack, frozen fingers in his, he reached up with his other hand to caress her cheek, deftly wiping away the tear-streaked blood. She opened her eyes, meeting his anguished stare with a shocky, distant one.

"You didn't let go," she whispered.

Nihlus tried to answer her, but every time he opened his mouth to speak, a gut-deep scream tried to bully its way out, to drench her in horror and pain so deep he felt as if it would drown them both. He swallowed it and clamped his jaw tight. She needed her anchor, her guardian angel.

"Of course I didn't. What sort of guardian angel would I be if I let you go?" He gave her a shaky smile and caressed her cheek again. "I won't leave. No matter what."
And he didn't. When they staked her out in the middle of the gravel road, he stretched out with her, both of her hands grasped in his, his face pressed against the hood they put over her head. When they hurt her, he told her every tale he could think of. In the few moments they allowed her to rest, he simply stroked her wrist or the back of her hand. At first he thought it might just be a comfort to him, while she would prefer to be left well enough alone. However, when he stopped, she murmured, growing restless even while unconscious, stilling only once he resumed his caresses.

At the end of the twenty-seven hours, she'd faded into the small kindness of unconsciousness. Without letting go of her hand, he dragged himself up to sit by her side. One knee drawn up, his free arm wrapped around it, Nihlus dropped his head until his brow impacted his patella.

It was over. Praise the spirits, thank God or the sweet baby Jesus or the fucking Enkindlers … whichever … it was over. Harsh, ugly sobs tore from his throat, tears and snot and short, moaning keens pouring out of him in an unchecked deluge. Twenty-seven hours of being completely helpless to save one of the only people he'd ever truly loved … flayed to the bone didn't even begin to cover it. All that remained was bone and a tangle of raw nerve endings bleeding into a puddle of guts.

And yet, she'd endured so much more … his beautiful, brave Jane. He checked her pulse as he'd done compulsively every time she went still … every time she lost consciousness.

Sometimes he remembered that she survived that day to grow into the amazing, fierce woman who had saved Elysium from meeting Mindoir's fate.

Most of the time he checked her pulse.

…

"Hypothesis confirmed. Writing secondary protocols. Allowing for multiple data streams. Preparing to save to multiple files. Opening multiple feeds."

As the tide of memory drew back, a shift resonated through the computer as its brain opened itself to new parameters. Fabricated synapses fired, adapting to compensate for two subjects. Somewhere —no doubt far from Thessia—the mind behind the experiments … the reason the facility remained up to date and maintained … changed the experiment, its hypothesis confirmed.

Nihlus's presence, his suffering through her memories of Mindoir, had changed everything.

"Adjusting primary input parameters. Dual input allowance verified. Potential to harvest significant data due to interaction, sixty-three point eight percent."

They shuddered at the word harvest, their mind spitting out images of Reapers cutting swaths through their brains with a scythe. Still, the computer seeing value in Nihlus's empathy and suffering gave them another clue. Being interested in emotion made sense if the Reapers' question had something to do with what made organic life tick. Empathy, remorse, guilt … none of them were anything that they'd seen demonstrated, even by Legion.

Logical processes dictated taking action and getting a result. If the result was not the one intended, then move on to another action and another result. Even the geth, for all their benevolent intent, did not regret the deaths of the quarians. They had not desired them either, but the fact remained. The death of their creators was an unfortunate outcome of reasoned, logical action.

Still, nothing that they'd seen from Sovereign suggested that the Reapers wanted to feel regret or remorse. She doubted their question was, "Why don't we feel bad about wiping out billions of
organics?"

It went so much deeper than that. It had to. Hundreds of thousands of years and trillions of lives spent searching for an answer necessitated it being a vast and important question … something to shake foundations and remake galaxies.

Didn't it?

...

Trying to look nonchalant as she searched the crowd, Shepard threw a vague smile and nod at the asari diplomat. Sweet baby Jesus, how long could anyone talk about trade agreements for prefab staircases? Second by second, resisting the urge to grab the nais and shake her until gumballs fell out grew more difficult. Restrained only by the knowledge that Udina would break her nose again if she caused a diplomatic incident at his big coming out party, Shepard resisted. Barely.

She shifted a little, wriggling inside her very beautiful, very uncomfortable dress. Just after three, her hotel doorman had called to let her know that she had a party on the way up. Unlike the more interesting sorts of parties, that one consisted of wardrobe, hair, and makeup. Three hours later, they'd plastered a face over her real one, she couldn't breathe or walk, going to the bathroom seemed a dubious, multiperson exercise, and her hair … well, actually, her hair looked fantastic.

Her heart gave an altogether too school-girlish flutter as she spotted him halfway across the hall. Not that doing so had proven all that difficult once Councilor Sparatus arrived. The bodyguard who preceded the turian councillor in the door threw off tidal waves of disgust and disdain that could scuttle a dreadnought and very effectively cut a swath through the crowd. At one point, she'd seen Sparatus tell the Spectre to back off, no doubt because everyone was too terrified to approach.

The wide clearing around the turian councillor had made it easy to keep track of the reason she'd let Udina talk her into attending his schmooze-fest. Unlike his compatriot, Council Spectre Nihlus Kryik simply stood back, a grin of what Shepard figured was sarcastic amusement on his face.

She did her best not to stare, but she couldn't help it. Something had happened about a year before when she saw him on the news: he'd just brought down a small time slaving operation, but the scumbag slaver had blown the place, killing all his slaves but for one child. Of course, Kryik killed the bastard, but when the Spectre walked out of the flames and smoke holding that little girl, she could see in his eyes that his victory felt like anything but. She knew how that felt.

Shepard realized that she'd been staring about the same time she realized that the Spectre was looking right back, and then someone sucked all the air out of the banquet hall. Blessed Enkindlers, had her dress gotten a lot tighter all of a sudden? She reached out a hand to steady herself against a planter. Yeah, it had to be the dress. Damn dress. Who wore corsets in the twenty second century?

"Are you all right, dear?" The asari slid a hand up Shepard's arm far too personally.

Shepard drew back as her skin slithered under the unwanted touch. Damn, she hated crowds … anything public really. Far too many people liked to touch. Except salarians. They seemed to abhor being touched as much as she did. Forcing a polite smile onto her face, she replied, "Fine, thank you. I think my wardrobe person just pulled my stays a little too tight. Excuse me, please."

Pretending not to see the glare that Udina shot at her, she turned and headed for the bar.

Udina reached out and snagged her wrist in his hand. "Don't get drunk. You're representing humanity here tonight, Jane."
She tried to snatch her arm back, but he held on. "I don't drink, Ambassador." She laid heavy emphasis on the man's brand new title. Glancing down at his hand shackling her arm, she raised her eyebrows. "Do you want to start a brawl right here, right now? I've got my Ka-BarTM, I can slit the ties on this corset-from-hell and be on you like a rabid tick in under ten seconds."

Udina's answering sigh came out more like a growl, but he released her.

"Thank you, Ambassador." She moved to step past him, then paused. "And the name is Shepard." As she walked away, she glanced over her right shoulder at the august figure of the Spectre. Just before she looked away, he turned and caught her gaze. "Damn, damn, damn." Spinning back toward her destination, she winced at the heat rising up her mostly uncovered chest and neck.

"Button it down, Shepard," she muttered to herself. "You're not fourteen and giggling about the cute boy in class." Smiling and nodding, she made her way through the massive crowd of complete strangers. She wished Anderson had been able to be her plus one, but no, he had to chase bad guys in the traverse. Right then, she'd give just about anything to be out there with him. Pirates raiding colonies were her wheelhouse, not too-tight dresses and polite bullshit traded with strangers.

She pressed between an asari loading up a massive tray of alcohol and a sallow faced salarian who looked three sheets to the wind. "Orange soda, please?"

Someone stepped in next to her when the asari left. "Turian brandy, double, neat, please. No, wait, make that two."

Looking up, Shepard felt all the air abandon her again and snapped her eyes back to her drink. After thirty seconds, as the Spectre shifted to lean a hip against the bar, Shepard let out a soft growl. The perfect opportunity couldn't knock much harder without giving her a concussion, and she just stood there like a moron.

You are such a coward, Janey. I thought you came to this stupid party to meet him. Now he's standing right beside you and you're hiding. Woman up. Gird your loins, and talk to him!

Right. Plastering on her best diplomatic smile, she turned and looked up. "Hello. Spectre Nihlus Kryik, right?" She held out her hand. When the turian just nodded, Shepard gave him what felt like a hugely dopey grin and said, "Lt. Commander Jane Shepard, pleased to meet you." She waited a second for him to grasp her wrist, then shrugged and let it drop.

Nodding over at the Spectre glowering behind Sparatus, she tried again, saying, "I'm glad to see the council spending the galaxy's credits so well."

"P-politicians," the Spectre replied, his shoulders popping in a small shrug. He stared for another second, then looked away as the bartender placed the drinks in front of him.

"Shepard!"

She turned toward the call, an embarrassed wince greeting Udina's beckoning hand flick. Well, at least he called her Shepard. She was surprised he didn't snap his fingers and point to his heel. Walkies! Heel. Now sit. Good girl. That's right, whoosa good girl. Shepard's a good girl. Yes, she is. Yes, she is.

She glanced up, not wanting to see the same, disdainful sort of amusement in his eyes for her as she said, "It was a pleasure meeting you, Spectre Kryik. Enjoy the rest of the party." Disappointment reached down and pulled a sigh from deep in her gut. Damn, she'd been looking forward to coaxing more than a word out of the Spectre, having a drink, maybe even asking him to dance. Giving him
a thin-lipped smile, she turned to walk away. Of course, she would develop the galaxy's most ridiculous crush on the galaxy's least talkative Spectre.

Then again, it might not have been awkwardness holding his tongue. He might not care for humans. Maybe he'd been focusing on not letting her see how grossed out she made him. That wasn't his reputation, but of course, reputations were mostly bullshit. Hers being a case in point.

She groaned when she saw Udina talking to Din Korlak. That volus spent every conversation begging to be the first de-suited volus drop kicked into orbit. Oh ... to hell with Udina, she'd spent two hours kissing every ass he pointed to. Time to cut her losses and get out of the silk torture device. Maybe she'd even take her heels off and walk back to her hotel, enjoy the presidium a little. She checked her chrono. It was only eight, she could visit Martin, take the kid out for dessert or something.

*But not before loosening the corset, right ... Janey?*

Hell no. The corset was a goner as soon as she found a bathroom.

"Lt. Commander?" Talons brushed her shoulder, yanking her out of her self-pity with a start.

She spun. "Spectre Kryik." A nervous smile crept across her face as her skin flushed hot. "Hello again."

"Hello." He cleared his throat. "And, please, call me Nihlus." His mandibles fluttered, spreading ever so slightly: a pleased smile if she remembered her xenopology courses correctly. "Would you like to ..." He cleared his throat and shuffled from foot to foot a little as if uncertain whether to stay or return to Sparatus. "I mean, I have to take the councillor his drink, but then ... um ... would you care to dance?"

Her nervous smile spread, claiming her entire mouth as its territory. Thank god her ensemble d' torture included platform heels. She'd yet to find a way to dance face to chest with someone without looking like an idiot. After a couple more heartbeats of smiling at him like a mindless doorknob, she nodded, a slightly spastic jerk of her head.

"I'd like that," she managed to squeak. A couple more seconds of staring at one another passed before she nodded to the glass in his hand. "I'll be here."

Heart pounding, dress squeezing her diaphragm hard enough to make her dizzy, Shepard watched him cross the hall and pass Sparatus his drink. They spoke a few words, then the other Spectre looked as though someone had shoved a stick of dynamite up his ass and lit the fuse, and Sparatus started making decidedly negative head gestures. Her grin widened as Nihlus gave the turian councillor a sharp nod and turned back toward her.

"Well, how about that?" she whispered, suddenly aware that she was staring again, this time with a massively stupid grin on her face.

Nihlus returned and held an arm out, ushering her toward the dance floor. Shepard walked ahead of him, all of her senses peaked and focused on the torin walking behind her. Her mind and heart raced, adding to the out-of-body experience. She must be insane. What was she thinking having a stupid, schoolgirl crush on a turian Spectre? And not just any turian Spectre, one of the council's top operatives. At the very best, he was just being nice to a pathetic fangirl ... one of thousands.

Then he stepped in front of her, one hand slipping around her waist as he held the other out, waiting for her to take it. When she placed her fingers in his, his other hand slipped further around
to rest in the small of her back.

After taking two steps, his face lowered into a perplexed scowl. "Are you expecting trouble tonight, Lt. Commander?" he asked, bending down to whisper.

Shepard laughed, her nerves disappearing like mist beneath a rising sun. "Always, Spectre Kryik. Always." Looking up at him, she tilted her head a little. "And I may have to cut my way out of this dress."

His talons traced the shape of the scabbard. "Talon?" He cocked a brow plate.

"Close, the Alliance Marines' version of it. It's a Ka-BarTM." She grinned. "I could pull it out and show you, but I'm not liking the idea of your scary-looking friend over there throwing me to the floor and stomping me to bits."

The Spectre looked thoughtful for a second, then nodded. "Saren would probably just shoot you if he had an open shot."

She watched his face, waiting for any sign that he was joking. None showed themselves. Damn.

He guided her expertly across the floor for a few moments, then bent down. "Have you figured it out yet?" he asked, his breath hot against her ear as he whispered.

Shepard frowned and pulled back a little. "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"Lt. Commander Shepard!" Udina appeared in her face, his voice hushed, but as sharp as the blade hidden in the small of her back. "I brought you here to sell confidence in the Alliance's colonial affairs, not to hit on turian Spectres."

Shepard opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, the turian Spectre did.

"I believe the Lt. Commander is an N3 operative and an officer in the Alliance Navy, not a salesperson," Kryik said, equally hushed and just as sharp. "And to clear things up for you, the turian Spectre is hitting on her. Have a wonderful night, Ambassador."

Udina stuttered for a moment, then turned and walked away.

Shepard let out a shocked laugh. "I can't believe you said that to him." As the shock faded, realization hit and she pulled back a little even as she looked up into Nihlus's eyes. "You know who I am?"

The Spectre smiled and nodded. "I took notice after Elysium."

Shepard winced. Sweet baby Jesus, not Elysium. And things looked so promising.

"I know how a holding action like that can grind you down," he said, his eyes dark and shuttered. "Civilians panicking and dying." He shook his head. "Then they drag you out of that hell and stick you in front of cameras and slap you on the back like you're supposed to forget about all the innocent corpses behind you."

She squeezed the hand gripping hers. Of course he knew the hell that had followed her off of Elysium. He lived it, unlike the crowd of fancy suits and tight hairdos. Wasn't that what had attracted her to him in the first place?

"Yeah, pretty much. Those kids ... ." She shook her head and stepped in a touch closer, liking the
energy that came off him. It had a fierce sort of heat.

"I heard that you got the Alliance to pay their medical bills and for prosthetics." As he spoke, the music changed, but he just continued dancing, changing the cadence to match the new rhythm.

She frowned. "You spying on me, Spectre Kryik?" Her heart kept skipping beats, and then racing, then slowing down. Taking notice of her for Elysium was one thing, but keeping tabs close enough to know where she'd sent Martin and the others … that was quite another."

He chuckled and shook his head, meeting her eyes with an open gaze. "No, nothing so sinister. You captured my attention … " He bobbed his head a little, looking sheepish. "... and held it."

"Oh." The blush began to burn up from her bodice again. "I … ." Her words disappeared, her mind going completely blank as he eased her a little closer. Who would have thought that the Spectre she'd been crushing on had been crushing on her?

They danced for a couple of hours, staying past when people began to trickle out. Sparatus called him over, no doubt to set a time for his official dressing down, then left. Finally, the Spectre stepped back and held out his arm.

"May I escort you home?" he asked, his mandibles giving a hard, quick flick.

She grinned and, using his arm as balance, slipped off her shoes. "You're not thinking that you're going to get lucky, are you, Spectre Kryik?" She chuckled at his expression of mock horror. "I'm not some Spectre groupie."

He sighed and shook his head. "Most of those come at me using my given name, and I can't seem to convince you to use it, Lt. Commander." Once she had her shoes in hand, he led her toward the exit and the elevator leading down the tower to the presidium.

"Says the torin who has called me Lt. Commander all night." She grinned and let out a long breath. "Sweet baby Jesus … fine. Nihlus." She stepped into the elevator, ignoring the humans giving her strange looks for walking on the arm of a turian. Or … maybe, they were all just jealous.

The presidium had been sent into night cycle, the pristine streets and park areas in a sort of perpetual twilight, and she chuckled. One couldn't have asked for a more peaceful or romantic setting, at least on the Citadel. They walked in silence for nearly a block before he stopped next to one of the huge fountains jetting out of the lake and turned to face her.

"Do you remember how this night actually went?" he asked, taking her hands.

Shepard frowned. "How it actually went?" The question set off a small charge of explosives in her gut, her stomach dropping in a sick, airless swoop. Maybe it was just the dress making her feel so lightheaded and nauseous. Maybe. But no. Recognition burst through the walls separating the different parts of her. She could feel her body, frozen in a pod of the amber chia. She knew she was standing in a memory, but … one that . . . .

Shaking her head, she tried to back away from Nihlus, but he held tight to her hands, drawing her back in. Her scowl deepened. "This isn't the way that night went." She looked up into his eyes. "You didn't talk to me, and Udina called, and I saw he was with Din Korlak, so I ditched the party and took Martin out for ice cream."

Nihlus nodded, his mandibles sweeping in and out ever so slightly. "Yes, and I went back to stand behind Sparatus for another two hours, kicking myself the whole time for not being brave enough to go after you." Stepping into her, he lifted a hand to cradle her jaw. "Whatever the computer's
operator did, it allowed us to change the memory. We're in the same memory together. Us, not some remembered image of us." Smiling he bent to touch his brow to hers.

"But why?" She closed her eyes, her mind racing, trying to solve the damned riddle of the machine, and why Nihlus would change the past.

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Nihlus finished drinking from her offered water bottle, nodded, and grunted a pissy sort of thank you at her as he passed it back. She placed it on top of the pile of mats and turned to face him. He wasn't finished yet, she could see that plain as day. The Spectre took a breath. "I have no idea what to think, Shepard. All you do is run that damned mouth too fast for me to know what's real."

Shepard rolled onto the balls of her feet, putting up her guard as he stepped back in, throwing hard, fast blows. Try as she might to keep up, he pressed her on her weak side enough to throw her off. Trying for distraction, she quipped, "You got something better for me to do with my mouth?"

He laughed and leaped into the opening. "Is this your turn to double dog dare me into having sex with you, Shepard?" Grabbing her right arm he tossed her over his hip, flipping her onto her ass. He dropped to one knee, his elbows on either side of her chest, keel pressed into her ribs. "I think you should stop in and see Dr. Chakwas before we leave the ship. That shoulder and knee are still giving you trouble."

Shepard leaned up as far as she could, wedging her elbows underneath her. "What are you doing, Nihlus?" A tight lipped smile pulled her mouth taut as she stared into his eyes. "This isn't the way this happened."

He nodded and lifted his weight off her chest. Sitting with one leg raised, he rested his elbow on his knee. His other leg sat alongside her thigh, the contact almost electric, like static building up as she reached out to touch something.

A long sigh marched out, his subvocals strong enough to lift the hair on the back of her neck. "I had a chance that day to be kind … to be the torin I always hoped I'd be when we finally had a chance to know one another. You'd spent days taking care of me, keeping me from imploding, and I let jealousy win. I was unconscionably cruel to you, Jane, and I hate that I said those things." He helped her sit up, his hands resting heavily on her shoulders. "If this machine is going to turn us into paste like the processing plants in Merol's memories … what does it hurt to make up these moments … to both of us?"

Shepard reached up and slid her hand around the back of his neck. "Because we don't need to make this up, Nihlus. No matter if it took us a little longer to get to where we are now, we're here, and we both grew up a little along the way." Her thin smile broadened as it warmed. "And … because of this moment, Garrus came into my room and doctored my hands after Therum, and sewed the most beautiful seed in my heart. I can't regret that, and I wouldn't change it for anything."

Smiling, she leaned in and touched her brow to his, her love for him wrapping around them both. "Life is too short for regret, Nihlus. We're good, aren't we? Finally working on being friends and
partners?" Closing her eyes, she relaxed into him. "If we'd started something this day, it would have blown up in our faces the moment you wanted to get intimate. Yes, I was crushing on you, but I wasn't ready for anything reciprocated." She kissed his brow, then pulled away. "It worked out for the best."

He nodded, but despite the machine loosening its hold on them, she could still feel everything he felt ... how much he hoped for their relationship: forever and family.


(A-N: The moral of the story is … never let these two near tech at the same time. Ever. Thanks as always to those who read and those who check in to say howdy. Writers are a strange bunch, generally. There are exceptions of course, but mostly we are an easily discouraged bunch, myself in particular. Soooo hearing from people really does help keep me going. And I luv yah for it. ALL the hugs, even if you're all NOOOOOO! Not the hugs! See yah Monday.)
Chapter Summary

Garrus sat quietly, rereading through the few messages Shepard had sent before the Ypres reached Thessia. He'd expected to hear something from her or Nihlus by then, but he trusted them to keep one another alive. He let out a soft chuff. Yeah, they'd look out for one another right after discovering all sorts of things to need being saved from.

He closed his eyes and walled away the sick twist and yank in his gut. A day out of touch was nothing, and he needed all his attention on the mission at hand. When Shepard returned from Thessia, he hoped to welcome her with the best homecoming gift of all time. His heart thumped hard and quick against his keel as reality washed over him again. Shepard was coming home to him. She wasn't gone, not a prisoner in his dreams, but away on a mission, and at the end, she'd come back and wrap her arms around him, lips warm and soft against his mouth.

**Hyalus** - A particular type of spun glass used to make beautiful figures. It is always the natural blue/grey of the sand from which it is fired, although threads of precious metals are frequently spun and worked into the glass.

**Numas** - Ancient turian coin that was the base unit of their monetary system before they adopted the galactic currency of credits.

**Buratrum** - The realm of the spirits of dishonourable association.

**Morumplacus** - Restless spirit, undead, ghoul.

**Hideth Turram** - Popular sport of turian origin. (full explanation at end)

37 Days ASR

"Thanks for helping talk the hierarchy into assisting with this mission, Adrien." Try as he might to hide his amusement, Garrus's mandibles couldn't help but flick, betraying him. Primarch Fedorian had spent the entire QEC conference glaring at the two generals. Near as Garrus could figure, the primarch had alternated between trying to figure out how badly an alliance between Victus and Garrus would throw the galactic political balance off-kilter and attempting to fill them both with lead using the power of his mind.

As the conference went on, Garrus's gut had tied itself in a tighter and tighter knot. He didn't dare strip Omega so bare so soon after the attack, but the intel he'd received on Krellid's operation listed a defense force of hundreds. If they wanted to avoid civilian casualties, they needed company strength strike teams.

Just when he thought Fedorian was going to tell them where to shove their request, Garrus's father stepped in. Fedorian and Herros had been friends for decades, having served together during their youth. When Herros confirmed the intel, stressing all the same points Garrus had, the primarch had stopped looking petulant, exchanging it for thoughtful. At least he trusted and respected Herros's word. End result, distrustful as he might be of Victus and Garrus, Fedorian agreed to lend two
 turian strike teams to taking down the slaver holding Lucille Shepard.

"Don't thank me. Thank my hyalus tongue," Adrien joked, "it glitters with platinum filaments and riches can't help but pour from it." He chuckled and gave Garrus a jaunty sort of salute. "Did you see the way Fedorian was looking at us? Every single disaster he imagined we could create working together appeared on his face as they occurred to him. I'm not sure if I'm glad Hierarch Vakarian was able to talk him around or not. I detest crawling around dark, filthy mining tunnels." The general's smile faded as he leaned forward, talons hovering over the disconnect control. "Time to go. Good luck, General. We'll see you on the other side."

"Good hunting, Adrien." Garrus returned the salute, grateful to the council for that one great thing that had grown out of their treachery on Tuchanka. "Vakarian, out." He closed the channel, then checked the chrono on the console. An hour until drop, and he and Martin still needed to shuttle over to the Normandy. Taking a page from Shepard's book, Garrus intended to land the frigate right on the slaver's front step. Nothing like a couple of ship-mounted mass accelerator cannons aimed at your door to make an impression.

As he left the comm room, headed for the elevator, his plans cycled through his mind on a constant loop. Five strike teams attacking five targets all timed to the second … it had taken a hell of a lot of planning, and any tiny thing could throw it off.

To his mind, the weakest link in the plan was Kandros and the third strike team. He hadn't had enough time to get to know her or her competence as a leader, but when faced with taking out the slaver's compound that included a public sales venue, brothel, and gambling facility, she'd come up with an inspired plan. It was a complex area filled with innocent civilians and slaves, and though her plan to set up a barrier and blanket gas the entire block needed a solid tactical infiltration team and split second timing, it was their best shot to avoid collateral casualties or escaping slavers.

He, Anderson, Martin, and a team including Normandy and Archangel personnel were taking down the slaver's headquarters while the other, much larger, Archangel team secured the breeding facility. Garrus's C-Sec contact claimed that this single bastard was responsible for the birth and subsequent sale of over eight hundred slaves a cycle. Some of them were raised and sent to his mines or brothels as soon as they were big enough to work. Most were sold at auction on Khar'Shan.

Leir'Darak Krellid's eighteen cycle career included no fewer than twenty-three raids on human colonies, thirteen on turian colonies, the murder of fourteen C-Sec officers, and two Spectres. Time had come to end it, and end it they would thanks to Lucille's intel.

"General Vakarian?"

He stopped and looked up, realizing that he'd passed through the computer room to the guest compartments. A quick smile and nod greeted the young reporter. "Miss Wong." With deft talons, he fixed the bad seals on her armour. "Ready to do your first combat reporting?" He nodded for her to fall in.

"Yes, sir. I'm probably going to throw up in my helmet, though." She jogged next to him to keep up. "I was really happy with our previous arrangement. You went into the scary places with bullets and brought me back a story and a souvenir."

Garrus chuckled, but it faded as he nodded. "This bastard and his network have been plaguing human and turian colonies for eighteen cycles. There isn't a clean politician in either government who isn't going to be grateful he's gone." He clenched his teeth hard enough that his jaw protested. "Not to mention all the families who have lost loved ones."
"And might get them back?" Her eyes shone up at him, so earnest that it made his jaw ache.

"We can hope so, but let's not get ahead of ourselves." The fear in Lucille Shepard's eyes when they'd met burned in a pool of hot, churning acid in his gut. Nineteen days had passed since he let her return to face punishment and imprisonment. "Either way, I want the galaxy see Archangel, the hierarchy, and the Alliance working together to take him down."

Wong nodded and opened her omnitool, setting it to record through the cameras on her helmet and armour. "General Vakarian, you've orchestrated an intricate plan to bring down an entire slaving empire in a single strike, how do you like your chances? Will today see the end of an organization that has terrorized humanity's colonies for well over a decade?"

He stopped and looked into the camera. "Today, I hope to offer everyone who has suffered at the hands of Leir'Darak Krellid's organization some small measure of closure. In an act of unprecedented cooperation, the turian hierarchy and Systems Alliance have joined Archangel in executing today's raid. It's my sincere hope that it's a sign of things to come as the galaxy moves toward facing the Reaper threat."

She grinned and turned off the camera. "Can't miss any chance to beat the old Reaper drum, eh, sir?" Stuffing her helmet under her arm, she started running alongside again, puffing a little when he stopped at the elevator, no doubt due to the extra weight of her armour.

"Have you given any thought to running the PR and fundraising on my Sanctuary project?" he asked, feeling a combination of admiration and affection as he watched the young woman decide how to answer his question. Two cycles earlier, she'd been inexperienced, eager, and far too reckless, but passionate about making Shepard's senseless death count for something. In the intervening cycles, she'd lost the inexperience thanks to Archangel's guiding hands, her reckless passion tempered a little.

Emily shrugged. "It would be a huge undertaking, General. There have to be people better suited to the task."

Garrus studied her for a moment. Although he might be reading her wrong, she seemed excited, but intimidated, and for that, he couldn't blame her. It would be cycles of hard work and organization. The elevator arrived and opened. "You've had as experienced a staff as we could find for you, but like it or not, Miss Wong, you have become the credible face of the Reaper threat." He chuckled. "The rest of us are considered lunatics bent on bringing down galactic civilization."

Once he sent the elevator to the shuttle bay, Garrus turned to face the reporter head on. "The Illusive Man was right the day he told me that we're going to have a huge upsurge in recruits as soon as the Reaper threat manifests." He shrugged and forced all the logistics of that to the back of his mind. "Their price for service is going to be the safety of their families, so we're going to need somewhere to keep thousands of people as out of the way of the war as possible."

She took a deep breath and shook her head. "I just … ."

Gripping her shoulder, he gave her an encouraging smile. "I believe you're perfect for the job, but if you decide it's not for you, fair enough." He stepped back as the carriage stopped on the crew deck, the door opening to let Martin on. The young man was carrying on a thousand klick an hour discussion with Emily Johnson. The moment the young engineer saw Garrus, she grinned and turned bright pink.

"Hello, Engineer Johnson," the general said, smiling. "Glad to see you made it back from Tuchanka in good form."
She nodded, as bashful as she was animated the moment before. "Yes, sir. Thanks to you and Instructors Weaver and Kandros."

"Thanks to you as well, Engineer," he corrected. He glanced over at Martin. "That sounded like an ardent discussion."

The kid grinned and gave his head an enthusiastic shake. "Em is a genius with robotics. We were discussing ways to improve the battle frames. If turned loose on the armour, she'd turn us into tanks with nearly equivalent fire power."

Garrus's brow plates lifted. "Then, by all means, turn her loose. It certainly wouldn't hurt to have different classes of the frame armour. Some soldiers will want to stick to the lighter version, but others, like Martin, can never get enough firepower."

The elevator stopped on the engineering deck. As the doors opened, Johnson gave them all a bright smile, ending with Martin. "I'll talk to you when you get back. Good luck, Martin … General."

The rest of the ride down to the shuttle passed silently. Garrus could see Martin clicking over from techie to soldier, not that the one existed to the exclusion of other. Emily Wong busied herself all the way over to the Normandy sending messages, setting up all the last minute details for the live feed once they made planet fall.

Garrus sat quietly, rereading through the few messages Shepard had sent before the Ypres reached Thessia. He'd expected to hear something from her or Nihlus by then, but he trusted them to keep one another alive. He let out a soft chuff. Yeah, they'd look out for one another right after discovering all sorts of things to need being saved from.

He closed his eyes and walled away the sick twist and yank in his gut. A day out of touch was nothing, and he needed all his attention on the mission at hand. When Shepard returned from Thessia, he hoped to welcome her with the best homecoming gift of all time. His heart thumped hard and quick against his keel as reality washed over him again. Shepard was coming home to him. She wasn't gone, not a prisoner in his dreams, but away on a mission, and at the end, she'd come back and wrap her arms around him, lips warm and soft against his mouth.

A pleasant, but altogether inappropriate heat settled in behind his plates. Clearing his throat, he shifted in his seat and closed his omnitool, unable to curb the gratitude that set his mandibles fluttering and balled up in his throat. He'd been given his future back … a future filled with warm kisses and making love and curling up with her arms around him, her breath caressing his neck.

"Oh, stop it," Martin grumbled, a wide grin belying his tone. "Wipe that smug, stupid, 'I got my girlfriend back' smile off your face." He kicked Garrus's shin. "Show some respect for those of us who haven't found one yet and focus on the mission."

Despite muttering a few choice words under his breath, Garrus kept the smile. Landing on Lorek would wipe it away soon enough. When the shuttle set down on the Normandy's deck, he jumped up and strode to the hatch, pushing it open, his mind focusing on the business at hand.

"Haven't heard from Kandros," he muttered under his breath as Martin stepped up beside him. "The port authorities in Jalnor could be giving her a hard time." Running a mission on a hegemony controlled world constituted a major, almost unacceptable, risk. The batarians refused to admit slaving was a huge source of revenue for their flailing empire, and they really weren't prepared to lose that income. To keep their businesses operating and the eyes of the law turned the other way, slavers like Krellid paid millions in kickbacks to local and hegemony politicians.
However, the batarian government's denial of sapient trafficking and its offshoots—prostitution, illegal gambling, and smuggling—would also allow Garrus to bring the bastard down; no official protests or reports filed with the authorities. They'd quietly and dangerously hunker down and wait for a chance to exact retribution.

"Nyreen is smooth," Martin answered. "She'll get them in there, General. Now whether or not she manages to get a barrier up over that block, deploys the gas, and takes out the slavers without the authorities closing in … ." He shrugged. "But we've always known that hers was the trickiest leg of this op."

Garrus's omnitool pinged, but when he opened his messages it was Adrien letting him know that both of the turian teams were in shuttles, on their way to their separate mining operations. The teams had started a friendly war over which one attacked the island closer to the sunward hot-polar region and which attacked the island at the terminator into the dark cold-polar region. Adrien resorted to flipping a numas in order to settle it, then promptly assigned himself to the hot-polar team.

"It's good to be the general," Martin said when Garrus showed him the message. The kid laughed and headed over to talk to Kaidan and the other Marines.

Garrus nodded. Being the general did have its moments and its perks. He looked up when the elevator pinged, then strode across the cargo bay to meet Anderson as the captain stepped out.

"Been awhile since I strapped on the old armour," Anderson grumbled, wriggling a little. "I don't remember it being this heavy ... or this tight." A warm grin belied the complaints, and he held out a hand to grip Garrus's elbow in greeting.

The step up in familiarity from wrist to elbow threw the general off stride for a moment, but he supposed that with Shepard back, Anderson saw the writing on the wall. He liked it, he decided, and gripped the captain's elbow in return.

"Must be the armour," Garrus deadpanned. "You know how it shrinks in storage."

Anderson chuckled and slapped his shoulder. "Been sitting at desks too long," he announced. "It'll be good to stretch my legs."

Garrus nodded, falling in beside the captain, a sudden feeling of profound connection spreading through him like warm water under his plates. He'd listened to Shepard talk about the feeling as a golden web that tied her to people, but he'd never understood until that moment. He loved his people … even Martin, spirits save him … but the new feeling … it felt as if they'd moved in to live just under his hide. He shook his head, pulling himself back. Mission, no word from Kandros, getting the slaves out alive, that was where he needed to focus his attention.

Nyreen reported in ten minutes later. It took a little bribery but she got her team on the ground and they were moving in to place the emitters. Every ten minutes, the teams reported in, green across the board. Then the Normandy began her descent, the shuttles containing the second team ready and waiting in her hold.

Garrus headed up to stand behind Joker, watching space give way to a rolling torrent of sky and seemingly endless ocean below. A rare jewel—a garden world in orbit of a red dwarf star—Lorek came with its share of issues including being tidally locked to Fathar, and a geography that allowed for a great deal of underworld activity. The whole habitable surface being a widespread mass of islands made policing nearly impossible. But, it was a beautiful world.
Joker brought them down quick and steep then skimmed the ocean surface, handling the frigate expertly through the turbulence, another of Lorek's quirks. Being a tidally locked ocean world made for ferocious thunderstorms along the terminus from hot to cold.

"We'll be on top of them before they see us in this soup," Joker called over his shoulder. "One second our slaver will be sitting at dinner twirling his moustache and saying, 'Oh ho! What a fine life of villainy I lead,' the next he'll be screaming and running."

"Do batarians even grow mustaches?" Garrus laughed then patted the pilot's shoulder. "Good work, Joker."

"Better get down there, General." The pilot grinned. "Don't want to miss the screaming and running."

"True. And when you put it that way, I think Shepard just might be pissed off she missed it." He turned and strode the length of the CIC.

Garrus stepped down off the Normandy's ramp into chaos. Thunder crashed, the weather twisting through the weapon fire, and the rain drove at them sideways, lashed by a wind that gusted over eighty kilometres an hour. No, Shepard definitely wouldn't be angry for missing out; she refused to wear a helmet in survivable conditions and hated rain running down into her armour.

"Let me guess," Martin hollered over the wind, "you didn't check the weather report?" The kid's omnitool glowed as he lowered his armour's center of gravity and mass effect field. Once anchored a little better, he sent a handful of rockets sizzling through the weather toward one of eight guard towers. Two hit, the others impacting the tall, solid concrete wall.

Movement through the thick canopy of trees alerted Garrus to the second team's shuttled landing on the other side of the wall. C-Sec drone recon sweeps had shown the wall was far too well guarded and solid to breach quickly. While they bashed at the two metre thick concrete, Krellid's guards could be killing every slave in the breeding compound, so they'd decided right from the start to land a second team inside the wall.

"It said eighty percent chance of hurricanes; I decided to play the odds," Garrus shouted back as he dug in, pushing against the wind toward a garden planter. He needed to get into cover and help take out those towers. Wind that strong played bloody havoc with rockets. Of course, gusts that strong didn't make for ideal sniper conditions either. Throwing himself toward the leeward side of the planter, he rolled up, his back shoved against the concrete. Two quick breaths, he spun, taking a knee and using the edge of the box to steady his rifle.

Five shots brought down the two guards in the closest tower, buying the team a slight reprieve as they floundered, trying to find cover from both the wind and bullets. Garrus pulled his rifle in, wiped both ends of the scope to clear away the fog, and shifted to line up the second tower. Further away, the wind gusts threw off his aim a little, not because it pushed the rounds—they were far too small and moved far too quickly—but because it shoved both him and his rifle.

Seven shots to clear the tower that time, and meanwhile Martin and the others had cleared two more.

Anderson hit the planter next to Garrus, huffing a little. "Definitely too much time behind a desk."

"Need to move inside," Garrus called, reaching up to his radio. "Weaver, beta squad … finish clearing the towers. Alpha squad, front door with me. Charlie, rear door with Anderson." He spun out of cover, and leaning at a nearly forty degree angle, pushed toward the front door. Luckily, the
mansion had a fancy porch structure that effectively blocked both wind and bullets, allowing him to bypass the door lock in relative peace.

Kaidan took cover on the other side of the door, nodding his readiness. As soon as the door opened, he ducked out, his Vindicator sweeping the entry before he stepped through. Garrus pulled his sidearm, lifting the Phalanx into high ready, opting for ease of movement over rapid firepower.

Two guards swung out and opened fire from behind a pair of krogan statues on either side of the corridor, falling before they even corrected their aim enough to do damage. Garrus winced as stray bullets dug into the statues; Lucille was going to kick their asses for damaging the art.

And priceless art and furnishings littered the entire home, filling shelves and covering tables. Larger pieces stood in corners, along hallways, and flanked windows. The squad made their way through a marble-floored parlour and a dining room replete with enough gold trim to tip the decor from rich to gaudy. Between the two rooms, the contents could fund opening Archangel's third building on their own.

"You could fund a small colony," Kaidan said, voice twisting with disgust.

Every empty room and token pair of guards hammered another six inch spike straight into Garrus's spine until a frustrated scream climbed up to dangle from the back of his tongue. Damn their luck. Did every mission have to end up being a trap?

He took cover next to a door, and nodded to Kaidan. The door opened, revealing a very large, serviceable kitchen, the room deserted. Kaidan sidestepped toward a stove and peered under a lid. Steam billowed, releasing the scent of roasting meat. The appliances had all been turned off, but moments before.

He returned to his position at Garrus's ten. "He's pulled all the household staff back to use them as hostages."

Garrus nodded, but the snapping eels slithering through his guts said something else, something a lot worse than that. He raised a hand to his ear. "All teams report in. Anderson? Martin?"

Martin's voice came back, his voice muffled and distorted by heavy interference. "Towers cleared. Hear heavy fire from inside the breeding compound. Moving toward your position through the side door. Over."

Garrus paced a little, half his attention on puzzling out the reason for the eels chomping at his guts. "Anderson?"

"On our way to you now. Met a little resistance … not enough," the captain said, suspicion treading heavily through the words. "Something's off. Feels like there's a piano hanging over our heads."

Garrus scowled, that image making no sense, but then pushed it aside. "Roger that. We'll wait here until—"

"Emergency transmission from Strike Team Challir. Team ambushed. Unknown enemy." The comm officer's voice came through as badly distorted as Martin's, but even through the static and broken comms, Garrus could hear the fear in the young officer's subvocals.

"Dear spirits, what are these things?" Another voice, just as young and just as terrified.

"General Victus is down. Retreat back to the last cross tunnel."
"Whatever these things are, they're spit straight from the pits of buratrum!"

"There's hundreds of them."

Calls for help and general chatter swelled for a moment, then Victus's voice broke through the rest. "Enough! Squad leaders get control of your people! Essential comms only! Pull back to the last cross tunnel. Set up portable cover." He paused, a soft grunt making it over the interference, and the eels started to gnaw their way out as Garrus heard the pain resonating through his friend's voice. "Garrus, if you're reading this, ambush two hundred and fifty meters into the mine. Unknown aliens. Bipedal … insectile … huge hea—"

The channel died, but the silence lasted only a second.

"General Vakarian, how good of you to visit." Garrus spun toward the voice, his Phalanx bullsyeing an intercom. Damn. The batarian chuckled. "I have some friends who are very eager to meet you. Do come in, but please try not to shoot up too much of my home. Lucille has spent so many cycles dedicated to my collections. It would break her heart to see so much history riddled with bullet holes."

Garrus reached up to his radio even before the bastard stopped talking. "Joker, do you read?"

"Barely," the pilot's voice came through. "Someone's doing a hell of a job messing with comms."

"Ambush. Lock the Normandy down and get her off the ground, and then I need scans of this house and the breeding facility, as detailed as you can get them." He barked the orders as quickly as he could, not trusting the comms to last. "Try to contact the other teams. Warn them that Collectors are waiting for them."

"Understood. I'll get back to you. Joker, out."

Kaidan moved in to stand with his back to Garrus's eight, his assault rifle pointed at the side door. "So, a trap. Any ideas so far?"

Garrus shook his head, but let out the breath he'd been holding, appreciating the Lt. Commander's levity. "Nothing yet, but I'll keep you up to date." He nodded to the rest of the squad then opened his omnitool. "Keep an eye on the exits. Don't shoot our incoming squads."

Sucking in a long breath, he forced himself to focus. Work the problem, just like every other problem. The other teams had experienced leaders who could take care of their own people. Their job hadn't changed, just gotten a little more complicated. He brought up the partial floor plan of the house and overlaid a heat signature scan. As he suspected, the house jammed scans. No slaver worth his shock collars would leave his properties open to scanning, but sometimes inside the building, scans could pick up short range.

Sure enough, when he pulled the scan radius in to twenty metres, faint heat signatures showed Anderson's team heading their way as well as three large masses of heat. He bumped Kaidan with his elbow, pointing to the second of the three … the one he suspected indicated most of their Collector welcoming committee.

"Their fielders." He pointed to a mass of heat in the basement. "The hide." Then the one upstairs at the back of the house, behind what he was sure amounted to at least a platoon of Collector troops. "And what they think is the hide. We need to muddy the field," he whispered. "Right now, they've got the hide at their tower. We need to kick with the spur, bring down their wall."

"Remind me to get a hideth turram manual, so I know what the hell you're talking about." Kaidan
sighed, but then gave a single nod. Whispering so low that Garrus only caught eighty percent of it, he said, "Martin's on his way in. Between us we can probably get into the network, make a mess, maybe get a decent set of blueprints."

"We need to play the slow game, move their fielders into position. Muddy the field enough to capture the hide and get it down field before they know they've lost it." He wished Martin was there. The kid had become fluent in hideth turram strategy as code. Still, from the way Kaidan looked at the scans, Garrus believed he'd captured the shape of the plan if not the specifics.

First goal, take away their advantages by killing the power to the entire place. No power, no jamming.

The side door knocked twice, then three times, then once and cracked open. "Lucky charms," whispered through the crack.

"They're magically delicious," Garrus replied, letting out a small sigh of relief as the wind blew Martin's squad in the door, minus three.

"Collectors for sure, boss," Martin said. "Two injured. The third got them onto the Normandy before Joker pulled out." He turned to headcount his team, then stepped to the door, scrambling the codes. "Locking this down to my code in case we need an exit."

The kitchen door knocked in the same two, three, one pattern and, "Hey, diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle," came through in Anderson's grumpiest grumble.

Martin cackled, then replied, "The cow jumped over the moon." He returned to stand next to Garrus, head craned trying to see the general's omnitool.

"I'm getting you a proper recog, ident, and signal protocol manual," Anderson said as he entered.

Martin shrugged. "Save your credits, Captain. The boss gave me one a year ago. Haven't cracked the cover." When Anderson stepped up beside Garrus, the kid nodded to the omnitool readout. "So, we've got at least two hides on the field, and it's pouring down rain."

Garrus nodded, checking to see if Anderson had understood.

"I've seen enough turram to follow," the captain replied. "Might not be fielders here," he continued, pointing to the center group.

Garrus nodded. "Weaver … Alenko, muddy the field and get a tarp up to cover the team." He turned to Anderson. "The close quarters gives us the ability to spread ourselves thin," he whispered. "Take a team down into the basement. Hopefully there won't be too many guards. Get those slaves out, call in Joker."

"It'll be slow going," Anderson said, his scowl deepening as Garrus saw him starting to work the numbers. "I doubt he's just going to let us walk in." He nodded. "We'll get it done." He turned to his squad, but then stopped and looked back. "He knows who you're here for."

His churning gut not needing that pointed out, Garrus just nodded and swallowed, forcing his gullet back where it belonged. No doubt Lucy would be a shield of last resort, and held either with her master or in a location only the slaving bastard knew. Not bothering to whisper, Garrus turned to face everyone. "We're up against Collectors. We know they have been taking humans and that they work for the Reapers, so expect husks as well as Collector drones and unit commanders. Weaponry unknown, and my intel is fifty thousand cycles old, so err to the side of caution. The protheans had widespread biotic abilities, so expect that possibility."
He shrugged. What else could he say to prepare them? Unknown enemy, sketchy details … all they could do was be careful. "Take your time, keep your eyes open for traps." Darkness fell, deep enough that it took Garrus's eyes a moment to adjust to the dim light coming in the windows. A soft 'whoo-dee-hoo' from Martin told him that the computers were down, a fact that a quick glance at his omnitool confirmed. The scan still showed signs of interference … probably built right into the materials of the house, but they'd cleared up a little.

"Okay," Martin whispered, letting Garrus know they faced a good chance of continued audio surveillance. "We got a decent floor plan out of the computer." He uploaded it to Garrus's omnitool. Emergency lights flickered on, and the kid shrugged. "Oh, and they've got generators for the power."

Garrus let out a long breath. Of course they did, living in a veritable hurricane zone. He nodded to Anderson, slapping the captain on the shoulder as he moved his people out, heading down to the sublevels. When the kitchen cleared out a little, the general turned to organize his team, stopping dead in his tracks when he saw an unfamiliar face staring back at him. It wasn't until the soldier smiled that he realized it was Emily Wong. With the entire mission tilting dangerously toward the pits of buratrum, he'd completely forgotten about the reporter.

His mandibles flicked as she gave him a jaunty salute. "Don't worry, General. I'm getting it all." She tapped the camera on her helmet. "The live feed died as soon as we entered the house, but all systems are go for recorded footage."

Setting his teeth, Garrus nodded. With Collectors coming after them, Wong's footage would be more important than ever, but spirits, he hated putting her on the firing line. If … when they made it out of there, he was going to insist she take the lead on the Sanctuary project and get some old crusty turian and human ex-military to be their field reporter.

He gestured to Kaidan. "Keep her safe." The Lt. Commander nodded and moved in on Wong's six.

"We're going up to the second floor. Check your fire. I doubt the Collectors will use slaves as shields, but neither will they care about killing them in the crossfire. The bastard behind all this will definitely have shields, and very likely the one closest to him will be Captain Shepard's mother." He sent the floorplan to the entire team's omnitools. "If you get separated, make your way back here. Pair off, five metre spread, keep your eyes open. Alenko, Wong, and Leri'Alek take drag. Weaver, point with me."

Jaw clenched, pistol in low ready, Garrus headed through the door into the rear corridor, his eyes sweeping for traps. He didn't expect anything explosive—Krellid loved his things too much—but a whole lot more than explosives could disable his people. Martin moved lightly and easily despite the weight of his armour, his shotgun up and ready.

Pulse pounding out a warning in his head, Garrus climbed the stairs three at a time, taking cover at the top to check the hallway. Staircases were death traps, giving attackers elevation over an effective bottleneck. Pistol leading, the general leaned out—

Darkness … no … not darkness, just blindness. White … everywhere. No air! Garrus's talons leaped to his throat. No air. He sucked in a ragged, heaving breath, inhaling something thick and viscous that sealed his nostrils and mouth even as he choked, struggling to clear it without any air in his lungs. Vomit surged up his esophagus as his body struggled to rid itself of the suffocating goo and sent him rolling onto his hands and knees. Still throwing up, he lunged up off the floor, desperate for air. Frantic talons clawed at his face, trying to clear whatever was blocking his airways and vision.
His hands came away thick with white foam. Foam?

He threw it aside, still sucking in lungfuls of air that did nothing to ease his body's demands for oxygen. Black spots flashing across his vision, he shoved himself up off the floor, climbing the wall hand over hand. Once most of the way up, the air began supplying oxygen again. Gasping in huge gulps of air, he regained enough of his vision to really see his surroundings.

Fire suppressant foam clung to every surface, explaining the lack of oxygen at floor level. Under the rapidly dissolving foam, fire damage blackened the walls, spreading out from hunks of shrapnel buried in the panelling. He spat, cleared his throat and spat again, then snorted, clearing one nostril and then the other.

Dear spirits. So much for his heroic rescue mission. Where the fuck was his team?

"Martin?" One hand buttressed against the scorched wall, not trusting his trembling legs, Garrus picked his way down the hallway. "Weaver? Do you read me? Anyone?" No reply. But neither did he see any bodies along the hallway, so there might yet be hope they managed to pull back before whatever took him out. What had happened?

He paused, talons lifting to press against the pounding behind his brow plate, trying to remember. Pain distracted him, forcing him into a quick inventory. Body parts all at least semi-functional, every one of them aching and letting out intermittent, stabbing cries. The stench of burned polymer and ceramic curled from his armour in thin, smoky tendrils that stabbed down into his sinuses.

But what happened?

He and Martin called clear on the hallway and moved up. Then … his memory fogged over. A sharp pain drew his attention to the side of his head, distracting him for a second. Seeking talons discovered a chunk of metal and circuitry embedded in his neck just behind his aural canal. A sharp yank ripped it from his hide, and he held it up, face complaining as he scowled at the scorched hardware.

Husks. He remembered husks. And … and … a huge energy weapon? He closed his eyes, trying to draw the memory forward. Yes, a massive, powerful energy weapon, but whatever was behind it … he either hadn't seen it or couldn't remember it.

He went back to the husks. When had they appeared? Second floor? Five or six husks had lurched out of a door no more than eight metres in front of them, but then … they caught fire? They glowed red as if combusting from the inside, then flame wreathed their bodies like *morumplacus*. They moved like husks, taking as long to orient and manage a straight line as their counterparts. He took the head off the first one six metres out, then it exploded, spraying the hallway with burning shrapnel.

As the rest of the flaming husks closed, Garrus ordered his team back, but each successive explosion grew nearer, the fires in the hall finally triggering the fire suppression system. The last of the exploding abominations … .

Blood running down the side of his head and into his collar reminded him of his injuries, and he hit his medigel. As the cool relief of the medigel sent pain to the bottom of his priority list, he shook his head, trying to clear away the lingering fog of oxygen deprivation. The last husk … it exploded in his face, and then … Collector foot soldiers with assault rifles and a few command units with devastating beam weapons attacked—

He reached up to his radio. "Weaver. Anderson, report in." Static. "Do you read me?" He waited a
second, then opened the main channel. "This is Vakarian. Anyone receiving this signal, please respond."

"I'm afraid none of your people can hear you, General," a voice spoke over the intercom, clearly disguised, but just as clearly not the batarian.

Garrus shoved himself away from the wall, a searching stare dropping to the floor when his hand slapped his hip and found nothing. His pistol … he must have dropped it. Damn it, where were his people? If he needed to take the entire facility down alone, one fucking Collector at a time to find his teams, that's what he'd do.

His head laughed at that idea, but then he spotted his pistol five metres away, and he laughed back. He'd been in worse shape on Haestrom, and he'd still got Nihlus out of that hell. He ran the three steps and bent to scoop it up, the entire hallway swooping around him in a heavy wave of dizziness that just about threw his assless over his head.

"You are hard to kill, aren't you? They warned me you would be."

Garrus snatched up his gun and spun to face the new voice, that one young, female, and definitely not batarian. He stumbled backwards a couple of steps, unsure if he was hallucinating. Near the end of the hall, a woman stood, aiming a shotgun at him. Tall and willowy even in armour, she walked with the natural swing common to beautiful females galaxy wide, her long red hair twisted into a plait over her left shoulder.

He sagged against the wall—the entire fifth flotilla firing Thanix cannons inside his head at once—barely managing to keep his pistol trained on her as his hand migrated back to his brow. "Bunny?" He shook his head a little, regretting the action as it drove a wedge between the two halves of his skull. Squinting, he managed to get her to stop floating around his field of vision. "Are you Beatrix Shepard?"

"My name is Qua'tien Krellid. Bunny Shepard died nearly fifteen years ago." She stalked toward him, loose-limbed and confident. "You don't need to introduce yourself. General Garrus Vakarian." She stopped andcocked her head. "Funny, you don't look nearly frightening enough to warrant all of this." A quick flick of her shotgun's muzzle indicated the destruction.

"Where are my people?" he demanded, his head settling back to a tolerable level; enough that he pushed away from the wall, fairly solid on his feet. He took a step toward her, his pistol steady between the sea green eyes. Pain and doubt crystallized into determination. "What happened?"

She shrugged, but he saw the way her jaw tightened, making a lie of her nonchalance. "Your … um… Anderson is aboard your ship as far as I know. The rest of them grabbed the surviving slaves and evacuated when the entire second floor went up in flames, then collapsed." Another shrug. "Well, except for the smart mouthed kid. He insisted you were still alive. He's either dead or still down there searching for you."

"Beatrix … or Qua'tien … whatever your name is … what happened? I was on the second floor." He took another step.

She nodded. "The Collectors attacked with their flambe husks, but you fought your way through those pretty well and the troopers. The floor was on fire. You ordered the team to push on, then you saw me and charged. Walked right into their trap." She nodded over her right shoulder. "Come on, the fire's out, but the house is coming down. Their giant beetle monster thing cut it to ribbons with it particle beams … while trying to kill you, actually."
"Stop! Wait! Where are the slaves?" he demanded, not moving. He couldn't keep his gun steady and move at the same time without his head trying to dump him on his ass. He swallowed a sour mouthful of vomit as the pain spiked. He'd be deep in the pits before he proved her right. "We came here to find your mother. She is the one who told us how to find him.

The teenager stopped and nodded. "Yeah, I know. You walked into that one too. Good thing your people are such good fighters. You were all supposed to die. Instead, my father's empire lies in ruins, the Collectors betrayed him … never trust bugs who promise the universe … and he's upstairs with half his head missing." She let out a long breath. "Once again, my bitch sister pulls my entire life down around my neck." Another nod. "Let's get going before we end up buried under all his expensive junk."

"Where's your mother?" He followed, keeping a good distance between them. "I'm not leaving without her."

"Father sent her to the shed as soon as she got back from baiting your hook. She's dead by now. They never last more than a week in the shed." He opened his mouth to demand that she take him there, but she slapped a hand up to stop him before he got a single word out. "Don't bother, not even I know the codes to get you in. Even daughters get sent to the shed once in a while. Can't have them able to let themselves out."

"I don't care." His feet felt like someone had coated the soles of his boots with grease, forcing him to pick his way carefully down the hall. Luckily, a large scrap of smoldering rug graced the marble floor in the next room. "Hold up," he said, layering an impatient grumble under the words that sent pain shooting through his head. Spirits … he couldn't function like that. He slapped his medigel twice, then scrubbed the soles of his boots clean.

Arms crossed, hip cocked, Bunny stood a few metres away, watching him with an appraising stare. "Is it true that you and Captain Shepard are a thing?"

He jerked his head toward the exit. "I want to see your master's body and his office. Take me there."

She rolled her eyes and let out a long sigh. "Fine. You always this suspicious when you win a battle?" Another sigh punctuated an eye roll before she spun and headed out.

"I haven't won anything until you, your mother, and all my people are safely back at Archangel." Keeping the pistol aimed at her spine, he followed. "How did your master die? You said half his head is missing?"

"Father, not master. He saved me from the cages, raised me … trained me to be the captain of his personal guard. And, yeah, he's missing the half I shot off." She made a sound like a vocal missile slicing through the air. "He forgot the one lesson he drilled into me the hardest … making people family just lets them get close enough to shank you."

As deserving as the bastard had been of a grisly death, her explanation didn't sit easy. He raised his gun, the spikes the mission had hammered into his spine bristling and digging into the meat. The day was a long way from being done screwing with him. "Why? Why did you kill him?"

Armoured shoulders popped in a careless shrug. "He made promises, but when he brought in the Collectors, started trading slaves for some bullshit promise of immortality and a return to glory for
the batarian empire ... ." A harsh, derisive cough cut from her throat. "When he fell for their bullshit, he broke the only promise that meant a damn … that one day, I'd get to stand toe to toe with the bitch who betrayed me, betrayed my mother … let them kill our father, all to save her own damned skin." Bunny stopped and turned to face him. "He promised that one day, I'd get my chance to kill Jane Gwendolyn Shepard. Now, you're going to make sure it happens."

(A-N: Thursday, we hop back to Sassy and Nihlus, then Monday back to Garrus. These Collectors really are a pain in the butt. Thanks as always. All the love.)

Hideth Turram - A game played by two teams of fifteen players. A drellak hide is hung on a six metre tall pole in the center of a field that measures one hundred and fifty metres long by thirty metres wide. A twenty-four metre tall scaffolding tower stands at either end of the field. The field, which begins as turf, is soaked to provide a further obstacle, one that becomes only more and more difficult to surmount as it gets churned to mud.

**The object** is simple, although the execution is anything but. Teams compete to take possession of the hide and move it down the field to their tower, climbing to hang it from the pole at the apex of the tower. There are few rules regarding what means may be used to take possession of the hide from another player, and center on conduct once another player has hit the ground. They may not be struck once any body part above the hips touches the ground. Games are not considered to be good sport without "Blood hitting the mud".

**Players:** Both males and females play on equal footing and there are no rules governing how many of each should make up a team. What females lose in brute strength, they make up for in speed and agility, often being the teams 'advancing' players, although many are very effective in blocking roles as well. The game is played wearing little clothing as it proves to be both a liability and easily shredded. Light, skin tight leggings are the norm. Bare talons-hands and feet- give the player better purchase. Players of non-taloned races use heavily cleated boots.

The turian saying "**Kick with the spur**" refers to a move in the sport where one player disables their opponent by hooking the opponent's spur with their own and dragging them to the ground. This move is extremely painful for both involved, and usually results in torn ligaments in the opponent. Although the saying remains popular, the move has become less so.

**Origins:** Clan gatherings during the turian "*dilacul venatiar*" or early hunter period, where dominance amongst the clans of a given area was decided by the outcome of a hunting competition. A drellak was marked and the clan that brought it in had first choice over hunting territory, resources, and mates. The elder of the dominant clan also had final say in matters of law as the head of the elder council.

**Trivia:**

One game between regiments of the External Forces lasted for three days (86.4 Earth Standard Hours), the players falling asleep on the field in shifts.

The first game played against an all asari team lasted 7 minutes, the asari coming out victorious. (Use of biotics and bare breasts have since been ruled illegal)

No fewer than 6 Primarchs have been killed participating in the sport.

No fewer than 13 Primarchs and 68 other members of Hierarchies have been assassinated at games.
The oldest player to ever plant the hide was General Aldus Pallian at the age of 93.
"I'm not just going to let you kill Shepard," he said at last, voice heavy and rumbling with subvocals of both warning and a wry sort of pissed off amusement. The kid was a piece of work, but considering her genes and upbringing, that didn't surprise him at all that much. He doubted that dragged through the pits of buratrum even began to cover the last fifteen cycles of Bunny's life.

She nodded. "Of course you won't." She picked through the smashed remains of furniture and strewn chunks of plaster and wood. Dead Collectors stuck out of the rest, so thick that Garrus couldn't help but grin, fierce and proud. His people had picked up and fought on brilliantly.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for brief conversational mentions of abuse and torture. No details are given.

37 Days ASR

Garrus stared at the young woman, eye narrowed, his gut twisting into empathetic knots as he studied her, looking for signs of deception or mental disorder. His visor told him nothing useful. Heart rate, respiration, body temp all elevated, which the circumstances warranted anyway. As useful as it would be, his visor didn't include a mind reading app.

"I'm not just going to let you kill Shepard," he said at last, voice heavy and rumbling with subvocals of both warning and a wry sort of pissed off amusement. The kid was a piece of work, but considering her genes and upbringing, that didn't surprise him at all that much. He doubted that dragged through the pits of buratrum even began to cover the last fifteen cycles of Bunny's life.

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Bunny sniffed then spat a thick gob of dusty, smoky snot into the rubble. "You'll tell yourself the same optimistic lies that my sister and mother will. Qua'tien can be rehabilitated. It will take time and patience, but we'll get our Bunny back. Then you'll let me out of my cell, and we'll be one great, big happy family." She glanced back over her shoulder, giving her braid a cocky flip. "That's when I'll kill her."

The eels renewed their attack on his guts, dread slithering through all the tender, sympathetic bits. He believed her. Growing up, brainwashed by that bastard, trusted and tortured, twisted a million different ways … Qua'tien would never truly disappear. They'd never be able to trust her.
Of course, Shepard would. It would take time, but eventually Shepard would believe her sister had been reclaimed, and she'd let her guard down. His gut wrenched into a knot, sending a surge of bitter acid up his throat. He choked it down.

No.

He'd just gotten Shepard back, he wouldn't let her empathy … her kind heart … snatch her away again. Pushing up behind Bunny a little, gun lifting a hand's width higher, he said, "I could just put you down here and now, save everyone the worry. I can just tell them that tragically, Bunny died in the attack."

She laughed, bright and eerily merry. He shuddered, the sound more disturbing than her threat or even the fact that she'd killed the man she called her father. Popping her shoulders in a far too familiar shrug, she said, "Yeah, you could put a bullet through my brain, lie about having found me, but you won't." Sparks arced around her as she hopped over a fallen light fixture. "You're good people. Good people are so easy." She stopped at a shut door. "You'll always be susceptible to those of us who have no rules."

She turned her back to the door, and met his eyes with a stare so dead and frozen that he couldn't tell if she'd told the truth. Damn, she was good. Not many people could keep him guessing, but Bunny Shepard was leading his powers of perception on what Martin called a 'feral goose chase'. A careless shrug rippled across the narrow shoulders. "If you do really love that bitch, do it. The only way to stop an assassin willing to trade their life for the target is to take them out first." Holding her arms out, she sighed. "So do it. It's the only way to save your girlfriend."

He shook his head, lining his heart and guts with steel to fortify himself against her taunts. She knew he was no murderer, and suddenly he wished that Nihlus stood in his place. If the Spectre thought Bunny posed even the smallest threat to Shepard, he'd put a single shot of lead through her brow. The Spectre would hate himself for it, but he'd do it anyway.

Garrus cracked his neck and cleared his throat, hating the picture that formed in his mind … that young, pretty face … a tiny entrance wound dead center in her brow, a single trickle of blood marring the pale, freckled skin. He jerked his chin toward the door. "Is that Krellid's office?" he asked, turning the conversation back to getting everyone the hell out of there. When she nodded, he stabbed his pistol toward it. "Open it."

"It's not going to do you any good," she said, turning and keying in a code to open it. "He's dead, and dead men tell no tales."

Garrus stared at her, almost expecting the word, "copper" to come out of her mouth in Shepard's hard-boiled detective voice. His brow plates started creeping down toward his nose, but then he caught himself and schooled his expression, keeping it a flat and reflective … a still pond. The moment his talons stepped into the mansion, he'd known something was off. Somehow, he always knew. He might walk into a trap, but he always knew it was a trap … only the slaver's lair hadn't just felt like a trap. Too much out of place, none of the right vibes … the lack of slaves near the firefights … not a single sapient shield had been thrown at them. And then he awoke, almost killed fighting a Collector monster he couldn't remember, but his people and the slaves had all been evacuated?

No, nothing added up, yet. He nodded for Bunny to open the door and go in ahead of him.

Crossing the threshold, he kept himself in partial cover as he cleared the room. Five batarians, two humans, and a turian lay sprawled over various chairs. He nodded to Bunny to stay where he could see her and sidestepped over to the bodies. Tracing their order of death by the neatness and number
of wounds, he saw that they'd been picked off in order from left to right. No doubt they'd been sitting in their chairs, listening to the battle going on outside their little fortress. He checked the walls to confirm his theory, and chuffed. No damage to the walls other than single shots fired inside the room.

A panic room.

So they sat in their impenetrable little fortress and waited. Then someone had opened fire. He examined the wounds. Pistol shots. He nodded Bunny over. "Show me your weapons."

"No." She jerked away from him, placing the desk between them, her shotgun held low, below the edge. Even so, he could see she didn't have a pistol on her.

Garrus circled the desk to look at the corpse slumped over a computer spattered with blood and brains. The corpse was definitely batarian. Grabbing the dead man's shoulder, he pulled Krellid up off the desk, leaning him back in the deep chair. Face blown off, but not by a shotgun. Pistol again, back of the head … five shots.

Spinning to face Bunny, he said, "Is this Krellid?"

She snorted, then spat. "Of course it is." Nodding toward the others, she continued, "That's the inner circle … all his most trusted lieutenants. Pure bastards, the lot of them." Another gob of spit followed the first as she edged toward a wide bookshelf on the right hand side of the room. "All right, you've seen the dead slaver. Now, lets get out of here before the entire house comes down on our heads."

"Where's the gun?" He looked over the desk and the floor around it, then in the chair. No gun.

"What do you mean where's the gun? It's right … ." She slapped her hip. "It's gone." She spun one way then the other, as if she must have dropped it.

She was lying. Not about the gun, the surprise on her face when she found it missing was genuine, but Beatrix Shepard was lying up a storm about something else. "Who killed Krellid?" he asked, watching her as she glanced his way before resuming her search.

"I told you, I did." She made a disgusted sound in her throat. "He was a bastard, and you're worried about the fact he's dead?"

"No, I'm worried about why you're lying to me about being the one who did it." Garrus gave the chair and the dead slaver a shove, rolling it away from the desk, then bent over, activating the computer. No doubt a man like Krellid made sure that his panic room had generator backup for all his toys. Sure enough, the computer woke, bringing up an interface for the security systems. So, Krellid hadn't been casually sitting back, waiting for his Collector partners to clean up his problems. He'd been afraid, checking his … .

A thoughtful scowl pulled Garrus's browplates low. No, he hadn't been checking his security. Garrus scrolled through the open windows. Krellid had been searching for a hole in his security. He stopped on a screen that showed a maze of tunnels below the house, at least thirty or so metres deeper than the basement. A series of blinking tick marks showed where someone had tripped silent security alarms.

Bunny raised an eyebrow. "You're calling me a liar? That's rich."

Garrus straightened and pointed to each of the dead men. "Pistol shot. Pistol shot. Two pistol shots." He stabbed his thumb toward Krellid. "Five pistol shots." Brow plates lifting toward his
crest, he shrugged. "How did you manage that without a pistol?"

She scoffed. "I lost it after I killed them. Seriously? If you're going to try to pull a Sherlock Holmes, think of the obvious." Her stare travelled back to the bookcase, then jerked away, returning to indifferent scorn.

"C-Sec senior investigator, kid. When I asked about your pistol, you went into your memory, trying to track where you lost it. You put it on this morning and hadn't touched it since." He leaned on one hip and crossed his arms. "Then, you got a look on your face that was both realization and fear. You know who took it and did this, and now you're afraid for them." He cocked his head. "How did I do?"

She just let out a derisive cough and continued staring the other way.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." He returned to the computer, searching for a way to restore comms. He found it amongst the controls for the security grid. Raising a hand to his radio, he called, "This is Vakarian, anyone reading me?"

"Boss!" Martin's voice exploded through Garrus's head like a missile. "We've been searching for nearly an hour. Where are you?"

"In Krellid's panic room with Beatrix Shepard." He returned to the desk, searching through the datapads and papers on its surface, looking for anything that would help him find Lucille. He found a great deal of evidence of Krellid's dealings with the Collectors, but nothing indicating the location of the shed. "We're making our way down the back way to avoid the second floor collapse."

"Huh?" Martin paused. "The second floor is fine, boss. Those exploding husks burned things up a little, but the fire system took care of it. The big beetle thing carved up the walls, but all our scans say it should hold together." He coughed. "How are you? Where are you? Do you need backup? And did you say Beatrix? You mean you found Bunny?"

"I did." Garrus looked over at the girl, noting the sudden stiffness in her posture, the way she had turned her back to him. "I'll let you know on the backup. What's the sitrep? How long have I been missing?"

"Just over ninety minutes. We kicked the Collectors in the ass, grabbed the slaves and ran, but … ." Martin stopped, the pause going on long enough that Garrus wondered if the comms had been taken down again.

"What is it, kid? I haven't got a week to stand here while you build suspense." Garrus shoved everything he found into his belt pouches. Sorting through the treasures could wait until everyone was aboard ship and on their way home.

"It's like the slaves had been moved out of harm's way. We expected them to be used as shields, but both groups had been locked into rooms with reinforced walls. If I didn't know better, I'd say that someone had been trying to protect them."

"Yeah, roger that, Weaver," Garrus replied, his gaze returning to Bunny. "It's not the only strange thing going on here. Have you heard from the other teams?" He held his breath, waiting, although he felt fairly certain that if disaster had befallen the others, Martin wouldn't have buried the lead.

"They all report moderate losses and heavy casualties, mostly during the initial ambush, but mission success across the board. Ironically, Nyreen's team came through without a loss." The kid
scoffed. "Because they were behind schedule, she got our warning about the ambush in time to prepare."

"Anything about Adrien?" he asked, dread beginning to erect walls just in case.

"He was badly wounded while covering his team's retreat: took a couple of blasts from an arm cannon on a giant husk. He's back aboard his ship and being treated. Last I heard, their doc expects him to pull through. Apparently he went into surgery shouting at them to save the data from his armour so they could develop shields to block that weapon."

Garrus chuckled, that information doing more to ease his concerns for his friend than anything else. Leaving the desk, he made his way over to the bookcase, eyes on the floor. "Okay. My informant here says that Lucille was being held somewhere called the shed. Does that sound familiar?"

Martin hummed. "No, but … ." The channel blipped. "Anderson? Do any of the slaves know where the shed is? Garrus says Lucille was being held there."

"He's alive?" The captain's deep, gruff voice came through heavy with both relief and aggravation. "Glad someone let me know. Hold on, I'll ask about the shed." Garrus heard him talking in the background. Less than a minute later, he came back. "It's called the shed, but it's a dungeon under the house in a sublevel."

"Thanks, Anderson. Did you get that, General?" Martin asked.

Garrus knew just the tunnels they meant. "Thank you, Anderson … Weaver. I'll stay in contact." Finding what he suspected in front of the bookcase, he turned back to face Bunny. "Vakarian, out."

"Good news," he said, "the second floor is perfectly intact, we can leave that way to find the shed and your mother." He strode to the door, but didn't even make it to the threshold before a hand snagged his vambrace.

"I told you, there's no point in going to the shed. Even if she was still alive, we can't get in." She stabbed her chin back the way they'd entered. "And we can't go that way. We'd have to pick our way back through all that crap and the foam slime. It'll take us an hour to get downstairs." A sharp, mocking laugh sliced through her words. "You'd end up slipping, hitting your head, and barfing all over me."

Tilting a nod toward the bookcase, she continued, "This is the fastest route." She headed that way, her manner completely at ease. "I know this house inside out. The back elevator is the quickest way down. Five minutes and we can be on our way." Pushing books aside, she revealed a keypad. When she entered the code, the section of books slid aside.

"All right." He followed, pointing down at the dust smudges on the floor. "Looks like someone has been through her recently. A few steps into the hidden corridor, Garrus lunged forward and grabbed the young Shepard's arm, dragging her over to him and lifting her onto her tiptoes. As he stared into her eyes, he steeled himself against the sorrow, rage and disgust waging war in his guts and let loose his rapidly vanishing patience.

She just hung there, staring back at him as cool and calm as he could ask, as if they were having amarceru and biscuits on the chaise in the sitting room.

"Okay, kid, I've put up with enough tarc from you. How much of what you've told me has been complete stulti?"
What had been done to Bunny was no less monstrous than what had been done to Kahri or their mother, that certainty held his frustration in check. Layering as much threat and no-nonsense cop tone into his voice as he could—the old suit fit surprisingly well—he said, "Take me to the shed. I'll find a way in."

When Qua’ieten Krellid stared back, not even bothering to shrug, he let out an impatient hiss. As much as he understood that the child had been brainwashed and tortured into the person before him, Lucille's disappearance didn't allow for patience. Spirits, what had he caused with his carelessness? He closed his eyes for a half second, taking a deep breath to calm the storm battering at the inside of his keel.

Leaning down, he set his jaw, his expression steel and granite as he met the young woman's eyes at a level. "She's your mother, Beatrix. She's been held captive here every bit as long as you have, only she was forced to bear seven children and turn them over to the bastard who killed your father and very nearly killed your sister."

Layering in subvocals so thick and menacing that he saw the hair on her neck stand on end, he said, "I'm not leaving here without her, and as good a person as you think I might be, I'm also dangerous. Particularly to people blocking me from completing my mission, and today my mission is bringing back my girlfriend's mother."

Bunny spat in his face. "I'm not letting that traitorous bitch anywhere near Lucille."

Garrus wiped his mandible. "Charming, but now that I know your mother isn't lying dead in some shed—"

A gunshot echoed up through the house, then another. Garrus reached up to find out who was shooting, but then Bunny wrenched her arm loose and bolted. "Dammit, Bunny!" Opening the channel, he took off after her, racing through the dimly lit corridors. "Weaver, that shot come from any of our people?"

"No, sir. I didn't even hear a shot. We're all either on the Normandy or in the breeding compound."

"Roger that, situation rapidly heading for FUBAR. Vakarian, out." He paused at the top of a long series of staircases, looking down the center of them, his stomach wondering how long it would take vomit to hit the bottom. He swallowed it and turned on the flashlight attached to his pistol then started down, leaping down as quickly as he could manage given his equilibrium. Bunny managed the descent with much greater speed, so when he hit the end of twelve staircases, she had disappeared from sight.

Luckily, the corridor offered only two options, and one direction showed no disruption to the dust layer. Running, one hand trailing along the wall to keep his balance in the near dark, he followed the dust trail. Sloppy, if Bunny had been hiding someone down there. She should have laid false trails. Although, he supposed it didn't pay to train your captive daughter/captain of your guard to be too cagey.

A scream of pure rage and agony echoed toward him. Bunny! Throwing caution and sense to the wind, he pushed off the wall and raced down the tunnel. He found her outside a small, cell-like room, pacing like a maniac.

"What is it?" Leaning against the wall and a knee, he panted, sucking in long draughts of air. "What happened?"

The girl threw herself at him, but stopped short of beating him with the fist she raised over her
head. "You happened." Bunny let out a shriek of fury and spun to slam her fist into the wall. "Your stupid rescue mission screwed up the perfect escape plan, you moron! Now … ." She paced the width of the tiny, dark room. "Now, he's got her!" Letting out another ferocious scream, she kicked a small stool, smashing it against the far wall.

Garrus let out his first full breath since he'd woken up suffocating on the floor. "Okay, give me the story, kid." Without waiting for her to start, he checked the room over for clues. Thick dust clung to the corners, brushed away from the center of the room by constant movement. Someone had done a lot of pacing in the tiny cell.

"When Lucille got back from the Citadel, Krellid hung her in the damned courtyard, pulled out all the slaves, lined them up to watch her whipped bloody for betraying him." Bunny paced a couple of steps one way then the other and slammed her fist against the wall. "Of course, he set her up to betray him. That was the whole point: lure you here. He knew who you were … knew she wouldn't resist an opportunity to bring him down."

A tiny corner of bright colour peeking out from under the pallet of blankets on the floor caught Garrus's attention. He glanced over at Bunny, then walked over and crouched, pulling the blankets aside. Mandibles fluttering in a sad sort of smile, he picked up the book on human painters. "Beautiful History: The 200 Most Influential Human Painters," he read out loud. Still crouched, he twisted to look up at Bunny. "Let me guess … you broke your mother out of the shed and hid her in here?" Brow plates raised, he stood and leaned toward her. "Did you tell him she was dead?"

"She just about was." Bunny's gaze slid over the book on its way to study the floor. "He just left her there. The bastard never intended to get her out … after everything … all the fucking money she made him over the years. Her back was covered in maggots … what could I do?" She spat without even a hiccup in her pacing. "I took her to the Mother House, and they started her healing. Then I brought her here, where I could take care of her."

"Guess he wasn't quite right about family, was he?" Garrus reached for her shoulder, but she ducked out from under her hand. He nodded. "Okay, let's find her." Turning toward the door, he studied the floor as he left the cell and entered the tunnel. Tracks cut through the thick layer of dust. He crouched again, trying to sort the different layers and movement patterns. "How much of the scuffling through the dust out here is from you and Lucille?"

The kid stepped around him and crouched down. She pointed to a boot print with a distinct heel. "That's me. The drag marks though … there." Standing, she took off. "He's got her. The bare feet, the sideways marks … that's her."

Garrus saw it and bolted after her. Definitely someone being pulled along in a tight grip. "Who's the dead man upstairs?"

"Marl, Krellid's right hand. Lucille should have just waited for me." Bunny cursed and stopped in the center of a junction between two tunnels. "She was supposed to wait. I was going to take out the lieutenants and Krellid in the panic room, then come and smuggle her out while you kept the Collectors off our backs." After a second, she bolted down the tunnel to the left. "He's taking her toward the hangar!"

Garrus didn't need her to tell him that they had to catch up to the slaver before he reached his means of escape. Needing all their air for the run, they simply raced side by side, stopping to check the trail at intersections. As fit as he'd been before getting blasted upstairs, Garrus felt all the weak spots in his patched together body by the time they came to an open door that led out into the storm.
Bunny didn't even slow, apparently forgetting that the shots they'd heard meant that Krellid was armed. Garrus, however, had been bent, broken, and spindled more than enough for one day and slowed down, moving forward with at least partial cover as much as possible. One hand protecting his eyes from the blinding downpour, splashing through water sometimes as deep as his mid-calf, Garrus picked his way forward.

They found Krellid wrestling with Lucille about halfway across a wide, landscaped lawn that looked more like a lake … two pale ghosts amidst the miniature whitecaps pushed along by the gale. A shot whined past Garrus's head, close enough to hear over the wind and thunder, and sent him dodging toward cover behind a large palm tree.

"Krellid!" Bunny shouted. Garrus gut tied itself into a nice, tight double knot when she raised her shotgun. "Let her go. I did what you said." The kid was going to get herself killed.

"Spirits, Kahri, the things I do since I met you." Muttering under his breath, Garrus stepped out of cover, moving toward Bunny. He needed to be close enough to get her down and behind him if bullets started flying. No way was he going back to Omega to tell Shepard that he'd gotten her mother and sister killed. Krellid stopped, slipping in the deep water and grass as Lucille jerked him back and forth, the woman's whole body writhing as she fought to get free.

"What a grand day for you, General," the slaver said, his voice disappearing into the thunder. "Vengeance for the woman you love … Archangel saves thousands of slaves and returns them to their families … a victory over the Collectors."

"Bunny, back away from him," Garrus called, letting Krellid's taunts slide right off. "Don't let him goad you. He wants you to do something to get yourself and your mother killed." Holding his breath, he inched forward, one arm holding his pistol on Krellid, the other reaching out to snag the teenager's armour.

Bunny lunged forward. "Krellid, you bastard, I got him here!" She got three steps before the gun turned on her, and she slid to a stop, arms pinwheeling to keep her balance. "Let her go!"

Garrus stepped up beside her, glancing back and forth between the slaver, Lucille, and Bunny. "So this was a set up? Trade one dead general for your mother?" Taking the chance that between his struggling prisoner, the storm, and the combination of adrenaline and fear, Krellid's hands would be shaking too hard to wing him let alone get a head shot, Garrus turned to face Bunny. "It never occurred to you that I'd be willing to make that trade without being lied to? All you had to do was tell me the truth, and I could have helped."

The kid cursed, shooting him with a fifty calibre glare. "Doesn't matter now, does it?" She took another step toward Krellid, her hands held out. "You're a lying bastard. You were never going to let her go, were you?"

The slaver wrenched at Lucille's neck as the woman stomped on his foot and twisted, almost breaking free. He slammed the pistol into her cheek, and she slumped, hanging from his arm.

"Mom!" Bunny leaped forward, as Krellid staggered a little at the sudden weight.

Recovering, the bastard swung the pistol back to Bunny. "And reward your betrayal, Qua'tien?" Garrus saw the slaver's vicious laughter slice Bunny to the bone. "Did you think I wouldn't know who took your mother out of the shed, little girl?" Krellid bared his teeth. "Oh yes, my beloved, doting daughter, I've always known about all your hideouts and your little secrets." The mocking smile melted from his face, sliding off with the rain. "After all I've done for you … after all the trust … this is how you repay me?" He jabbed the pistol into Lucille's temple.
"You tortured me, beating me unconscious when I didn't learn fast enough or show enough respect!" Bunny lunged forward, then danced sideways a step. "Then you'd beat me and lock me in the dark for a week with nothing but my piss to drink and my filth to lie in, you son of a bitch! How is that care or trust? You used my mother as a weapon against me for fifteen years."

Seeing that she was trying to distract the slaver, draw him around so Krellid's back was to him, Garrus remained as still and unassuming as possible.

Krellid yanked Lucille's limp body around, keeping her between him and Garrus. "Oh no, you don't." The pistol lunged toward each of them. "Stay where you are, or I start shooting."

"You can't shoot Lucille," Garrus said, fighting the steady, pounding drumbeat of the rain. "You need her to get out of here."

"I'm a dead man!" Krellid screamed back, his voice manic, hysterical laughter bubbling through. "We both know that, General. But if I'm going to die, I'm going to take these two bitches with me. I'll die as Tir'Lak Remit, with Shepard blood pouring over my hands."

The batarian staggered, his stare going dead, his features slack. Done stalling his own death, Krellid swung the pistol toward Bunny. Garrus sprinted toward the teenager, throwing himself between her and the gun, but Lucille moved faster. Krellid let out a strangled squawk as his limp victim sprang to sudden and vicious life.

Spinning in his arms, Lucy slammed her knee into his groin. So quick that Garrus didn't have time to react even if he'd had the inclination, the woman punched the slaver in the ribs five or six times. Krellid dropped to his knees, his face suddenly slack, black eyes sightless. Lucille threw a long, bloody piece of broken glass in his face even as he slumped into the mud.

"That's for my girls, and for Franklin, you bastard," she screamed then spat on him. She turned to face them, her face a dull mask of shock. Garrus spun mid-stride, lunging to catch her, but before he got there, her legs gave out. She sank to her knees, splashing as she hit the grass, harsh, screaming sobs tearing from her mouth. Bloody fists clutched at her shift, working their way up the filthy material as they migrated to her mouth, pressing against her open, gasping lips.

"Mom!" Bunny raced across the churned up lawn, hydroplaning the last eight metres on her armoured knees. "Are you okay? He didn't hurt you, did he?" The teenager's frantic hands searched her mother for wounds, then wrapped around Lucille's neck, holding her tight. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. The general knew. He figured it out."

Garrus crouched a couple of metres away, giving them their space. They'd been through quite enough that day without him adding any more stress. "Are you all right?" Relief washed through him, leaving him warmer, but shaking and suddenly very, very tired. He reached out, gently examining the bruised lump on Lucille's cheek. It didn't look as though Krellid had managed a solid enough blow to break the bone. "How are your hands?"

Lucy nodded, then buried her face in the tangled, soaking tendrils of her daughter's hair. "I'm fine, General." A pallid smile drifted across her face. "In fact, I don't think I've been better in a very, very long time." She kissed Bunny's cheek. "Come on, let's get out of this storm. I want to get dry and warm." She kissed her daughter again, then let out a deep, throaty moan of longing. "And I'd give just about anything for a cup of sweet, milky tea."

Garrus stood and wrapped an arm around her, lifting her from the water. "I think we can take care of that for you." He held out an arm toward the door. "We'll head straight through to the Normandy, and Dr. Chakwas can look at that cheek while you drink your tea." Once Lucille
seemed stable on her feet, he offered a hand to Bunny, raising a brow plate in a mild challenge.

"Fine." The kid took it and pulled herself up. "You do-gooders … you're all the same. Massive pains in the ass."

"Yeah, well, you'd only know because you're an even bigger pain in the ass." He jutted his chin toward the mansion. "Come on, kid, let's get out of this storm. I feel like crap."

"Yeah, well, just don't puke on me. Damned turians." She swaggered away a few steps and then turned back. Something in her expression curdled in his gut, and for a second throwing up became a real possibility once more. Pure hatred flickered behind the young-old eyes that had seen far too much. "And don't think all this …" She circled her index finger to indicate the three of them. "... means I lied about killing my ex-sister. That bitch fed us to the fucking lions." Before he could say anything, she turned back and marched ahead, calling back over her shoulder. "She'll get hers, I promise."

Garrus sighed and offered Lucille a supportive arm that she leaned into gratefully, walking slowly but with a strength in keeping with the mother of the two most stubborn human females in existence, and the slave who'd freed herself using a broken chunk of glass.

"She doesn't remember." Garrus looked down as the woman spoke. "She was so young, so scared and brutalized that she locked all those memories away. And, of course, Krellid brainwashed her." Lucille pitched her voice to stay between them. "He told her that Janey had sold us for her freedom, and that the only way to ensure my life was to be a good slave and earn freedom for us both." Eyes dark with sorrow and suffering looked up into his, and for a moment, she leaned even heavier on his arm. "She'll come around once we get her away from here, and she has time to learn what really happened to her sister."

Garrus nodded. "Did she tell you that Jane is alive?" He winced a little, hoping that Bunny had mentioned it when he just threw it out there like that. Sometimes he made krogan look like the masters of tact.

Lucille nodded, but stared up at him with a shocky sort of blank expression. "It seems a miracle."

Her brow furrowed. "She truly died?"

Garrus nodded. "In my arms." He smiled and gave her arm a gentle squeeze. "And it is a miracle. She's struggling, trying to find her feet, but it's Jane."

She clung to his arm. "I look forward to getting to know her again." They walked several strides in silence before she asked, "Is she still impossible?"

Garrus chuckled. "Completely." Just before they reached the door into the house, he stopped. "I'm going to have to keep Bunny under guard until we find a way to bring her around. I can't risk Shepard. I hope you understand."

Lucille turned a little to face him, her free hand gripping his. "I understand, General. Janey is very lucky to have someone who cares so much and watches over her so well. I trust you to do your best for my youngest." She patted his hand then turned to the door, shivering a little. "Come, let's escape this wretched place."

"Yes, ma'am." Garrus palmed the door control, then stepped back to allow her to enter first. Relief, and gratitude, and amazement, and joy … absolute joy resonated a four part harmony through him as he followed the two women into the house and through.
"Oh no." Lucille stopped at the door to the front sitting room. When Garrus peered over her shoulder, he saw that part of the ceiling had collapsed. The woman's hands gave a helpless, distressed flutter. "Some of the articles in this room were quite literally priceless."

Garrus cleared his throat to thwart a laugh. Shepard women really were damned near indestructible.

Lucille spun to face him. "Please tell me that we're going to salvage all this art … the books. We can't just abandon them, or leave them to be pillaged by other criminals." She drew herself up tall and straight, all nettles and thorns. "Once I take a shower and get in some clean, warm clothes, I can bring your people in here … show them what to save. There are crates … ."

Garrus just watched her go, both admiring her spirit and fearing her reaction to what he'd do with most of her treasures. When she ground to a halt, he nodded. "On two conditions. First, whatever doesn't need to be sent to a museum, is sold to help fund Archangel and Sanctuary." He pulled his mandibles in tight, clenching them against the grin that wanted to answer her comically suspicious glare.

"And the second?" Her words came out slow and loaded.

"That you scan the rooms structurally before going in, listen to my people if they tell you to get out if it becomes unsafe, and that it's all wrapped up in the next twenty four hours."

"That sounded like three conditions, but I agree to all of them." She turned and marched with vigor toward the door.

Garrus turned to Bunny who was sorting through the rubble looking for something. "Are you going to help her?"

The kid shrugged but didn't stop. "Don't I need to go directly to a cell and start the head shrinking?"

The bastard child of a sigh and a grumble rolled from his throat. "I trust you to not hurt any of my people. Will you disappoint me?"

She set her back to a huge chunk of plaster. "Help me out, here?" When he didn't move, waiting for her to answer his question, she shrugged. "Okay, yes, I'm not going to hurt your lackeys. Why would I? They've never done anything to me." Jerking her head toward the piece of ceiling, she said, "Well, lend a hand!"

Garrus strode over and wedged a shoulder under the rubble, helping her lift it and push it aside. He watched her search for a few minutes, not sure if he should say anything or not. The kid probably wouldn't hear him, but maybe that didn't matter. Maybe she needed him to say his piece anyway. Or, maybe he just needed to say it.

"Look, kid, I know you're going to just chalk what I have to say up to a bunch of stulti, but I'm going to say it, anyway. I'm also just going to say it once." He took a deep breath. "I love your sister. I have for a couple of years now, so I know her about as well as anyone can. I've seen her scars … the whip marks that covered her from her neck all the way down over the soles of her feet, back and front … the bite marks from where they set their varren on her and where Remit and one of the other slavers took their revenge for when she bit them trying to get you to safety."

He backed up a couple of steps as she pushed in on him, continuing her search without showing any sign of listening to him. He pressed on anyway. "I've held her when she woke screaming from nightmares. I've been unable to make love to her, because every touch awakens the ghosts of them raping her for twenty seven hours straight." He swallowed hard and took a couple of long, slow
breaths to wrestle his emotions in line. "Your sister was left staked to the ground when the slavers pulled out. They thought she was dead. So did the Alliance medic who found her. So while your sister has spent the last fifteen cycles out in the galaxy, believe me … she's been anything but free."

"Ah ha! There you are." Bunny dove into the rubble, cackling a little as she dug. Straightening, she held up an old, battered tin mug. She kissed it and clipped it to her belt, grinning up at him in victory. "I was sitting in that chair, drinking my coffee and watching the news when you lot flew in. Thought I might have lost the old girl. Morning cup just wouldn't be the same without her."

Garrus nodded and turned toward the door out, his gaze landing on Lucille, standing just the other side of the threshold. She held his stare for a moment, slow tears rolling through the dampness left by the rain, but then, after a couple of breaths, she nodded and turned, drifting toward the front door.

"Yeah." Garrus sighed and followed. His welcome home gift would prove to be even greater than he'd planned, but far more complicated than he'd hoped. Still, he'd come in to bring down the bastard who'd hurt his … his mate and find her mother. Mission accomplished, even if his victory festered in his gut, a grenade buried in a stone. The day had birthed so many more questions than it laid to rest.

First and foremost amongst those … the Collectors and their arsenal of monsters. Where did they come from? How many of them were there? And how were they going to defeat them?

(A-N: Okay, so I lied. Turns out Garrus and Bunny wanted to be first. I might not be posting twice a week for a while. I think everyone can understand how posting nearly 20K words a week can wear, but most importantly, it doesn't give me mulling time. We're getting deep into the struggle now, so I need to give the characters time to give me their full awesomeness. I need time to plot ahead. I loved this chapter. Writing it made me just insanely happy, and I'd like that to be the experience for as many chapters as possible. :D Thanks for reading. So much, and thanks for being awesome. Hugs!)
Chapter Summary

He looked up, meeting her eyes. "I think I know what the question is," Nihlus said. He gathered his feet under him and shoved himself up off the stone floor, a crooked grin greeting the creaking and popping of his joints. Up and balanced, he stared into Shepard's eyes, his mandibles betraying the war between elation and terror raging in his gut. "They aren't asking if they have a soul like the geth did."

Her nod told him that she'd already considered that possibility.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Jennic:** (Jennix plural): Tree dwelling, heavily fur-covered marsupial analogues native to Thessia. They are solitary creatures that travel hundreds of kilometres to mate, finding one another through loud, eerie howls. In asari lore, the howls were long believed to belong to the souls of deceased lovers calling out to one another from beyond the Veil of Tears."

**Ceraya:** The folds of skin and tissue that protect prothean female's four small, independent uteri located in the mid to lower back, about a hand's width to either side of the spine. (Yes, TMI)

**37 Days ASR**

Neither of them knew who came up with the idea to willfully separate their memories and pull forward some from Tashac and Merol as well; flood the computer with as much data as they could. As soon as the plan appeared, just as they turned their attention to the walls they'd created to keep the prothean imprints at bay, the current swept their feet out from under them.

…

Shepard turned away from Anderson, letting out a tiny sigh as the elevator door to the wards access opened. Of course the computer would flag her death. Taking a deep breath, she nodded. It worked to their advantage if the computer really was having difficulty processing their data. She could let it play out. She didn't consciously remember most of it, anyway, and seeing it might just allow her to recognize the next attempt.

Outside the elevator, Garrus leaned against the alley wall as if he'd been waiting there forever rather than a few seconds. Damn, he looked good, and she grinned as a delicious, truly unsubtle heat blossomed deep in her belly. Her eyes locked onto his mouth, remembering the passion with which he'd kissed her, always so tempered by his patience, but there and strong.

He pushed off the wall and held up a liquor store bag, showing it off like a game show assistant. "I got the good stuff for Tali. So filtered, it doesn't even know if it's alcohol any more."

Still wearing a smile far too wide to look anything but idiotic, she stepped out and slipped her arm through his offered elbow. "Excellent. Now we have the makings of a first rate party." He tugged his arm free to wrap it around her, pulling her in tight against him.
Shepard glanced up as the elevator at the end of the hallway opened, a few civilians stepping out. Her heart began to beat hard and fast at the base of her throat, but she simply leaned into her boyfriend's side and eased her arm around his waist. Boyfriend … damn, she liked the sound of that. She gave his thigh an affectionate little bump with her hip. "Relax, Brother C-Sec. I've got you."

His mandibles fluttered a little. "Yeah, I guess you do." He bent to nuzzle her temple. "You okay?"

Her smile turned sad, but she forced her lips to do their best to reassure him. "Yeah, I am now." Consoling herself a little with the sound of his voice, she let herself enjoy that warmth fluttering in her belly. Her heart belonged to him, and just as he'd said it would, her body ached to follow. "You know, Garrus, something just occurred to me," she said, lowering her voice to a husky whisper.

His brow plates arched, and he pulled her tighter against his side. Leaning down, he whispered back, "What's that?"

She hesitated and glanced behind them to see Nihlus watching her even as he and Anderson discussed whether Udina should be assigned bodyguards. She shook her head to warn him to separate himself from the memory. Trying to overload the system offered them only a slim chance, but better a slim chance than just letting the machine turn them into thoroughly analyzed paste.

As she looked back into Garrus's eyes, her smile returned, still sad but radiating love. "After today, you aren't really on my crew any more." She purred a little, deep in her throat, letting herself feel that promise … what would have happened if they'd made it back to the Normandy. The sweet anticipation of his gentle hands and breath-stealing passion. "You know what that means, don't you?"

He made a show of thinking about it, his mandibles and brow plates working comically. "Um . . . I never have to suffer through you driving the Mako again?"

Delight coloured her startled laugh. "You're such a poop!" She nudged him with her elbow. "Okay, I'll give you that one, but it also exempts you from my 'never with my crew' rule."

His response came out only as a rumble in his throat that cut straight through her, making her skin lift in gooseflesh. A shy smile brought her eyes back up to the civilians. Most of them passed her by without any notice. One man looked at her … no, nothing so innocent. He was a missile locked onto a target.

She turned in her torin's arm to look up into his eyes. "Garrus …" No. No, it was too soon. So many things had gone unsaid because she'd buried herself in too much fear to trust his great spirit. Heart pounding, each beat wringing it out like an old sponge, she spun to face him. Reaching up with one hand, she pressed it against his cheek. It might not be real, but maybe, somehow, he might feel her right the wrong she'd done him if she could just say it. "... I love you. I want you to know that." Tears burst free, pooling along her lashes as fear rolled in, intractable and heavy. "You're going to be okay."

The man bumped into her, his arm inside her sling—

"I'm so sorry." She held her breath, clenching tight to her boyfriend's bewildered stare, wishing those eyes to be the last thing she saw.

...(concurrent)...

The endless dance twirled above her, a billion candles amongst the black shining light and warmth
down on the children of the new cycle. Tashac sat on the top step, her toes cool and wet in the soft grass, wood hewn by Merol's talented hands still warm under her backside despite the sun long having abandoned them. She folded down, bracing her elbows on her knees, then resting her kepala in her hands.

*My beautiful children, I miss you more with every passing day. I miss the sound of never-to-be grandchildren and mates filling the house. Sometimes, I can hear you all as if you are a room away, and my heart breaks anew as I recall lying you out and releasing you. Antecessors, if you heed only one plea from this old, broken soldier, allow me the chance to rest in their light once the darkness of this life is finished with me.*

*All the children and mates, mothers and fathers yet to be born, forgive me.*

The Voice broke through her prayer, dragging her toward the mountain until it took all her remaining energy to resist that call. Not even meditation pushed the darkness back any longer. As endless as the movement of the stars, the chorus of the Reapers' conflux chanted, a constant echo in the back of her mind, drowning out memory and joy and love.

It spoke of endless things, its multitudes of minds all talking, answering, debating, and somehow always finding consensus. It discussed breaking free of the Masters' Calling, of preparing for the next Harvest, and always … always the mad obsession with the Question. They never spoke it, but she knew it traced its origin all the way back to Harbinger. That sterile, pitiless intelligence had been the first created, the first to ask, even before it broke free, building a body for its massive mind. It had thought a body might answer the question, but harvesting the race of its masters and creators had provided only form, not substance.


Sometimes, she wondered if Harbinger even remembered the question. Other times it seemed as though insanity sang, shrill and harsh through the conflux, thousands of giant, complex minds all driven mad by the question. She suspected the latter to be true, to have searched so long, repeating the same pattern over and over without ever discovering what it wanted to know. That would drive anyone … or anything mad.

And now, her entire galaxy had been swallowed by that madness. Her children … bitter tears fell as their faces appeared. Seven beautiful, strong lives wasted before they even learned the joy of mates and babies, of lives spent fulfilling passions rather than wallowing in blood and despair.

Merol's slow footsteps on the terrace reached out to pull her back from the abyss. She traced his progress as he crossed the planks and stepped down the three stairs to sit by her side. He didn't touch her as he would have five cycles before. Back before the darkness made her anxious and afraid, he would have sat down and wrapped her tight in against his side. Oh, how she mourned for those days. He remained her heart, the good cool air in her lungs, but sometimes it wasn't her that responded to his presence, but rather the infestation at her center.

One night, he tried to wake her from a nightmare, but it hadn't been her who woke. When she surfaced, she'd found him slumped against the nest, bleeding and unconscious. The memory coaxed a moan, low and desolate, from her throat, as if she answered the lonely howls of the jennie echoing up from the forest below. That day, her beautiful mate stopped touching her before ensuring that he faced the mother of his last children rather than the monster.

"What are you doing within the mountain, haksaya kubenar?" Merol asked, his voice pitched low and soothing.
Tashac let out a soft sigh. The same question every night, and every night she possessed no answer to satisfy him. The monster worked within the mountain, granting her only momentary glimpses of freedom when it needed the chiastyllia ordered about. For all their strength to subjugate minds and enslave souls … for all the cataclysmic power of their will, the Reapers possessed no ability to command the tiny beings they’d corrupted. She found that irony delicious and sweet, ripe with the smallest of justices.

Every night, she tried to tell her mate what little she knew, but Sovereign never allowed it. Instead, she leaned against his side. "I am so very weary, my heart." She rested her head on his shoulder and wrapped her arms around him. "So very ready for an end." Rubbing the edge of her kepala along his, she let out a long breath. "I remain sure of so little, but you hold me fast."

A soft, musical sigh wrapped around them. "I'm no longer certain if that is a good thing." Merol pulled free of her arms, stood, and climbed the stairs.

"Cikabeknai? Please do not leave me." Tashac turned, a soft whimper of relief dragging from her throat when she saw her beloved was simply moving to sit on the step behind her. Letting out a ragged, desolate sigh, she closed her eyes, trying to calm the sudden, frantic terror. Of course he hadn't walked away. The father of her last children, her mate of more than sixty cycles, would never just walk away.

"Do you know what I hold onto, my love?" Merol whispered, his arms so very tight and warm around her. Tashac merely leaned back into him and tipped her head. No.

It shamed her, but no, she no longer knew her love's soul the way she once had. As that realization blossomed within her, it pushed back the darkness ever so slightly. Her eyes … all this time, her eyes had been focused in the wrong direction, seeking to fight the darkness by looking within. Oh, such a fool. Had there ever been a greater fool? Of course, the darkness grew, feasting upon her selfishness.

"What do you hold onto, Merol?" She twisted to look up into the glittering gold of his eyes. Brushing her kepala with his own, he smiled and said, "I remember Giran's birth. Do you remember that?" He chuckled and pressed his cheek against her neck. "I believe it angered her that I helped ease Attit into the air before her. The birth-matrons had never seen the like of those little hands pushing from you, Giran pulling herself free from your folds." He sighed and nuzzled the sensitive spot along the edge of her kepala where it plunged down toward her neck. "You always said, protheans were born fighting."

His eyes glistened. " I have spent more than sixty cycles at your side, the only place I can imagine finding happiness. I eased five lives from the care of your body into this galaxy, watched Lulyak deliver two more. Raised seven, beautiful children … loved them all as my own. Each one of them grew up fighting and died fighting, but because of you, they knew more than battle. They knew hope and how to cherish joy wherever they could find it. You taught them to fight for a better life, not just to kill the enemy."

"I have forgotten … allowed the darkness to steal far too much from my mind and heart." Tashac let out a soft sigh, her entire being relaxing into his hands as he stroked her neck and shoulders, thumbs dragging along the ridge of ligaments tying her shoulder into her neck and back. "I have always hated those antecessor-cursed statues on Ilos, their heads cast down, spines dragging so low. An entire race's defeat carved into stone … how my spirit railed against them. And now my spirit bears that same shape."
Merol's hands slipped lower, following the line of her spine. "I know that the Vanguard eats away at you, beautiful mother of my last children. Does it hurt you to fight it? Have you truly reached the end of your strength?" He hesitated, caressing just above her proximal ceraya.

Tashac leaned forward, rounding her back, encouraging the contact. She tipped her head a little as her muscles began to relax, her mate's touch prompting an instinct as old as her people. "That is what you meant?" she asked, seeing his heart as clearly as her own. He worried that he truly was all that kept her going, her heart defeated.

… (concurrent)...

Nihlus rubbed Shepard's back as she choked, his mandibles giving a hard flick as he said, "Actually, Captain, I'm not her boyfriend, I'm just in love with her. Well, and we were bond-mates in prothean memories that the beacons stuffed into our heads … had two kids … spent a lifetime together."

Anderson's continually morphing expression gave Nihlus a strange satisfaction. Sort of the way he imagined it must feel to show up at the parent's domin after sneaking off to bond in secret. Anderson pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and passed it to Shepard, his laser drill stare boring straight into Nihlus. The intensity just increased Nihlus's amusement.

"Prothean bond-mates? Had two kids?" The captain shook his head. "That one is going to take a little explaining."

Shepard drew Nihlus's attention, wheezing a little before blowing her nose. Giving him a scowl that hit harder than a guided missile, she stomped on his foot. Blithely ignoring the threat in her stare, and the pounding ache in his foot, Nihlus just patted her back while she leaned on her knee, trying to catch her breath.

"No," Shepard said, the word a sharp bark aimed at Anderson. Nihlus grinned as he watched the teasing war of wills playing out around him. "Get those thoughts out of your head, sir. You don't get to pull your, 'Son, come help me decide which shotgun to take on this mission' stunts anymore. I'm not an eighteen year old cadet."

The elevator ground to a halt, the door letting out a sharp ding as they arrived at the alley to the wards. Nihlus's heart crashed as reality registered, all his amusement dying in a landslide of dread. How many times had he watched those exact minutes play over and over on his omnitool? How many times had he watched his moment come and go, Shepard's blood splashing across Garrus's face, painting the other torin's silhouette on the wall?

Anderson's warm laugh buffeted the Spectre's cocoon of misery, the laugh of a father proud to have protected his daughter so well. "You've got to admit, having the suitors help me choose my weapons got you a lot of extra study time."

Shepard stepped from the carriage, her entire posture changing the moment she saw Garrus. Nihlus let out a long breath composed of yearning, regret, and a gentle sort of gladness. He'd messed up … messed up … yeah, if that wasn't the understatement of all time … and Garrus had been there to support her, to be her partner and shoulder to lean on, the way Nihlus should have been. He envied the other torin the way Shepard began to glow the moment she entered Garrus's gravity. Despite her saying that they were fine … that she didn't regret their hard beginning, Nihlus feared he'd never bring that instant, easy smile to her face.

Shepard slipped in against Garrus's side and the pair led the way down the corridor.
Nihlus looked down the deserted alley, his emotions ripping him apart like two preteril fighting over a soluvermus. He chuffed softly, earning a raised eyebrow from Anderson, but didn't look toward the captain. Any second the door at the other end of the alley would open and five people would get out. All of them would seem harmless. He'd watch them without really paying any attention, his concentration on Anderson's continued disbelief that Shepard chose Udina to become humanity's council member. Halfway down the alley, the completely unremarkable human would appear to stumble and then catch himself on Shepard's bad arm.

Hand reaching for his shotgun even before he saw the man's weapon, Nihlus would open his mouth to call out a warning. And then the moment would be gone, taking Shepard with it.

The Spectre clenched his teeth and pulled his neck back, setting his shoulders. "Not this time." Anderson turned to look at Nihlus, the captain's hand moving to his sidearm without a second's hesitation.

The door opened, the civilians stepped out. A fierce, indignant sort of rage greeted the human as he appeared. How dare he steal Shepard from the galaxy? Did he even really know who he was murdering? Did he care?

Fury pulled Nihlus's mandibles back, locking them in a sneer. It didn't matter. At last he had a chance to do what he'd dreamed so many times. The man lingered behind the others, letting them get ahead three then four metres, enough to have them clear, but not enough to draw attention to himself. Heart freezing solid, everything disappearing into smoke but his anger and a sharp laser focus, Nihlus let the man close.

"Not her. Not this time." It might not give him or his fratrin the last two cycles back. It might not change the reality of Shepard having to find herself back in a body and a life two years dead. It might not stop the nightmares and it might not close the hole in his gut that howled endlessly.

But it couldn't hurt to try.

He watched Shepard jump a little and laugh at something Garrus said. He'd always wondered what his fratrin had teased her about, but respected Garrus's grief too much to prod him for the details.

Fifteen metres. Ten. The world slowed down around him, allowing a clarity of sight that even watching the vid hadn't allowed. He could see it all … the way the human hesitated, looking interested in something on the floor to allow the other pedestrians to gain more clearance … the subtle movements and signals that told him unspoken promises had been made between Shepard and Garrus … the way Anderson moved in sync with him, demonstrating the veteran captain's absolute trust in a fellow soldier's instincts.

Nihlus's heart dropped back into place, its rhythm calming to just slower than normal, blood carrying resolution to steady his hands and power his legs. His breathing slowed and deepened. Spectre Kryik present, accounted for, and locked on target. Opting for the accuracy of his sidearm instead of his previous choice of shotgun, he drew in a long breath and shouted, "Garrus! Cover Shepard!"

Garrus reacted instantly, grabbing Shepard and curling around her, spinning to put his body between the civilians and his girlfriend. Bearing her to the floor, he shoved her in against the wall, as Nihlus and Anderson strode forward, guns lifting and opening fire. The assassin went for his weapon, but too late, his head disintegrating into a spatter of blood, and bone, and hair.

Nihlus staggered to a stop, the muzzle of his gun dropping toward the floor. For a split second, his pulse pounded in his ears, but then he let out a long, harsh cry of tangled victory and mourning.
He'd done it. Finally. He sank to his knees on the floor, all the anger and self-incrimination and even sorrow draining away. He'd done it. He'd saved her, and more importantly, he'd seen that without foreknowledge, she could never have been saved.

"Nihlus?" Shepard crouched next to him, her arm draped around his neck. Lowering herself to kneel, knees pressed against his thigh, she let out a long sigh. "Did you see it?" She leaned in to rest her brow against the side of his head.

Nodding, he whispered, his voice scarcely louder than her breath, "It always had to happen."

"Yeah." She pressed her lips against his hide. "And it really is okay. Not perfect. Not the direction I would have wished for my life, but okay."

… (concurrent) …

Merol rejoiced at the light and hope that burst through his mate. He truly had feared her finished, and he stood such a very long distance from being ready to lose her. Even though he might be an old prothean, and as such, having been gifted so very much more than all his contemporaries … . Well, no one remained to call him selfish for holding onto a few extra cycles with his love.

Sliding his hands down her spine, he let his thumbs caress her ceraya, smiling as she relaxed, and opened her mind and heart to him. Most of their adult lives, they'd just had to brush fingers to know everything the other felt. No secrets. Nothing hidden between them. Sovereign hid so much of her away that he no longer even dared touch her before speaking. Ah, the irony of being the indoctrination-free mate when he toyed with Reaper technology his entire adult life, and Tashac destroyed it.

How bitter that draught spread across his tongue and through his soul. Even as his mate opened to him, allowing her entire being to show, he could see the darkness, a singularity at her center. It consumed her in tiny bites, nibbling away at everything strong, at the beauty that had stolen his heart the moment he laid eyes on her.

Nearly sixty-five cycles lie between the dusk that streaked the sky above him and the bright, golden morning when the manager of the military science facility escorted the new head of security into Merol's lab. Mouth hanging open, he'd stared, never having seen anyone to equal the sheer presence of Junior Captain Tashac Jacar. As was proper and respectful, Tashac had bowed her head to him when the facility manager introduced them.

For his part, he could only blame some intrinsic force of the universe for his fingers reaching out to skate along her arm. Surely, without the interference of universal-level forces, he would never initiate such familiar and disrespectful contact, especially with someone who could kill him fifteen ways using just one hand. No, powerful cosmic forces—the same that coaxed the stars to dance—had whispered in his aural receptors, enthraling him with the notion of finding out if what lie at Tashac's heart matched the magnificence of her surface.

"Were you disappointed?" Tashac asked, teasing a little as she wriggled further onto her stair. She leaned into him, her back brushing his belly with every movement. Silken thoughts caressed his, cool and diaphanous but also gaining strength, resilient. Sweet and rich, but piquant with spice, her emotions swelled to defy the darkness, calling to him with that same music that had ensorcelled his fingers all those cycles before.

"Not a single moment," he replied, even knowing he didn't need to. Looking up at the brilliantly painted sky, he let out a long sigh of contentment and held his mate in the circle of his arms. The whispered song of the wind pushed the eerie silence of the mountain up the slope, allowing peace
to envelope them.

"No," Tashac said at last. She turned to look into his eyes. The brilliant violet glinted with some of her old joy and spirit. "No, it doesn't hurt, my love. Fighting their darkness is fuel, not defeat. As are you, and the memory of my children." Jutting her chin out a little, she smiled and said, "Make room for me on the top stair?"

Merol returned her smile, his body warming to the heat in her thoughts. He slid back, watching as she stood and slipped off her robe. She hung it over the railing and climbed up, sitting between his thighs. Twisting to face him, she caressed the ridge of his kepala with her own, eyes closing as their love and ardor fed into one another, mingling and growing.

When she turned her back to him and curled down over her knees, he folded around her, feeling truly connected to his mate for the first time in cycles.

Later, when they retired to their nest, and she slept, he resolved to find a way into the mountain. During their joining, he'd caught glimpses of the work going on within those tunnels and caves. The Vanguard would never allow Tashac to destroy what they built, but he … he could be sure that they never fulfilled their purpose.

And in her sleep, Tashac screamed.

... The world inside their heads shifted, a boot stuck in mud wriggling ever so slightly to create a thin pocket of air around it. The computer remained silent, but Nihlus felt the claws digging into him loosen. If changing their dreams to add emotions missing from the real experience and events loosened its hold, what would the machine do with hope? Did he have enough freedom under their microscope to bring in wishes for the future … dreams rather than memories?

… (nearly concurrent) ...

"Mmmm, that was lovely." Shepard let out a long, happy-sounding sigh, her expression one of languid contentment. She grinned as she stretched, a trill of pleasure rolling deep in her throat.

Nihlus waited, a slow smile spreading his mandibles as the silence dragged on from seconds to a minute. Watching her out of the corner of his eye, he saw blank slate of satiation and pleasure overwritten, replaced by concerns that slowly piled up until she rolled over to face him.

"I'm up early to take that band of newbies on live fire maneuvers and then home late-ish tomorrow night." Shepard winced when he laughed, then sighed and chuckled. Sliding her leg over his, she curled in tight against his side. "Ugh, I didn't even last five minutes, did I? I thought you were supposed to smack me if I started doing the whole human day-planner thing within an hour of orgasm." She lifted herself up on her elbow and kissed him. "Sorry."

"Spanking is more foreplay than punishment, isn't it?" He grinned and relaxed down into his pillows, savouring the weight of the arm thrown over his keel, her heat warming his side. "Go ahead, plan our days, I don't mind. I know you're just freaking out because both Izzy and Terrus are heading to school in the morning." Opening one eye at the soft, almost keening sound she made at the mention of their youngest going out into the big galaxy of growing up, he grinned and lifted his head to nuzzle her lips. "You'll be fine. They're both still your babies. And to answer what you haven't asked, I'm home tomorrow, so I can get the kids off to school and pick them up."

She kissed him again and draped over him, her head on his shoulder. "Garrus is heading to the
Citadel. He's staying overnight, but he doesn't leave for the spaceport until nearly midday." She lifted up just high enough to look down into his eyes. "How about we all get up a half hour early so we can have breakfast together? I'll bring home supper, and afterward, you and I can take the kids down to the park and run them around. Then we can just curl up in bed and watch a vid or something once they pass out."

He nuzzled her lips and leaned in to touch brows. "Sounds perfect. However, the day after tomorrow, you and Garrus are going to have to organize yourselves because I've actually got to go do some work … take out some bad guys … enforce galactic justice, etc."

Shepard looked down at him, her expression loving, but serious and thoughtful. "You know, Garrus and I don't always express it the way we should, but we couldn't make this whole thing work without you. Thank you for sticking close to home. I know you could be out taking a lot more missions."

A long breath trickled from Nihlus's throat as he shook his head. "I don't want that life anymore, Jane." He rolled, over, pressing her back into the mattress, and leaned over her. "I don't feel like I'm missing out." He kissed her. "Quite the opposite. You, me, Garrus, our kids … this is what I want. This is what we fought the damned Reapers to have." Nuzzling his face into her neck, he stroked her side with his other hand, then smacked her hip. "Now, go take a shower and get to bed."

Shepard sighed and flopped. "I don't want to. It's warm here, and the caman will have burned down."

He chuckled softly and nuzzled her lips. "I heard Garrus banking it a few minutes ago. The domin will be warm. Get yourself to bed, mother of both my children, otherwise you aren't going to be up in time for my pancakes."

Shepard closed her eyes and let out a soft, decadent moan. "I do love your pancakes." She moved beneath him, her smile telling him that she was just savouring the sensation of her skin sliding against his plates and hide.

He watched her, his entire body resonating with a love that deepened and grew richer with time. Snagging her wrist in his talons, he lifted it to his mouth, nuzzling the delicate skin and the two opalescent chains wrapped around it. His bond-mate, mother of his children … more than a decade of good times and bad lie between them and wrapped them in the comfort of all the promises they'd made … and mostly kept.

He felt her watching him and smiled, nuzzling the tokens of their bonding.

"Do you ever regret it?" she asked, her voice a bare whisper.

"Regret what, haksaya kubenar?" He lifted off her when she tried to sit up. Legs tangled, bare skin pressed against hide, hands intertwined, they sat facing one another. Eyes tracing every feature, he waited for her to answer.

"All of it? Any of it?" She reached up and caressed his face. "You used to regret so much."

Nodding, he let out a soft sigh. "Not any more. You were right. Life's too short, and I like where I am … who I am. Without all the stupidity and the fights and the awkward bits, we … I … might never have found my way here." It was true. Somewhere along the line, he'd just let go of the past and its baggage in favour of living.

She pulled against his hands, lifting up to kneel between his thighs. "I love who you are. Always
have, but this torin … " Kissing him, she whispered against his mouth. "... he just keeps getting
better. I love you, Spectre Nihlus Kryik." Chuckling, she swung over his leg and off the bed. "And
I need to have a shower. Sleep well, cikabeknai."

Nihlus flopped over onto his pillows and pulled the blankets up to his chest. Closing his eyes, he
listened to the sound of the shower, his mate splashing as she bathed, then the soft murmur of
conversation from the other room. No, he regretted noth—

For the barest of moments, not long enough for his heart to beat or his lungs to take a breath,
Nihlus knew his mind was free. Then something slammed into him. A skybus? A small frigate,
maybe? The tube of amber chia shattered, the world exploding into pain, motion, sound, and
blinding light.

He'd been blown up enough to recognize the sensations, as well as the impact of floor meeting
bone and plate even through his armour. Taking the worst of the hit, his pelvis was the first to cozy
up to the complaints desk and start the paperwork. Tumbling around him a little, the world drifted
back into focus, vision and comprehension reasserting themselves.

They were free, but how?

Groaning, he shoved himself up off the cavern floor and took in the dead, black chunks of chia
strewn everywhere; the machine encased in a glistening, diamond shell; and the smoking remains
of the cylinder that had held them trapped. "Shepard?" His voice came out cracked and barely
audible. Pushing up until he could sit without being buttressed by an arm, he lifted a hand to his
head. "Jane? Are you okay?"

A long groan answered him, then a soft curse. A handful of metres across the room, Shepard rolled
over onto her side and dug an elbow into the floor, using it to wedge herself into a semi-upright
position. "Yeah, I'll live," she answered at last. "Nice thinking there, Spectre." Lifting her head to
meet his gaze, she gave him a weary grin. "How are you doing?"

A slow smile spread his mandibles. "I'm okay." And he was. Yes, he still felt weak, and he hurt
nearly everywhere, but inside him, in that place he never allowed himself to examine too closely,
the hole didn't yawn so deep or so hungry. He shifted around so he was sitting cross-legged. "I
suppose this is when the Collectors beat down the door and attack." He glanced toward the doors,
checking to make sure they were all shut. They were … and still locked down. But … uncorrupted
chia encased the machine. How had they gotten in?

Shepard rolled over onto all fours and crawled over to sit on her heels in front of him. "Yeah, this is
definitely the part of the adventure when the Collectors swarm in, and we have to shoot our way
out, but first … ." She lifted up onto her knees and wrapped her arms around his neck. "First, I get
to hug the ever-living-crap out of you." She kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

Wrapping his arms around her, he whispered, "And you." He chuckled then nuzzled her ear, the
skin like velvet against his plates. "It's strange, but both sets of memories feel real. I prefer the new
set."

Leaning back a little, she stared into his eyes, her expression an odd mixture of joy and sadness,
love and regret. "So do I. Thank you, Nihlus. Thank you for taking such good care of me." She
kissed him softly, but he felt every emotion, the depth of the gratitude and love that underpinned it.

Shepard knew him as well as he knew himself now, and instead of being horrified and disgusted by
all the weak places, all the dark spots and self-destructive anger, she offered only acceptance. He'd
always thought that if someone saw the real Nihlus that they'd detest him for how truly ugly a
picture it was. Then along came that bright, beautiful light. She saw into every corner, and all he'd felt from her was love, even after the darkness had lashed out and hurt her so badly.

The kiss ended far too soon. His mouth followed her lips as she sniffed and wiped at her face, pulling away from his embrace. "Okay, enough of the mushy stuff." She caressed his cheek. "Come on, old guy, we're still buried under a Reaper and Collector infested mountain, trapped in with a machine built to answer a question that only the Reapers seem to know." She heaved herself up off the floor and stretched, her joints popping loud enough to make him wince.

Nihlus chuckled. "You sound like the old guy with all the creaking and popping." When she offered a hand to help him up, he took it but didn't move to stand. "The machine has been taking people apart for at least fifty thousand cycles, but from the sound of it, for a lot longer than that in different forms." He stared at their joined hands without really seeing them, his thoughts holding his complete attention as they raced. "Although I'm sure they need the biological and cognitive data for some nefarious purpose, like turning the asari into those creatures, the question is wrapped up in the rest of the data."

He looked up, meeting her eyes. "I think I know what the question is," Nihlus said. He gathered his feet under him and shoved himself up off the stone floor, a crooked grin greeting the creaking and popping of his joints. Up and balanced, he stared into Shepard's eyes, his mandibles betraying the war between elation and terror raging in his gut. "They aren't asking if they have a soul like the geth did."

Her nod told him that she'd already considered that possibility.

As he turned to face the machine, gravity took hold, reminding him of his damaged places, and he slumped a little, his whole body leaning toward his bad hip. "No, they've been taking us apart for millions of cycles, dissecting the one part of us they can't comprehend, because they're trying to find their missing piece. Harbinger's question was ... why was I created incomplete? Why don't I have a soul?"

He blinked and swallowed, dread swelling within his heart until it felt as though it took up his entire chest cavity, pressing out against his ribs and threatening to explode out through his keel. If his guess was right, the implications were quite literally unimaginable. Could such a question ever be answered? And how much would the Reapers destroy and consume in their madness?

"And I think Tashac was right," he continued, needing to get it all out, for Shepard to hear it and dismiss it as impossible. "After millions of cycles, trying to answer Harbinger's question has driven them insane."

Chapter End Notes

And now back to our regularly scheduled Shepard and Nihlus. :D These two just ... . Yeah. When it got to the Nihlus dreaming about the future, I just said ... whatever, dude, the sky's the limit. Bring it. And the big dream was family. And it included Garrus. He kills me. He just kills me.

As for the Reapers, the whole we created an AI to kill all organics and synthetics to
stop organics and synthetics from killing one another thing just didn't work for me, so I've created my own lore as to their reasons and their relationship to the Leviathans ... and I hope it at least makes sense in the end. Got a ways to go before that though. Lots to reveal and discover as they move on. And then again, maybe Nihlus is just plain wrong. Hahahahahaha.

Thanks as always. :D *glomping hugs of doooom*
Chapter Summary

Bracing his hands against the wall, he let his head hang between his arms, and closed his eyes. All he wanted to do was go home, wrap his arms around Kahri and breathe her in. No, what he really wanted to do was sweep her up and carry her off some place warm and beautiful. No more impossible war and terrifying enemies, just long, slow days spent next to an ocean, surrounded by the people who mattered.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

37 Days ASR

Martin and Kaidan met them just inside the front door looking very pleased with themselves, at least for the first second or two. The kid laughed and held up a rain poncho. "Well, these seemed like a good idea before seeing that you've all been … swimming?"

Bunny snatched the rain gear from Martin's hand and put it on. "No point in adding to it." She punched him in the shoulder. "Thanks, kid."

Garrus just shook his head when Martin turned to face the general, his mouth hanging comically agape. "Go ahead," he said. "Get the Shepards aboard and up to medbay." He nodded to Kaidan to assist Lucille with the poncho. The Normandy stood a hundred metres or so away from the house. Couldn't hurt to block the rain as much as possible. The ladies had suffered enough.

Garrus followed Kaidan and Lucille out the door, Martin and Bunny already just watercolour figures disappearing into the misty downpour. He ducked his head, leaning forward a little to keep the cowl of his armour from filling up. Drains kept him from drowning in his armour, but rain was still damned annoying, although not nearly so aggravating as snow.

Something the size of a fighter slammed into the ground in front of him, stopping his heart as a wave of blue-white energy blasted him back through the door into the house. He crashed into the wall, rebounding to land face first on the marble floor, his entire body letting out a huge, unanimous bellow of pain, the jolt restarting his battered organs.

"The beetle thing's back!" The shout came from Bunny, her tone not terror or anger, but rather something that set Garrus's gut to curdling again. He shoved her reaction aside to examine after he'd survived the next couple of minutes.

Giving him a 'heads up, the monster's still out there' amounted to inexcusable cooperation, Garrus decided as he crawled away from the open door. It couldn't get through, but that probably wouldn't stop it from cutting itself a bigger hole.

Once clear, he scrambled up, talons raking the floor, running before his feet even made it under him. He opened his comms. "Get the Shepards aboard!" He ducked below a window in the next room, some sort of hall or reception room, and peeked up over the sill of the large, picture windows. The thing floated his way, no doubt tracking him through heat. Two beam weapons fired
out of the beetle's eyes, sending him rolling down the wall. Luckily, the weapon shot in a straight line rather than tracking him. He rolled again, leading it toward the far end of the room from the door and the Normandy. He needed to buy time to get Bunny and Lucille onto the ship.

"Joker, will the GARDIANs fire with the Normandy on the ground?" he called, rolling away from those beams as they sliced through the front of the house, showering him with glass. A couple more hits and the windows would collapse enough to let it in, and then he'd be screwed.

"Yes," the pilot replied as Garrus set up a concussive shot. "Painting the ugly beetle monster red. Firing."

The GARDIAN lasers hit, taking down the thing's barrier enough that Garrus's concussive shot stripped away the last of it. He got off a few shots, but then the monstrosity slammed into the ground just on the other side of the wall and released the energy blast again, throwing him out of cover.

Garrus bolted, some sort of horrible screeching noise accompanying another attack, but instead of a blast, that one felt as though it reached into his cells to rip all the energy right out of him. He fell out the door, gasping, his entire body suddenly so weak that he could barely stay on his feet. Stumbling into the rain, he took cover behind a large planter.

"We're aboard, General." The professional calm in Kaidan's voice gave Garrus complete confidence in the Normandy's side of the fight. "Returning with more firepower."

"Stay back and attack at range," Garrus ordered. "This thing has short range energy attacks. One will knock you out of cover, but the other … I think it can kill you instantly if you're too close."

"Roger that, sir."

The chatter of a squad's worth of Mattocks filled the air, but didn't distract the Collector monster. Whatever else the Collectors had been there to do, it became glaringly obvious that his death or capture ranked right near the top of their list. He ducked around his cover, hitting it with a concussive shot. Damn thing had restored its shields.

"Keep up the fire, Joker. It restores shields," he called into the radio. "We need to keep it distracted and try to take it down fast once the shields fall." He glanced around as the thing floated up, completely negating his cover. Time to find cover somewhere it couldn't flank him from above.

"GARDIANs are going to start heating up and becoming less accurate," Joker told him needlessly.

Lingering weakness from the last attack tossed 'finding good cover' and 'breathing room' to the top of his priorities. He needed time and a forgiving environment in which to recover. A small stand of trees and bushes grabbed his attention. It would do, as long as the beetle didn't last long enough to cut it all down.

As if to emphasize the point, the Normandy shot the beetle as it slammed into the ground just on the other side of his cover. Garrus threw himself backwards into nearly a quarter metre of mud and water as the lasers skipped off the thing's barriers, searing into the planter less than an arm's length from his head.

Heavy limbs dragging, Garrus scrambled up and ran, ducking into the thick foliage, every breath coming hard and ragged. Damned fire suppressant foam. Once he made it a few metres in, he paused to glance back. No doubt, the husk beetle could still see him, but at least he could out maneuver it until it burned down enough trees to follow. "Joker, not hitting me with the
GARDIANs would be appreciated."

Joker crowed. "Don't worry, General. I used to bullseye womp rats in my T-16 back home. I've got this."

Garrus ran a handful of metres further in and ducked down behind a large tangle of shrubbery. Despite his annoyance, a faint chuckle eased back the tension wiring his jaw shut. "That made no sense." He glanced out and brought up his assault rifle. He needed to get that thing's shields down. The geth-installed high frequency GARDIANs would need a few shots to cut that thing down, and they heated up quickly. "Martin and Kaidan, did the Normandy get any of those heavy arc weapons that Shepard brought with her?"

"With all due respect, sir, you're getting old and slow," the kid replied. "We're already on our way with them. Just keep out of range of the arc, or we'll be taking your bar-b-q'd smoky bits back to Omega. That's not news I'm giving Shepard … Kaidan can do it."

Garrus glanced around the bush as Kaidan sputtered in his ear, and emptied his heat sink into the thing. "With no due respect, I'm out here with it glued to my ass. Just shoot it." Sixteen shots barely scratched the damned shields. He hit it with a concussive shot, then rolled into a crouched run, moving around to flank it, hopefully out of bar-b-q range. Electricity ripped through the dim, misty downpour, wreathing the beetle in blue-white lightning. Taking cover on high ground, Garrus emptied two more heat sinks into it.

When the Collector's shields crashed, he saw the deep scars gouged into its armour. At least that didn't regenerate. "Take it out, Joker."

The Normandy fired, ripping one leg clean off the body, a second shot scorching a long gash along the metal hide. Legs lifting, the beetle thing prepared to slam itself into the ground and restore its barrier.

"Again, Joker! Quickly." The GARDIANs and arc projectors tore into the monstrous thing as it opened its maw. Garrus's gut flipped. The damned thing was filled with husk heads … functional … their eyes lit, their mouths gaping as they screamed. Dear spirits. Would the Reapers' well of horror ever reach a bottom? Colonists turned into—

The Normandy fired again just as the thing descended toward the soaking ground, Alenko and Weaver attacking in concert. Lightning crackled along its shell, lancing into the soil. Flame exploded from its maw, the husks all letting out a heinous scream as they went up in flames. The beetle listed to starboard then the fire spread, consuming the machine in seconds. Ash floated on the drowned lawn, blowing ahead of the howling wind.

Garrus slumped into a crouch, half-leaned against a tree, arms resting on his thighs. Well, if that bastard coming back didn't stir the field from mud to slop. He looked up at the sound of large armour crashing through thick foliage. Bunny had known about the monster. He'd bet his mandibles that she did.

He watched Martin and Kaidan approach without really seeing them. Not a single moment or event of the mission added up. Not unless the Collectors hadn't made a deal with Krellid at all, or at least, not just with Krellid.

"General! You alive?" Martin called, stopping to search.

Garrus stood, letting out a long breath before he spoke. "Yeah, kid, still alive."
"You are hard to kill, aren't you? They warned me you would be."

She'd said they, not he. They warned Bunny that Garrus would be hard to kill. He nodded toward the ship. "Come on, let's get aboard. I'm tired of this storm." Leading the way, angled at thirty degrees to avoid getting blown over, Garrus dug in, the going slow and slippery. He let out a long, moaning sigh of relief once he passed through the Normandy's barrier.

"Thank the spirits." He turned to the other two. "Get showered, dry, and warm, then the two of you can lead the art reclamation effort." He popped the seals on his vambraces and stripped them off. "Lucille wants to save whatever she can. I gave her a twenty-four hour limit, so make sure that everyone digs in." Striding to his armour trunk, he called back, "And make sure both she and Bunny sleep at some point."

When the two men reached the elevator, Garrus stopped and turned. "Martin, call the operations department back home and get them working on carriers to transport the total number of slaves. They'll also need to prepare to house them on Omega until we can locate their families or take them elsewhere. Have them contact Barla Von with budgets and requisitions." Gaze turning to Kaidan, he continued, "Contact the other teams. Find out what sort of numbers we're looking at." His mandibles flicked. "Please."

Both men gave a hearty 'Yes, sir', and headed off.

Once he stripped out of his armour, Garrus headed up to the shower. Hopefully a few minutes of scalding hot water would stop the shivering, an intractable chill that settled just beneath his plates. Exhaustion hung heavily about his cowl as he stepped under the hot water. Whether caused by injury, the beetle thing's life-draining attack, or just the stress of the day … right then, he didn't care. He turned off his comms and let out a long breath. Silence for just a few moments. It wasn't too much to ask, was it?

Bracing his hands against the wall, he let his head hang between his arms, and closed his eyes. All he wanted to do was go home, wrap his arms around Kahri and breathe her in. No, what he really wanted to do was sweep her up and carry her off some place warm and beautiful. No more impossible war and terrifying enemies, just long, slow days spent next to an ocean, surrounded by the people who mattered.

"Do turians get pruny?" Joker called over the intercom. "You've been in there for forty-five minutes. We're going to have to put out rain barrels if you use any more water."

Garrus shut off the water. "Are you spying on me? That's more than a little creepy, Joker." Without moving the curtain, he reached through the gap and grabbed his towel. Surely the Alliance hadn't changed the regs to allow cameras in the heads.

"I can't actually spy on you, and believe it or not, it's not my burning desire to poke my nose into your showers, but you've been in there thirty-two years." The pilot grumbled a little under his breath. "Dr. Chakwas keeps calling me because your radio is turned off. She thinks you're avoiding her and is threatening to dispatch a squad to bring you in if you don't report to medbay."

Garrus clutched the towel against his belly, fully aware that it was ridiculous. Anderson would never betray his people's trust by putting in cameras, and he didn't have anything on display to worry about. Still, going from being alone with his thoughts to having Joker hanging over his shoulder proved slightly violating and off putting to say the least.

Of course, he'd been radio silent for much longer than he intended, so he supposed he couldn't blame the pilot. "I'm on my way there as soon as I get dressed. Now, stop spying on me and keep
"I was wondering when you'd make it in here," Chakwas scolded. She nodded toward the back table. "Up you get. Heard you tried breathing fire suppressant foam."

He shrugged, but the burning in his airways didn't leave room for argument. "It doesn't work as well as you might think." Sitting, hands braced against the edge of bed, he watched her gather her supplies. "Have you had a chance to look over Lucille and Beatrix?"

The doctor nodded and rolled a table over next to his bed. "They are both healthy enough to work on clearing out the art. Lucille will need to be treated for malnutrition and to finish healing up her wounds. Beatrix will be a far more complicated matter." She nodded toward the pillows. "Make yourself comfortable, you're going to be here for a while. Your lungs and trachea need to be treated for chemical burns." She activated her scanner. "Not to mention the rest of your injuries."

Garrus grumbled and took a long, scalding sip of his drink. "May I finish this first? I just made it."

She chuckled and nodded. "Fine. I have to spackle up a few holes first, anyway." She finished scanning. "You and Shepard share a talent for getting yourselves filled with holes."

Chuckling, he nodded and took another drink. "Comes with the territory, Doc. If you'd seen the things we were fighting, you'd understand."

She frowned and began treating the wound behind his aural canal. "Strange, everyone else came back in relatively good shape." A crooked half-smile betrayed her teasing, so he left the barb unchallenged.

The combination of being warm and dry, the hot drink, and the gentle touch soothing the pain of his wounds left Garrus ready to lie back and allow the doctor to hook him up with a mask when it came time. He closed his eyes, letting the medication's cool mist to work its magic on his scorched airways. Muscles sinking into the mattress, cramping a little before going soft and slack, Garrus moaned, the relief both welcome and painful.

"Get some sleep," the doctor coaxed, lowering the lights. She set up privacy blinds and lowered the shades. "By the time the treatment is complete, you'll be ready to head back out and get shot full of more holes."

Garrus chuckled, but was already drifting off. When she spread a heated blanket over him, he just curled into it a little and fell fast asleep.

"General?" A warm hand touched his shoulder. "Garrus?"

Blinking against the bright lights, Garrus woke, one hand rising to cover his eyes while his pupils adjusted. He turned his head to look at the doctor.

"We're ready to lift off, General. I thought you might want to be up to lock everything down." She removed all the equipment attached to him.

He stared at her for a few more seconds, then ran his tongue over the roof of his mouth. Dry and
pasty. How long had he been out? Brushing back the blanket, he sat up. "Preparing to lift off? How long have I been asleep?" A numb hand rubbed at the side of his head. Numb? A vague, embarrassed sort of alarm set in. Losing feeling in his limbs would take extended hours lying on the too-thin mattress. "Really, how long? My arms are numb."

She nodded, a soft, kind chuckle greeting his alarm. "These beds aren't made for turians. You've been asleep eighteen hours. It didn't take as long to pack up the art as they thought."

Martin walked in, stared at Garrus for a few seconds and then threw up his hands. "He lives!"

"Eighteen hours? Why did you people let me sleep for eighteen hours?" He slid down off the bed and stretched out his limbs, shaking them to restore some circulation, mind racing. He should have been up hours ago. "There are a hundred things I need to do before we leave."

Martin preened a little. "Well, I have been both busy and amazing. Barla Von found a research institute that wants the rachni statue. Asari ... and willing to pay an amount of money I can't even comprehend, not to mention that they are willing to share all their research with us. But that is a statement of Von's awesomeness, not my own. Kaidan gave me the numbers, I gave them to Von and Operations, and carriers and Archangel personnel and supplies to care for the slaves are already underway. I also have arranged for the rest of Building Three to be opened, and Von cleared the funds for the extra sundries that will be required."

Sighing and shrugging as if his brilliance exceeded even what he could imagine, he continued, "The art is already crated and packed in our hold. The slaves here are organized and ready to evac when the carrier and its heavily armed escort arrives. You can go back to sleep if you want to. General Weaver has it all under control."

Garrus chuffed and straightened his clothing. "How long until the carrier gets here? What is the status of the other teams?"

Martin slumped a little as if wounded by the lack of appreciation then let out a dramatic, long-suffering sigh. "Just under fifty-three hours. The turian teams are remaining to provide security for the slaves at the mining operations. Victus is apparently recovered enough to be running the show from his hospital bed. He ordered his people to move the slaves into the most secure caverns in the mines and has patrols in place to watch for Collectors. Nyreen only reported sixty-three slaves. She's shuttling them over here to hitch a ride back to Omega."

Garrus activated his omnitool, opening his messages as Martin reported. Nothing from Shepard or Nihlus, but several from Archangel and Barla Von.

"The Passch transported down the crates of supplies we brought, but there wasn't enough to go around, so we raided the house for blankets and warm clothes." Martin ran down the list glowing on his omnitool. "We also set up the kitchen with power and the kitchen staff are back in there cooking up hot food and drinks. So, everyone should be okay until their transport arrives." He looked up, his eyes sad and exhausted. "There are a lot of people wanting to call family. I assured them that they'll be able to once we get them to Omega, and we'll make sure they get wherever they need to go."

"Good work." Feeling as though he'd slept for a half century, Garrus leaned back against the bed and took a second to collect himself. "Spirits, fifty-three hours?" It made sense, it was straight system to system FTL, and the carriers weren't nearly as fast as the Normandy, but he didn't want to remain on Lorek for another fifty-some hours. He needed to get back to Omega and prepare for another influx of people, get the Shepards settled in … and find out what was happening on Thessia.
"Dr. Chakwas, I want Beatrix Shepard kept under guard in the back lab. We'll have to move her to house arrest once we get back to Archangel, but I'll leave her care and treatment in your hands. Call in whatever resources you need." He raised his brow plates, giving her an opening to bring up concerns or questions, but she just nodded.

"Where are they now?" he asked, looking to Martin.

"Bunny is with the slaves. Mystery solved as to why they were locked away." The kid shrugged. "She knew we were coming and knew the Collectors were going to be shooting up the place so once Krellid locked himself in his panic room, she locked the slaves up to keep them safe." The careful, suspicious expression on the kid's face reminded Garrus of his earlier theory that Bunny might well have made some sort of deal with the Collectors.

"And Lucille?" Gripping the doctor's shoulder in his talons, he nodded. "Thank you, Doctor." Gesturing for Martin to fall in, he strode from medbay.

"Lucille is down making sure that all the art and books are secured properly." He snorted a little. "She smacked me in the back of the head when I packed a vase in the wrong crate." He stiffened and wagged his index finger. "That's Earth Qing dynasty porcelain, young man. It doesn't go in with the batarian Dar'letk period earthenware."

Garrus did his best to hide his grin, but the kid saw it and sighed. "What? Everyone is always smacking me in the head, and I think it's starting to jar things loose. I've got broken neurons in there just floating around, I know it."

That time the general let the smile loose. "You make it too easy, kid. Way too easy." Garrus ran through the list of things he'd wanted to do before the *Normandy* returned to Omega. Martin had covered most of it. "But you did good getting everything arranged." He slapped the young man's shoulder. "Now, let's go tie up the last few threads and get home."

Leaving *Passch* and most of the first and second teams behind under Kaidan's command, Garrus and the *Normandy* returned to the stars, headed home. It didn't even seem strange to think of the filthy station as home any longer. He took pride in how much it had changed over the cycles. Crime rates had plunged, Kima District wasn't an abandoned mire of violence and gang activity, people didn't run through the docks with their heads down and their noses covered any more, and they'd even created acres of paradise in the lower levels. Of course, the gardens needed a great deal of repair and replanting, but in at least their district, Omega had become a place to consider home.

Garrus spent most of his day and a half aboard standing at the QEC, arranging to house more than three thousand freed slaves, no small task, but luckily with having so recently absorbed the Talons and the refugees from Archangel's outer facilities, most of the work was underway. What was another three thousand bodies?

Three thousand more souls relying on his leadership, at least for a time. Dear spirits. When had such things become nothing more than part of his day to day? Three cycles before, that hothead cop yelling at the executor couldn't have even dreamed the way his life would change.

"General?" Joker's voice swooped into the vacuum of an ended conference with Von and the heads of Archangel's operations and accounting departments.

Garrus stretched and raked his talons over his fringe. "Go ahead, Joker." He winced as his spine popped all the way down, the muscles threatening to cramp.
"We're two hours out from Omega. The captain thought you'd like to know."

"Thanks, Joker," Garrus closed the myriad of files he had open, stuffed all his datapads into his attache case, then headed down to medbay. He wanted to have a chance to speak with Bunny before they arrived. The last thing the place needed was Shepard's little sister running through the corridors calling her sister a bitch and threatening to kill her. So soon after Shepard had saved all their asses … the kid would be lucky to end up with a simple beat down.

The younger Shepard looked up and let out a long, annoyed-sounding sigh when Garrus stepped through the door. "Let me guess," she said. "We're just about back to your superhero lair, and you've come to lay down the law." She bolted up to sit on the edge of her cot, her spine straight and rigid, her head pulled back, her shoulders and arms held wide. She swung stiff arms back and forth a little as she mocked him. "Now look here, little lady, I need you to behave yourself. Your sister loves you and … blah blah blah."

"Beatrix May Shepard!" Lucille scolded, moving over to sit next to her daughter. "That's no way to speak to the general who just freed us all."

Garrus just shook his head and waved off the insult. "Had I come to say that, I wouldn't be saying it now. I can't compete with that impersonation. You do a better me than I do." His mandibles flicked slightly under the heat of Bunny's glare, the surprise on her face very satisfying. Sitting on one of the crates facing her cot, he continued, "But, we are about to enter the heart of the army your sister started. Archangel was built out of love of her, and a lot of the people rallied to our cause because in some form or another, Shepard saved their lives."

"Like the kid claims that she saved him?" Bunny scoffed. "He looks about as saved as I was thanks to her." She yanked away from her mother as Lucille tried to put an arm around her. "Don't. You can believe all the lies you want, doesn't mean I have to."

"Anyway," Garrus continued, breaking up the family drama, "Shepard just saved most of Archangel from being obliterated by a massive merc army, so for your own good, I'm advising you to keep your opinions to yourself. They won't be popular." Raising his brow plates, he fixed her with an earnest stare, hoping she'd see the sense in his words.

"So no more lectures on how my sister suffered? Just a warning to keep my mouth shut?" She returned his stare with a glare.

"That's it. I told you, I'd only say the other once. I don't know enough to have the right to say anything else."

The door opened to reveal Anderson standing at the threshold. "But, I do." The captain looked over at Garrus. "I had Dr. Chakwas let me know when you came down to do this." He stepped inside far enough for the door to close, and looked over at Lucille and Bunny. "I was the one who found Jane on Mindoir. I was a lieutenant in the Alliance military, and on shore leave a couple of clusters away when we got word about what had happened on Mindoir. I caught the first ride I could and volunteered for one of the search parties."

Stomach clenched, Garrus watched the captain walk over to one of the computer terminals then looked back to the doctor standing in the doorway to make sure she was okay with Lucille and Bunny seeing it. "Are you sure?" he asked, his voice flat. "They're two days out from being ground through hell."

"No!" Bunny jumped up, aimed at Garrus. "I want to see it." She turned to Anderson. "Go ahead, do your worst."
"This isn't about trying to hurt you," the captain said. "It's about the truth of what I found that day. I recorded the entire mission. The Alliance wanted evidence to take before the Council." He started the vid and then looked up. "If you'll excuse me, I'll return after it's finished playing. Living through it once was more than enough."

Garrus looked to Lucille, clenching his teeth hard enough to send a vague ache rumbling through his jaw and up into his head. "You've already lived through this once as well," he said, trying to delay the inevitable. The icy dread crackling along his veins formed as much for himself as Lucy.

Grinding to a halt, he realized that as long as Bunny remained, Mother Shepard wouldn't leave her side. Damn Bunny's stubbornness. For all the girl's posturing and Lucy's hard shell, he felt the fragility that lay beneath the surface of both Shepards. He didn't believe either one in any state to be reminded of what happened on Mindoir, and the child's determination to prove them all wrong could end up harming both.

"I'll stay, General, thank you." Lucille sat beside her daughter and tried to wrap an arm around Bunny's shoulders. "You don't need to do this. Take some time, recover from—"

Bunny jerked from away from her mother. "Don't try playing mommy now. You're fifteen years too late." Turning her back on her mother's tight-lipped pain, she looked up at Anderson, challenging either him or herself. "Go ahead."

"If either of you wants to stop it," Chakwas spoke up, "we'll turn it off immediately." She stepped out of the doorway, moving over to sit on a crate near Lucille.

"Stop, all of you." The teenager whirled to glare at them. "Damn, I'm not some porcelain doll. I've seen a hell of a lot worse than dead people in the last fifteen years." She sliced an index finger at Anderson. "Since you seem to be the only person willing to treat me like a functional adult, turn the damn thing on and go."

A curt nod answered her demand, then Anderson looked over at Garrus. The captain's expression clearly told the general that he didn't want to see what the vid had to show. Sighing, Garrus nodded. Every muscle in his body tightened to the point of spasm as he stretched between staying to provide the Shepards with what little support he could and sparing himself. However, as much as he didn't want to witness the darkest moments his Light had ever faced, he needed to.

He and Kahri needed to move past what the vid showed and what it meant. Maybe the only way to do that was for him to face it, see the reality, and then, let it go. As long as Mindoir remained some sort of taboo mystery, it held too much power over them both.

"April 2, 2170. Mindoir colony. 0600 hours. Lovell settlement. Lieutenant David Anderson recording for S&R Team Theta."

Garrus looked over at the vid screen without turning to face it. A younger, worn-out looking Anderson stared into his helmet camera as he spoke. Then the picture swivelled, panning the troop compartment of a Grizzly as Anderson seated the helmet on his head. "We're approaching the settlement from the east along the main road from the capital."

Garrus squinted as light exploded across the screen, the aching brilliance transforming into a blur of dizzying movement that solidified into grass and a dirt road. In the distance, across wide fields of smoking char, a cluster of about thirty homes stood vigil. The Alliance troops fanned out to cross the burned out field, searching for survivors. Seconds into their search, the condition of the bodies littering the ground spoke to the futility of their effort.
As he watched, the general's gut tied itself into a tighter and tighter knot. So many bodies. No doubt, they represented everyone too old to be considered useful.

"We were a small settlement," Lucille said, her voice a bare whisper laden with so much regret and pain that each word cut like a scalpel. "Our family was one of the exceptions amidst retired folk. They moved to spend their dotage away from the capital." Her entire body heaved, her hand clapping against her mouth as the wave rolled up her torso. "Most weren't even given the mercy of a bullet. After they finished with them, the batarians simply herded them into the field and burned them alive when they torched the crops."

Garrus let out a long breath, heart aching. He wished he knew Lucille well enough to feel comfortable sitting next to her and taking her hand. Her daughter should be comforting her, but Bunny occupied herself trying to look tough and unaffected.

As the Marines closed in on the settlement, Lucille paled, the skin around her lips growing so white that Garrus threw caution aside. Sitting next to her, he reached up to grip her shoulder, deciding that left enough personal space between them. She looked up at him, a wan smile dying stillborn on her lips.

The other Marines hollered and ran forward, Anderson chasing after them, but before he arrived, shouts of hope turned to anger. Two of them ran past Anderson, and the sound of retching drifted in from off camera.

"Bastards," someone muttered, pushing past. Judging by the patch on the man's uniform, he was the unit medic. "Just a fucking kid."

The camera pushed forward, moving up the gravel road into the rows of houses. Garrus closed his eyes as Anderson stopped, no doubt trying to figure out what he was looking at.

Herros had taken Garrus drellak hunting in his youth. The days spent together in the forest and stalking herds across the grasslands of Palaven remained some of the general's best memories. However, killing the beast and then dressing it provided some of the worst. Neither those memories nor anything he'd ever seen in C-Sec came close to what appeared in Anderson's camera.

A soft mewling sound rattled from Lucille's throat, smashing any barriers of propriety, the knot in Garrus's gut insisting that he wrap his arm around the woman's shoulders. She leaned into his side as if grateful not to have to hold herself upright when Anderson bent down next to one bloody, ragged arm and took its pulse.

The lieutenant hollered—a wordless shout of discovery—and rolled the dead man off Shepard's back.

"Dad," Bunny said, matter-of-fact. She glanced over her shoulder at Garrus. "You're going to tell me that piece of meat there is Jane?"

Too sick, in both stomach and heart, to reply, Garrus simply nodded toward the vid screen. She'd see for herself soon enough.

Gentle hands untied the hood over her head, then removed it, followed by the blindfold. A face looked up at the camera, red hair tangled around everything, soaked to her skin with sweat and blood. Despite a nose broken so badly that it sat bent to the side, blood, bruises, and smashed bones, the face undeniably resembled those in the room with him. Green eyes, brilliant against the black skin around them despite being bloodshot, stared up at Anderson for a moment before the scream Garrus had only imagined until that moment, broke free.
Bunny staggered backwards a little as the girl on the vid screen shrieked then collapsed onto the gravel. Jane lay limp and still as many hands rushed to save her ... none stronger or more urgent than Anderson's. The lieutenant ripped the stakes from the ground, then unfolded a thermal blanket and covered her with it. The soldiers around the bloody spot on the ground celebrated. Jane's survival seemed such a small miracle, but he supposed amidst all that death, even one survivor amounted to victory.

"Anderson carried her through the shuttle ride to their ship," Garrus said, hoping to ease the pain etched on Lucille's face. "He visited her in the hospital and again when they put her in a psychiatric ward. Eventually, he broke her out and took her home."

"It's a mercy Franklin died," Lucille said, her voice still burrowed down into her throat. "He would never have been able to live with what he did that day ... what he forced Jane to endure." She straightened and pulled away from Garrus. "I sat as close as I could to her, talking to her through the long hours. I don't know if she heard me ... the pain must have been—"

Dr. Chakwas jumped up and strode over, crouching to grip the woman by both shoulders. "Jane grew up to be one of the most remarkable women I've had the privilege of knowing. She's okay." The doctor smiled. "I'm tempted to say that I don't know how she survived, but I've treated her, and she's also the toughest, most ornery person I've ever known. Her strength got her through it and just kept growing."

Lucille drew in a deep breath and nodded, her momentary despair turning resolute once more. Her strength helped unravel the knots in Garrus's belly.

Garrus looked past the women to where Bunny stood, staring at the screen. Pushing off the cot, he walked over to stand behind her. "You okay, kid?"

Bunny shrugged and reached out to turn off the vid. "Why wouldn't I be?" She jerked her chin toward the door. "Get out of my cell, General." She returned to her bunk and flopped down on her back, legs crossed at the ankle, her hands behind her head. "And take the do-gooder corps with you. You all have work to do."

"I'll be back once we're docked." Garrus took the hand that Lucille held out to him, squeezing her fingers. "We'll get you settled in."

Chapter End Notes

(A-N: Sooo sad, true story. My internet died last Friday, so no posting on Monday because no internet. I did nearly die during the detox process. It was horrible, but now I am back and you have a chapter. Should have one for Monday, but we will see. It is a huge chapter full of important things. Thanks as always to the readers and the reviewers. Loves and hugs.)
Mass Effect - Future Complex Chapter Fifty Seven

Chapter Summary

Placing her shots carefully, Shepard quickly thinned the herd on the upper balconies. She heard Nihlus and Thane's rifles on two other sides, sharp coughs of sound amidst the chatter of the assault rifles and sub-machine guns.

"Thousands have risen over the cycles, Shepard." Harbinger's voice roared over the gunfire, seeming to come from everywhere. A single Collector stepped out of the inky shadows that clung to the walls at floor level, its carapace cracked open, a fierce magma glow bleeding through. "They have all fallen before us."

38 Days ASR

Shepard's eyebrows headed straight for her hairline, then plunged back down toward her nose. She didn't know if she could buy Nihlus's theory that Harbinger had started all the madness on some quest to figure out why it didn't have a soul. Granted, on one hand, it fit what they'd seen, but, the idea of making the Reapers even the slightest bit sympathetic rankled. She needed to fill them with bullets, and having some pathetic, Tin Man and Cowardly Lion image stuck in her head wouldn't help that process.

"Would an AI even care about that?" she asked, hearing the words before she realized she was going to speak them out loud. She reached out and pressed her fingertips against his chest, a vaguely apologetic gesture, as she continued, "It seems a little … touchy feely for genocidal robots."

Nihlus gestured toward the machine. "Melting billions of people into goo … taking them apart to analyze them, turning them into monstrosities … ." His mandibles dropped. "I don't think we're looking at their search having anything to do with wanting hugs." She watched, admiring the wheels turning beneath the surface as he shrugged and walked over to the machine.

His head cocked a little as he stared at it through the casing of chia. "I think it's more along the line of the geth building their megastructure. You heard Legion … all geth would be united, their intellects combined, their potential unlimited. They could imagine new futures for themselves that they can't even comprehend of now."

Shepard nodded, her lips pressing into a thin line, impressed with Nihlus's line of reasoning. "So, it's about completion of a sort, the ability to grow beyond what they are." Lifting the gauntlet of chia clinging to her wrist, she asked them, "Is it safe to approach the machine with your people encasing it?"

"Yes," the genderless, comfortably impassive voice replied. "The chia are not in contact with the machine at any point. If they touch it, they may be corrupted."

Shepard stepped around the massive computer, looking down at the blackened, dead chia. What remained of the construct looked like the stuff of bee's nests or termite mounds, a dessicated reminder that they'd been living beings. Not familiar, but people nonetheless. "They're dead?"
"Yes. The kinetic energy released when the chia impacted the machine freed them from corruption."

"The chia freed us?" Shepard turned to look at the door, it remained shut. Of course, the chia in their single state amounted to molecules, so could easily get through cracks.

"Your will commanded the chia to save Nihlus. They did so in the most expedient manner available to them. When the machine transferred power from maintaining the field of corrupted chia, the uncorrupted chia shattered the construct. They surround it to prevent further contact."

Shepard jumped, heavy banging against the south door yanking her attention away from the machine. She took a deep, steadying breath as her heart tried to smash its way out through her sternum. "Here comes the onslaught of certain death." She shrugged her Mattock into her hand before glancing over at Nihlus. "So, do we wait for them to break in, or do we go out guns blazing."

"Shepard? Spectre Kryik?"

"Miranda." Shepard hurried over to the door.

"So … go out with guns blazing then?" Nihlus asked, his expression guileless. He shifted, bracing his bad leg then pulling his shotgun. Thank god for the durability and resilience of turians.

Shepard grinned as she glanced over at him, but called out, "Lawson, is that you?" Hope sparked bright and fierce in her chest. With the addition of the rest of the team, they had a real chance to get down into the mountain and back out alive.

"It is." The tone more than the words reassured the captain. An edge of haughty impatience sliced straight through the metal door, chastising Shepard for being so ridiculous and wasting valuable time. Definitely Miranda.

Shepard unlocked the door, pleased to see Liara's small army. At least, until she saw several of the asari wrestling with their compatriots. Her gut twisted and dropped. Damn, didn't things just keep looking more and more pear shaped?

"Come on, everyone in," she ordered, sealing the door behind them when they complied.

"Shepard." Miranda's intense, blue eyes studied the captain like a bug pinned to a board, the ever-present omnitool scanning even before the operative made it through the door. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She nodded toward the commandos, hoping for any explanation that didn't include them being indoctrinated. Hell, she'd take bitten by feral, rabid Thessian hamsters or zombie apocalypse. "What's going on there?"

Continuing her scans, Miranda stepped right into Shepard's face as she replied, "They bolted, leading us to an entrance further down the mountain. Once they got there, they couldn't operate the door, and we were able to apprehend them."

So much for hope. Shepard let out a harsh, noisy breath. "No indoctrination serum?" Her exciting mission to investigate something fascinating on Thessia seemed determined to roll right on past pear-shaped to shit-shaped. But ... .

"They led you in here?" Nodding, Shepard clenched her jaw and set her spine, refusing to let her queasy gut pull her down. The rest of the team needed to get the hell out alive, and more importantly, they needed to investigate what the Collectors were doing there, and shut it down. The
damned mountain amounted to a trap, pulling people in and either killing them or turning them into monsters. Her people were no doubt seriously outnumbered; she needed to use every tool at her disposal, even if it meant being ruthless.

Nodding to herself, she took another deep breath and cracked her neck before shrugging to settle her armour on her shoulders. "I guess Liara won't be joining us on another mission without sufficient indoctrination serum for her people."

And neither will you. You're going to need bigger belt pouches. A backpack, maybe?

"Meanwhile," Shepard continued without pausing, "we can use their indoctrinated radar to get to whatever is emitting the signal." For a second, she almost continued, saying that the asari needed to prepare themselves to leave some of their comrades behind, but she swallowed the words. That could wait until the moment reared its ugly head.

Turning to the group, she said, "We're going to release the indoctrinated and follow them to the heart of the mountain. Those of you who still have indoctrination serum, don't neglect it, and don't share it. We're in for a hell of a fight, and we need gun hands, not semi-cognizant zombies."

Meeting a host of angry stares as evenly as she could, she ploughed through. "We'll do what we can for those already affected, but we can't risk the mission for them."

She pointed to Javik. "You're on point with Nihlus and myself. Miranda, Jack, and Thane, drag. The rest of you, stay frosty." She nodded toward the door and the sound of running feet on stone. "The Collectors we've faced so far haven't used biotics, just assault rifles, but they've been luring asari here for a very long time and turning them into monsters. The mutated asaris' biotics and barriers are strong. They use charge to close, and if they get close enough to grab you, they'll gut you before you can blink."

Shepard strode across the chamber to take cover behind the furthest medical bed, giving her a nice long line of sight for Ingrid. "We're going to be fighting our way out, so take cover." She gestured for Javik to move up to the left side of the door when Nihlus took the right side next to the control panel. "Biotics, keep them bottlenecked in the door." She waited for the rest of the team to get in position, then nodded for Nihlus to open the door, her gut settling as the fight crashed down on them. "Let's give them hell."

A platoon-strength squad of Collectors rushed the doors, but the biotics managed to keep them from getting through while Shepard and the rest of the team mowed them down. Once the bodies began to pile up, the charge slowed, but not enough to make Shepard worry about any great ability to adapt or employ strategy. Numbers without a mind behind them were nothing more than bullet sponges. One small blessing.

When the Collectors stopped coming, Shepard gave the asari holding onto the indoctrinated the nod to release them. Falling in quickly, the team followed, saved from having to climb over the pile of bodies by a shockwave from Jack. The commandos moved quickly, the certainty of their path and their surefootedness down the steep, treacherous tunnel upping the churning in Shepard's from vague nausea to 'Dear god, I'm going to throw up everything I've ever eaten'. Their behaviour spoke to something much larger moving them; empty puppets rather than hypnotized people following a call.

Rage spiked, stabbing all the way down her spine to lodge in her pelvis. Everything about the Reapers consisted of, and formed, abomination. They fouled everything they touched, and then she was supposed to give a flying fuck about their existential angst over having no soul? How about not visiting horror and corruption on every sapient being that evolved over time? That might be a hell of a start toward finding their souls.
Shepard tripped, cursing silently as the sound of her boots echoed off the walls, speeding ahead to let the enemy know their location. Not being indoctrinated and having their perfect knowledge, she needed to stay focused. She didn't have room for sloppy, or for letting her emotions get the best of her. One hundred percent focus and clarity, one hundred percent professional soldier. It hadn't taken concentration before she died. She could ape insanity, torment three people into trying to kill her, flirt with two more and still never lose focus on the mission.

*Death messes with everything, I suppose, Janey. It might take some work to get back there.*

Letting out a soft, resolute breath, Shepard nodded and concentrated on the mountain looming around and over her. Somewhere a trap waited. Somewhere, a mind watched and calculated … so much older and more clever and diabolical than she could imagine. She needed to stay sharp and ready.

The tunnel curled down through the mountain, offering nothing in the way of cover. As she jogged downhill, trying to keep the asari commandos in sight, the roughly arched ceiling pressed down more heavily with every step, so much more than the weight of the mountain teetering over her head. Millions of years of history, thousands of extinctions, tens of thousands of races all waited to see what she intended to do about the situation.

*No pressure, Janey. Well, unless you count the thousands of species and cycles that lay ahead if you blow it.*

The gentle spiral downward ended at an abrupt right angle left. Shepard held up a hand to bring team to a halt, then signaled for them to spread out and take cover against the walls while she moved forward alone. Pressing against the inside corner, she leaned out a little at a time, peering into a dimly lit space. Someone moved in the dark—one of the commandos, no doubt—and the sound echoed high and with a long space between bounce backs. So, a huge, dark space. Not exactly ideal conditions.

Lights flared to life around the cavern, a strident brilliance from many metres up searing into Shepard's eyes, blinding her while leaving the floor in shadow.

*Right, conditions devolving from not exactly ideal to complete crap.*

"Shepard, you've become an annoyance." The deep, mechanical voice from earlier—Harbinger—boomed through the cavern, echoing off a forest of shadows. She reached up to rub her eyes. What were they? Stasis pods?

The voice continued, "Do you fear death even now? Is that why you fight against inevitability: dust struggling against cosmic winds."

Shepard shored up her walls as the voice chipped away at them, and glanced back at her people. "Huge chamber, four gallery tiers on all sides, lots of cover on the floor, but the lights are in our eyes." She signalled them into position. "Stay together, square formation." She felt rather than saw the rest of the team form up.

While they took their places, Shepard switched to Ingrid and changed scopes. "Okay, double time people. Keep sharp, there are a lot more of them than us." She raced into the room, Javik at her elbow, moving into the forest of stasis pods a few rows before taking cover. Raising Ingrid, she leaned out around a pod and took aim. Placing her shots carefully, Shepard quickly thinned the herd on the upper balconies. She heard Nihlus and Thane's rifles on two other sides, sharp coughs of sound amidst the chatter of the assault rifles and submachine guns.
"Thousands have risen over the cycles, Shepard." Harbinger's voice roared over the gunfire, seeming to come from everywhere. A single Collector stepped out of the inky shadows that clung to the walls at floor level, its carapace cracked open, a fierce magma glow bleeding through. "They have all fallen before us. You are less than nothing; not even truly alive ... an animated puppet"

Shepard shot the Harbinger-Collector in the head, but it barely flinched, still moving straight for her at a leisurely pace. It lifted its hand, flinging something at her. She ducked into cover, but then something that felt like a massive fist punched her out of cover, staggering her. Another attack flew at her, but that one glowed like a ball of fire, revealing itself, and she threw herself out of range.

"Where one falls, four more rise to take its place. Behold the futility of your resistance." Lights turned on all around the chamber, illuminating the room in detail.

Shepard winced back a little, her eyes taking a moment to adjust before she lined up another shot. As Ingrid kicked against her shoulder, one of the banshees appeared less than an arm's length away. She reeled back, heart practically punching out her chest and running screaming back the way they'd come before she realized that the asari husk stood immobile inside the pod.

"Sweet baby Jesus," she said, gasping as her heart calmed. Stasis. Thank the blessed Enkindlers. Of course ... whatever slept could be woken. They needed to take out all the Collectors before Harbinger decided to call in screaming banshee backup.

"Your civilizations will fall as millions rise to sweep you from your planets," Harbinger continued. "Your military and governments will be laid waste before you realize the harvest has come."

"Shepard," Liara called, "the talking one is closing on you."

Throwing herself back against the pod, Shepard raised Ingrid, sending another shot through the glowing eyes. That time, she saw it stagger.

"They're flying down from the galleries and closing," Nihlus said, his voice strong and determined. She didn't need the heads up, clearly able to see dozens of Collectors flying down from the upper levels to close on her tiny group.

"Everyone, use your cover, take your time and stay safe. Biotics, keep them back the best you can, and Jack, shockwave the shit out of them." Shepard fired on Harbinger again, that one shutting the bastard up as the host body incinerated.

"Glad I signed up, Shepard," Jack said, hooting with a manic sort of glee as a shockwave thundered across the chamber, tossing Collectors like bowling pins.

Another cracked-magma glow appeared above, the possessed Collector flying down to land on the first level. "You will not leave this place alive, Shepard. Surrender to the inevitable."

Shit, he just kept coming. The Collector fired off a ball of black energy—no doubt the attack that had thrown her out of cover—a fireball following right on its heels. She flipped to the other side of the pod, but it wasn't enough distance. The black one hit, sending her staggering, but then arms closed around her, yanking her out of the path of the fireball.

"If he wakes even half a dozen of these banshees, we're screwed," Nihlus's voice whispered next to her ear. He set her back on her feet.

Shepard didn't respond. What could she say? The situation had only one positive solution, and that one meant taking out all the Collectors before the situation fell further into the crap. As if to mock the possibilities of avoiding the crap pile, Shiala went down, screaming in agony.
"Shiala!" Liara cried from Shepard's right and spun to go to her, but Shepard grabbed her arm and yanked her back.

"Stay on the line, or we're all dead. We can get to the wounded once the bullets stop." For a moment, she thought Liara intended to rebel, and kept a tight grip on the asari's arm. "How are you doing, Shiala?" she called over her shoulder.

"I'll live," the asari answered.

"Hey, Princess Blue!" Jack hollered. "I could use a singularity here, so quit fucking dancing and get back in the fight." A shockwave rumbled across the room, but carrying noticeably less punch than even two minutes earlier.

Shepard switched guns, going for her assault rifle as the Collectors on the floor took advantage of the momentary distraction and swarmed toward her position. Calm, all ruthlessly efficiency and deadly aim, she moved from ugly bug-head to ugly bug-head, three bullets per customer, very little waiting.

Two more asari went down and Shepard could hear Nihlus wheezing with every breath before a singularity, a heavy throw from Thane, and another shockwave threw the Collectors back far enough for her to finish them off. Legs and arms shaking, she leaned against the stasis pod, sucking in long draughts of air. Ten seconds. When she reached the count of twenty, she ducked back out, dealing lead sixteen shots at a time.

Shepard felt the pulse first as a tingle in the soles of her feet, but with every beat it gained strength until it pounded through her entire body and throbbed through the air. It's rhythm resembled a heartbeat, but off, as if the heart had an extra chamber. The fire from outside the circle let up, giving her hope that the number of Collectors actually was finite. Then, it stopped, and everything fell to silence but for the throbbing thump-thu-thump.

"I know that sound," Nihlus said. He gestured to Jack and Javik to take the remaining commandos and secure the room.

"It's a prothean heartbeat," Javik said as he passed Shepard, three sullen asari trailing behind him.

She watched after him for a few seconds, then turned to see to the wounded. Miranda, Liara, and Aethyta were already cutting leathers away from wounds, so she left them to it, moving out into the dense forest of stasis pods. When she reached the inside edge, she turned back and looked up, her gaze travelling up the lit galleries. Stasis pods, who knew how many deep, stood in rows up there as well.

"Sweet baby Jesus," she whispered, her mind counting the rows and columns she could see. Tens of thousands of pods. At least.

"The Collectors have spent the last fifty thousand cycles preparing for the Reapers' return," Nihlus said, raising his voice to be heard over the throbbing pulse. "Given another couple of cycles, how many of these things will they release across Thessia?" He lifted a hand to press against the wall, sagging a little.

Shepard nodded. "Harbinger said that their numbers will sweep our homeworlds before we can even mount a defence. That means there is somewhere like this on Earth and Palaven … who knows how many other planets." She winced as the throbbing grew even louder. "What the hell is that?"
"The way our luck is running, we'd better go find out now." The Spectre held out an arm. "Give an old torin a hand?"

Shepard considered arguing with him and leaving him to rest, but he was right. The luck couldn't get much worse; she might need him. Giving him a weary smile, Shepard slipped under his arm, bracing her shoulder in against his side. "I can't wait to see what new nightmare awaits."

Nihlus sighed. "I was going to bark at you for jinxing us, but … who cares?"

Shepard just raised her eyebrows and nodded. They'd actually reached a point where it just didn't matter.

The cavern walls formed an almost perfect cylinder, but the five-metre-tall stasis units negated whatever line of sight might have been allowed by the shape of the room. Shepard's first hint as to the depth of her mistake in believing them unjinxable came when Nihlus's entire body stiffened as if bracing to take a heavy blow. The next hint crawled up the wall, interwoven tentacles of tech and corrupted chia that looked like a grisly bloom of squid or man-eating vines from a horror vid.

When they cleared the stasis units and the entire construct appeared, Shepard took a long, shuddering breath, her mind struggling to comprehend what stood beneath the brilliant lights. Five of the indoctrinated asari commandos stood within tubes of corrupted chia, their bodies still, their expressions impassive … blank canvases waiting to be painted. Behind their tubes, a machine crawled up out of the floor like some sort of living nightmare, sinuous veins of corrupted chia woven over and around the blocky, recognizable prothean tech.

"Dear spirits," Nihlus whispered. He released her, limping forward, his eyes riveted on the heart of the machine. A clear amber panel stretched flat and transparent over … something.

Shepard followed the Spectre, angling to see what lie beneath the window of chia without getting too close. The last thing she needed was to add, 'walked into a trap for the second time today' to her log entry. Reflections from the lights obscured her view even when she faced it head on, so she crept closer, straining … her mind racing, trying to piece together the puzzle of visuals.

Tubes, wires, and tech of all sorts encapsulated something. She squinted against the glare. Was that an arm? Faint teal-blue skin, but two fingers and a thumb at the end. Blessed Enkindlers, was that a person in there?

Nihlus let out a strangled moan. "No." His voice dropped to a desiccated whisper. "Spirits, no."

Tearing her eyes from the machine, Shepard looked to her partner. The Spectre wobbled precariously, his knees buckling. She ran up, slipping an arm around him to help keep him on his feet.

"What is it?" she asked, worried stare searching his. "Is it your wound?"

"Tashac." He inclined his head toward the machine. "The heartbeat." Closing his eyes, he lowered his brow to rest on the top of her head. "It's hers."

Shepard eased out of his grip, taking one step toward the machine before stalling. Her heart fluttered a couple of times, then stuttered to a near-stop even as the booming beat of the prothean's grew stronger. "I never saw her," she whispered. "I was always on the inside looking out." One hand crept up as if to touch the clear, amber casing but stopped well clear. "Dear baby Jesus, what did they do to her?"

The weighted hand, that old companion, pushed down heavier and heavier, crushing Shepard into
the floor. Panic … pure white, blinding panic sliced through her, freezing her to the spot even as it screamed at her legs to run. It demanded that she run until her heart and lungs gave out. She could run that far, her heart already fluttered, its beats uneven and rabbit-quick. She could run from that place and die somewhere under Thessia's velvet-blue sky … just stop as she'd been meant to all those months ago. She and her Callor could lie under a warm sun, his arm cradling her head, and he could read to her. They could … She backed up a step. They could make love and just let it all go. Maybe the cycle and the Reapers … maybe it was all meant to happen. Maybe it had to happen.

"I'm so proud of you," her father whispered, his face pressed against the hood, his breath heating the coarse material. "I've never been more proud ... no, not proud ... in awe of anyone or anything in my life, my beautiful girl." She felt a kiss, a soft blessing high on her cheekbone. "No matter what, you have to survive this, Janey. Something big, and probably terrible, is waiting for you, but I know that you'll face it. I know that you'll beat it, kiddo."

No! Shepard stumbled backwards another step. He couldn't have known how huge and black and monstrous it was. It was all too immense. All of it. She turned to look over the thousands, the tens of thousands of stasis pods, each containing one of the banshees. That many monsters … so many more on every homeworld … . What army could even hold against it, let alone defeat it?

"Millions suffer, thousands rebel, hundreds lead, but it only takes one … the right single heart to beat them. You are that heart, my beautiful girl. You are that heart."

No. Not her. Thousands of others braver and stronger than her had stood in almost that exact same spot. Tashac … Tashac was the last. And look at what the Reapers had done to her. Shepard spun back around to stare up at the ruined face of her future. The bravest of the prothean people, turned into a nightmare, the beating heart of Thessia's destruction.

In the end, the Reapers had denied Tashac everything, eating her from the inside out, then encasing her in a living hell, stealing away even the peace of death. Shepard reeled back. No! No, they did not get to … . She wouldn't … couldn't spend the next fifty thousand years trapped in a barely-living hell, being used against the races yet to come. And they would. The Reapers' tentacles already crept through her mind, dark and insidious. How long before they strapped her into a stasis pod, indoctrinated, stripped of her soul, unable to see even the bleakest light through their corruption?

Eyes riveted to the ancient rictus of agony on Tashac's face, Shepard backed toward the cavern entrance, her legs picking up speed with every step. No. Harbinger had one thing right: she was nothing, a corpse dragged back across the void. How in the name of the holy fucking Enkindlers could she hope to weather the coming storm?

A large hand impacted between her shoulder blades, that one very real as it held her up rather than crushing her into ash. Nihlus. He didn't speak, stepping up to grip her tight against his side, his hand slipping around her shoulders. She looked up to find him staring at the prothean. A soft keen trilled through his subvocals before he turned to her, meeting her eyes with very familiar storm clouds of fear and sorrow rolling across his expression.

"She prayed for one thing," the Spectre said, his voice soft and laced with another keen of grief. "All she wished for was the arms of her mate and children when her time came." The clouds parted, rage flashing through. "We don't let them get away with this, Shepard. We can't."

She opened her mouth, but the beasts rampaging through her thoughts scattered them too quickly for her to put anything together.

"We all get these moments, Jane." He pulled her in tight against him. "It's all too massive and
terrifying, and every once in awhile, it flattens me like a dreadnought. When that happens, Garrus 
drags me off the floor, sends me to Chakwas to sober up, and then carries me until I find my feet 
again."

Shepard pulled free of his arms, taking a hesitant step toward the machine. "They'd turn me into 
that, Nihlus." She threw a hand at the Prothean. "They'd turn me black as sin and chain me to their 
will, using me against everyone I love. They'd leave me like that." A huge, gulping breath tore its 
way into her lungs, smashing its way down her airway.

He recaptured her, hugging her against his side. "I'll never let that happen, Jane. Garrus will never 
let that happen. The three of us ... Anderson ... the kid ... hell, all of Archangel will never let that 
happen. You aren't alone." Holding her shoulders, he pulled away far enough to bend down, 
meeting her eyes on a level. "You're not alone. The weight isn't only yours to bear."

Anchoring herself in his stare, Shepard drew a long, slow breath. She wasn't alone. She hadn't been 
since Eden Prime. Another breath and her heart began to take full beats, easing into a steady 
rhythm. Even after she woke up on the Cerberus station, they'd been there with her. All of them, 
even Liara.

Her family.

Lifting a hand to brush Nihlus's mandible, Shepard nodded, a quick bounce of her head as her 
thoughts finally settled. "We start by blowing this whole place to hell." She backed out of his arms 
and lifted the gauntlet of chia. "Can your people take the information off the computer on the 
upper level?"

"Affirmative, however, chia may be corrupted in the process," they responded.

She swallowed hard and squared her shoulders, sliding a solid steel blade down through her spine. 
"If that information assisted us in ending the Reapers and the threat of corruption forever, would 
they consider that a worthy sacrifice?" She stared down at the device, trying to keep her will 
neutral. If she had to command it, she would, but that needed to be a last resort.

"EDI," she called into the open channel. "Find me a way to blow this machine and all these stasis 
pods to hell."

"Aye, Captain. Analyzing."

"Blow the stasis pods?" one of the commandos demanded, striding ahead as Javik's squad 
approached them. "There are a hundred thousand of my people in these things."

Shepard nodded and raised her Mattock, turning on the flashlight. Shining it into the closest pod, 
focusing the light on the banshee's face, she glanced back at the commando. "You recognize her?"
The small slice of cruelty slid down her throat, bitter and slick, but helped pull her back, centering 
her. Softening her voice, she said, "These aren't your people any more. Mourn them, but don't 
delude yourself about being able to save them."

She turned off the light and looked to Nihlus. "We should police up whatever we can find to help 
accomplish the whole blowing this place to hell maneuver."

A quick nod answered her, and he started calling out orders, rallying everyone over to the passage 
back to the surface.

Javik approached the machine, his lips drawn back to bare his teeth. He walked right up to the chia 
and stared up at the prothean encased within. After a moment, Shepard saw his shoulders rise and
fall in a deep breath. "She was once the most stunning and remarkable of takune." His head tilted a little to one side. "I have often wondered what our offspring looked like, whether they favoured me or her."

A bitter chuckle cut the silence between them. "I hoped her genetic code dominated." One hand reached up. Shepard moved to stop him from touching it, but she didn't need to.

Another long breath and his shoulders dropped further. "She was once the most impressive of takune." Turning from the case, he met Shepard's stare with one formed of fire and ice. "She must be released, Shepard. Allow her to join her mate and children."

"Oh, yeah," Shepard said, her voice low and furious. "I will. I don't care if the entire mountain explodes because of it, I'm shutting this whole damned place down." She approached the case and looked up into Tashac's face. "It may have taken fifty thousand years too long, but you'll be free. I hope your family is waiting."

Swallowing the tears that balled in her throat and flooded her sinuses, Shepard spun away. "Come on, EDI, the pounding is getting louder. I'd bet an entire bag of peanut butter cookies that it's powering up to do something."

"It is currently channeling power to the pods holding the indoctrinated commandos. The machine has begun the transformation process. I believe I can utilize my cyber warfare suite to overload both computers. As their power source is nuclear, the resulting explosion will destroy everything within the chambers and collapse a considerable portion of the peak. You will need to evacuate to the Ypres prior to detonation."

Shepard looked to the pods with the captive asari, a pathetic sort of hope sinking clammy fingers into her guts. "Is there any way you can free the prisoners?"

"The machine has progressed too far into the process. I am sorry, but the prisoners are deceased, Shepard." Even knowing that she tended to anthropomorphize the AI, Shepard swore she heard genuine remorse in EDI's voice."

"Chia, have you finished downloading the computer data?" she asked, turning her attention to the gauntlet.

"We have not reached a consensus on whether the data contained within the computer core is worth the potential risk to millions of chia."

"Any chance of reaching a decision within the next minute?" Anger simmered, slowly rising to a boil. Planet ending threats didn't leave room for debate."

"The likelihood is negligible."

"Then do it. Retrieve the data. I'll take responsibility for their lives." Shepard lowered her arm. "Javik, the rest of you, come on, let's get the wounded to safety before this place blows." As she ducked between stasis pods, Shepard turned her attention back to bringing down the mountain.

"EDI, give me some good news, here. I want this place melted into slag in less than … ." She glanced over at Javik. "How long did it take you to get from the entrance to the chamber where you found us?"

Before the prothean could answer, EDI responded. "According to my scans, the ground party should be able to evacuate in under twenty-four minutes, given that several members are wounded. I will time and coordinate my attack to allow sufficient time for evacuation."
Shepard stomped down hard on the flare of hope that went off in her chest, sizzling up into her brain. Way too much could still go wrong. Way, way too much.

"Captain Shepard," EDI continued, "analysis of the pulse coming from the machine suggests a beacon or transmitter powering up a signal. I hypothesize that the machine was designed to indoctrinate anyone within range in order to defend the Collector base."

"Captain," Steve cut in, "what she isn't getting around to saying is that the signal is gaining strength with every cycle. In fifteen, twenty minutes, your indoctrination serum might as well be chicken soup for all the good it will do you."

The flare died. Always too good to be true. "Thanks, LT. EDI, get to work. This place goes up, even if we're still in it. We can't risk it. We're on our way out." She sped up, racing toward the wounded. "Miranda! Get these people up and headed out."

The operative looked up. "We have more commandos succumbing to the signal, Shepard. Two more just disappeared, and another three are experiencing hallucinations." She finished securing a bandage on Shiala's chest.

Shepard nodded, her gut clenched so tight it hung like ozmium in her belly. "Yeah, it's the pulse. It's an indoctrination signal and it's getting stronger. We need to get out now, or it'll get us all." She held out a hand to Shiala. "You ready to run?"

(A-N: October 1st, I have been writing Future Imperfect for two years. I posted that quick, uppity chapter within hours of getting the idea for a Nihlus LI, smartass Shepard story that would be a nice little break from the heavy drama of writing The Internal Machinations of Exploding Stars. HA! Now look where we are.

I have commissioned art to commemorate the momentous occasion, and have something pretty special planned, storywise. So, I will be putting out chapters this week aiming toward getting my big day all set up. As always, I so appreciate you readers … whether you've been here from the first day like Vulpixer, or just started reading a couple of weeks ago. You're unbelievably kind and supportive, and I love you for it.

A quick shout out to the people who have helped make this story what it is: theherocomplex, LilVy, Lachdannen, and Sinistra-sama ... thanks so much for beating up my sad words and making them shiny.)
Chapter Summary

"Do you think I haven't had my moments of despair today? I've had more than I'm comfortable admitting to, Liara, but here I am." She shrugged, throwing her arms out to the side. "Still here. Still fighting." She pointed to Nihlus. "He's why. You're why." Her hand swept to encompass the entire team. "They're why. Understand? We don't have the selfish luxury of despair."

**Nais:** (pronounced Nahees) Plural: Naisa (pronounced Naheesah) An asari over the age of emancipation. Equivalent of woman/women.

**38 Days ASR**

Shiala's vice-like grip on Shepard's hand reassured her of the injured asari's ability to make the long run to the surface. "Yes, ma'am. More than ready." She pulled herself up, but held herself gingerly, canted to her injured side.

"Excellent." Shepard steadied the nais until Shiala pulled away, then turned to the rest of the team. "Javik, help Shiala." Shepard waited until the prothean stepped up, then moved on, her movements quick and efficient as she got them all up and supported by at least one other member of the team. Pride replaced worry as the unindoctrinated moved calmly and with purpose, gathering up their fellows.

"Shepard," Miranda called, gesturing for the captain to step away from the others. "I sent Liara ahead to the entrance with Aethyta. The matriarch gave all her serum away to the commandos." The operative paused, looking both exhausted and vaguely nauseated. She brushed her forehead with the back of her hand, an uncharacteristic tell. "The matriarch has begun to hallucinate. Liara found her staring into one of the pods talking to Matriarch Benezia."

"Shit." Shepard nodded. "Okay, go ahead. Start getting these people out of here. We don't have much time before this place blows, and even less time before the signal becomes so strong that we all end up drooling." She watched the operative, searching for further signs of wear. "You holding up all right?" she asked, knowing the answer she'd get regardless of the truth. Still, she needed to ask.

"I'm fine, Shepard." Miranda turned away and began moving people out. "I've been keeping up with my serum."

"Good." Shepard glanced back to find Thane a few metres behind her. "Shadowing me?" She smiled and tipped her head toward the way out. "Give me a hand with Aethyta?" When he nodded, she lifted into a jog, leading him to where Liara struggled with the matriarch.

Tears ran down the frantic asari's face as she tried to keep her father present and anchored. "She thinks she's talking to my mother, Shepard. I don't know what to do."

"Thane will help you get her to the surface." She squeezed the young nais's shoulder. "Stay calm. Getting upset will only make her more agitated."
Chaos ruled their evacuation. She needed to do something, or they would never get out in time. A memory flashed through her head. A movie … maybe?

"Blindfold them," she shouted over the pounding. "Wrap their eyes with bandages and quickly."

Nihlus cocked a brow plate at her. "Blindfolds?"

Shepard shrugged and butted her shoulder in against his side. "Horses will panic and refuse to leave a burning barn. The only way you can get them out is to take away their orientation. Hopefully, it will make our indoctrinated a little easier to guide." She started up the tunnel. "Meanwhile, a blindfold won't move you along any faster, so let's get going." She glanced over to see her people either giving themselves a boost of the serum or obeying her order.

Miranda and four of the commandos arrived, completing their party. Blessed Enkindlers, they'd lost a lot of people.

"We're starting ahead, Miranda," she called. "Bring them along." Two steps down the hall, she stopped Nihlus and turned back. "But take another dose of serum first."

"As you say, Captain." The operative dug into her hip pack.

"Captain Shepard," EDI called over the team channel, "I have begun the attack on the Collector computers. My firewalls are holding against their counterattack, although their computer is proving extremely powerful and adaptable. You have twenty-five minutes before the base reaches critical."

"Understood, EDI. Please give us five minute updates." Shepard turned back. "Okay, old guy, we're going to have to push." A shudder rolled up her spine, clammy fingers stabbing out from her implants as they gripped the base of her skull, pulsing in time with Tashac's heartbeat. She felt the tar-slick spiders writhing, slithering out along her neurons, but not trying to take control. If the idea didn't amount to complete and utter madness, she would have thought them trying to protect her from the Reaper signal.

Shaking off the crazy, she let out a pained grunt and pushed through the cramps locking up her spine. Letting Nihlus set the pace, she merely kept up with his flat-footed jog, trying not to hinder him. She didn't hold much hope for him being able to maintain the pace for long, but where the Spectre was concerned, she couldn't discount the bulwarking effect of sheer stubborn pride.

Nihlus held the pace better than she thought, and they made it all the way to the twelve minute mark and the first chamber before he slowed to a laboured limp. The rest of the group had caught up with them after only a few minutes, the indoctrinated proving fairly biddable once blindfolded.

Shepard took advantage of the slowed pace to lift the gauntlet to address the chia. "Have your people recovered the data from the computer?" she asked, bracing for their reply.

"Affirmative. Three million chia were corrupted in the process." Even with that news, the voice remained completely emotionless. She wondered briefly if the gauntlet's owed its stoicism to her omnitool possessing no emotion, because the emotion steeped through everything the chia did.

"I'm sorry, but that data may help save a lot more of your people in the long run." Shepard clenched her teeth, took a deep breath, and pushed on. The time had come. For all she thought about and spoke of the necessity of sacrifice and loss during the fight against Saren, she'd been able to throw herself in front of most of the danger, minimizing the loss. However, the Collectors had upped the ante to the point where the best she could do was make the inevitable losses count.

"Apology unnecessary. The data is important to continued resistance," they replied, surprising her.
Given their initial reluctance, she'd expected accusation.

No matter. "If your people want to evacuate Thessia, get them to the Ypres. They can hitch a ride with us in the cargo bay as long as they don't try to influence anyone on the sh—"

She stopped, a fuss up ahead pulled her attention away from the cuff. Scowling, she leaned around Javik and Shiala to see a bright flash of blue throw Thane and Liara across the tunnel.

"Aethyta!"

Shepard spun as Liara scrambled up and sprinted off into the dark. "Damn it." Thane started to go after them, but she released Nihlus and threw herself in front of him. "No, Thane, help Nihlus. Keep him moving."

Nihlus grabbed her arm. "Shepard, you can't go after them."

She gripped his hand, squeezing his talons as she removed it. "We're five minutes from the surface," she called back as she started running down the ramp. "If I don't catch them in under a minute, I'll turn around."

"Take more serum!" he hollered.

That wasn't a bad idea. She gave herself a shot even as she ran. "We need to have a chat about how much you allow to go wrong on my damned missions," she muttered to the air, tossing the ampule to the side and speeding up. "This is ridiculous, even for my luck."

She caught sight of Liara a good minute into the run, the asari sprawled on the ground struggling with the matriarch. Biotics flew, slamming off the walls and ceiling.

"Hey, stop throwing powers around," she called, slowing. "I don't want to end up trapped in a singularity or stasis." She went into her pack for her emergency kit. Half of it had been turned inside out while trying to find things to help Nihlus, but luckily, she hadn't dug out the sedatives.

"Hold her down," She knelt next to them, then threw herself over the matriarch, pinning her enough to get a good jab. It took only a few seconds for the asari to stop fighting.

Shepard groaned as she pushed off the drugged asari. "Oh man, I am way too old and deceased to be doing this crap."

Scrambling up, she waved to Liara. "Help me get her into a fireman's carry. We have seven or eight minutes to get to the surface." Between them they wrapped Aethyta over Shepard's shoulders. After bouncing the matriarch's body into balance, she took off, trying to ignore the ticking clock in her head and how much uphill slope lay ahead. "Liara, come on! Move! Ahead of me."

Liara ran ahead, the pair of them making good time to the first cavern, but then the asari slowed so suddenly that Shepard almost ran her down. Two commandos scurried past them, blindly racing back the way they'd come. The prothean researcher let out a squawk and spun around to follow them.

"No!" Shepard shouted. "If you go after them, I'm leaving you, and you'll die down there." She kept running for the surface. "It's either live and look after Aethyta or die down there. Your choice, Liara."

"But, Shepard … ." Liara's infuriated wail echoed up the tunnel, but then Shepard heard running feet gaining on her from behind.
Shepard’s legs shook so hard the last hundred metres or so that she expected them to give out. Each next step surprised her as the reinforced muscles held, pistons driving her forward and up.

*Thank you, Cerberus. For this, at least.*

As soon as they emerged into the sun, Shepard stumbled, falling as gracefully as she could manage, hoping to spare Aethyta injury. Hands grabbed hold of her and her burden, helping her up onto her knees. Once steady there, she waved them off, needing a second before getting back up onto her feet.

Her pulse fading inside her head, Shepard swung around, looking for Miranda. Despite the sun whispering for them to forget the dark tunnels and horrors, they needed to get their asses to a safe distance. "Is the *Ypres* on its way?" she demanded of the operative.

"Less than a minute out, Shepard." Miranda's tone came across as dull and flat as Shepard felt.

"Get it here faster." She pushed up off the ground, taking a few, stumbling steps out onto the ledge. "What the hell, Lieutenant, you knew the deadline, you were supposed to be here waiting."

"We still have a couple of minutes," Liara insisted. "We could go back and get the rest of the commandos." She raced over to grab Shepard's arms. "We've got time. Some of them were only at the first level."

Shepard pulled free and shook her head. "Nobody goes back in there." Nodding toward Aethyta and Thane, she clenched her jaw and said, "Look to your father. You need to get her back to Omega for treatment." Shepard turned toward the cliff twenty metres down the trail. "Let's move. I want to be ready to just jump on the—"

The young asari grabbed Shepard and spun her around. "Those are my people! You can't just leave them."

"Does it hurt?" Shepard slapped Liara's hands away. "Does it burn?" The captain leaned in, her voice burrowing down into her chest when the asari tilted her head in a reluctant nod. "Good. Learn from it. Next time, don't bring people without preparing them. You are in charge, not them."

Looking past Liara to meet Nihlus's eyes, Shepard ground her teeth for a second, the pressure driving back the unkind words that leaped into her mouth. "I've killed a lot of innocent beings today, and I'm about to finish off another hundred thousand. So, let's just agree that we've both learned a brutal lesson about the shape of this war. Drive it home, and move on."

"Shepard!" When the captain looked toward the call, Miranda pointed to the approaching *Ypres.*

Shepard nodded, but then turned back to Liara. "Do you think I haven't had my moments of despair today? I've had more than I'm comfortable admitting to, Liara, but here I am." She shrugged, throwing her arms out to the side. "Still here. Still fighting." She pointed to Nihlus. "He's why. You're why." Her hand swept to encompass the entire team. "They're why. Understand? We don't have the selfish luxury of despair. Whether we asked for it or want it, we're leaders. That means doing better. It means rising out of the pathetic, weak, base stuff that makes up who we are and striving for stronger and wiser."

Pulling Liara into a rough, one-armed hug, Shepard lowered her voice to something kinder as she said, "Go, see to Aethyta. She needs you." Once the pale, shaking nais turned and walked away, Shepard strode to Nihlus's side. "Come on, old guy, let's get you aboard."

He leaned into her as she wrapped her arm around his waist. "I feel old." His elbow dug into her
shoulder as he limped, the way his talons dragged through the grass making an eloquent argument for his weariness.

"Well, you look like absolute crap, so … ." She let out a soft chortle as he elbowed her. As she approached the edge of the escarpment, she stopped and turned to look at him. "Hey … guess what?"

The Spectre's chuckle came out dry and laced with pain. "We made it?" Still, under the filth and the exhaustion, his eyes sparkled brilliant and green. Battered, but not bested.

Shepard nodded. "We made it." She looked up when the Ypres's thrusters kicked down to counter gravity as Lt. Cortez brought her in. Never had a lowering ramp ever seemed so damned welcome. She tightened her grip on Nihlus and led him toward the edge then onto the deck plating.

"Dr. Eis is on her way to meet us," Miranda said, helping Shiala up the steep angle. "I'll head directly to medbay to assist."

"I will as well," Liara called from behind Shepard.

"Good. We're heading straight back to Omega." Shepard glanced next to her at Nihlus. "How far will your Spectre clearances go to keeping this from becoming a government shit storm?"

"I think our suit recordings will go a lot further." The Spectre stopped at the top of the ramp, his mandibles giving a quick flutter. "I know a few people who can ensure the recordings make it to the matriarchs who need to see them rather than just vanishing."

At the far end of the shuttle bay, the elevator doors opened, Dr. Eis, Kelly, and Vincent stepping out, gurneys floating ahead of them on antigrav fields. When the two groups met, the doctor pointed Nihlus toward one of the beds, Shiala, and one of the commandos to the other two.

"No arguments, Spectre," the doctor said, forestalling Nihlus's inevitable protest that he could walk up. She looked to Liara. "I have cots set up for the indoctrinated. We need to get their treatment started as quickly as possible." For a moment, it looked like she was going to ask about the missing numbers, but then just closed her mouth and set to work.

Shepard helped Nihlus onto the gurney. "I've got to get to the bridge, but I'll see you up in medbay once all the unpleasantness is done."

He held out his hand even as Vincent started pushing him toward the elevator. "Loan me the chia?"

Shepard thought the request, and the gauntlet opened. She passed it over then squeezed into one corner of the elevator and hit the controls. "How long do we have, EDI?"

"Fifty-three seconds."

"Returning to orbit, Captain," Cortez added.

Shepard willed the elevator to go faster. "Bring up a visual of the mountain in the briefing room, and record the explosion." The doors opened on the crew deck, the rest of the elevator's occupants hurrying off. She held Nihlus's stare until the doors closed.

"Aye, Captain," the pair replied in unison.

Shepard jumped out as the doors opened onto the CIC and ran around through the lab to the briefing room. She could have just as easily witnessed the Collector base's destruction from the
The table already projected the hologram when she arrived with less than a second to spare. The mountain shuddered, starting about two thirds of the way up and travelling toward the peak. With remarkably few theatrics, the peak collapsed, losing about a quarter of its height before clouds of dust and smoke broke through the shattered crust, billowing up into the atmosphere. Compared to the massive bulk of the entire mountain, it amounted to a small puff of smoke, barely enough to rattle windows in nearby Armali. On a galactic scale, the consequences should have shattered the planet.

Shepard closed her eyes and leaned into the table, her arms braced against her sides. "Rest well, Tashac. Rest well."

Cortez broke through her moment of silence on her private comms. "Captain, there is a Matriarch Tanalliia requesting to speak with you or Spectre Kryik."

"Tell the matriarch and anyone else who calls that Archangel will contact them as soon as possible to arrange a meeting with our representatives. Express that we understand and share their concern over the incident as what we found within that mountain represents a grave threat to the asari republics." She debated sending along visuals of the Collectors, but decided to wait. Before they showed their hand, they needed more intel on which of the matriarchs to approach and how.

She shut down the hologram, the picture reduced to a cloud of settling dust. Time to check up on her crew and make sure that even the ones who didn't appear to be showing any effects got treated. But first … credit needed to be given where credit was due.

Shepard greeted the crew with smiles and short words of thanks as they congratulated her on the decisive victory. With every step toward the bridge, the events on the surface registered more and more as just that. Their losses paled in light of what they'd discovered, and the fact that the Reapers' massive army of banshees had been reduced to slag under millions of tons of rock.

And now we know there are other bases on the other homeworlds, we can do the same to them.

"Well, if it isn't the Captain Shepard! And on my bridge!" Lt. Cortez said, a wide grin brightening his handsome face. "Guess they weren't just making it all up when they briefed us on why they invested so much to bring you back."

Shepard shook her head, her face easing into a smile to answer his. "A big chunk of bringing down that base and pulling us out goes to EDI and to you. Good work." She turned to the AI's hologram, cocking her head a little at the sideways sort of mouth thing that flashed when the AI spoke. "Thank you, EDI. You pulled out a big win and bought Thessia some time."

"I am pleased to be of assistance, Captain." The flashing stopped for a pause Shepard just knew was for dramatic effect. "Working with you has encouraged me to indefinitely postpone my plans to subjugate all organic life in the galaxy."

Shepard grinned, the AI's humour sloughing away the last of her mental and emotional armour. "Glad to hear it." Turning to Cortez, she asked, "How are the two of you getting along?"

"I admit, it's been a little strange, but EDI's easy to work with: efficient and courteous," the lieutenant answered. "Although, I'm pretty sure EDI and Lt. Baswar, the beta shift pilot, have an
unholy prank conspiracy going. Today, someone deleted my entire playlist, substituting elcor opera."

Eyebrows heading for her hairline, Shepard winced. "Do I want to know?"

Cortez shook his head. "Writhing in the throes of internal agony: you do not."

Chuckling, she gave his shoulder a gentle slap. "Didn't your mother teach you that they only pick on you if they like you?"

He scoffed low and throaty. "That shines a whole different light on Big Eddy Chelnik in fourth grade."

Shepard laughed, but after a second, her grin fell from her face. "Oh, dear god, and my entire history with Ambassador Udina. Ew." She backed toward the door. "I've got to go check on my ground team, but excellent work today, EDI ... LT. Excellent work."

The Ypres's crew had settled back into their routines as she made her way back down the CIC to the elevator, acknowledging her with sharp, respectful nods. She couldn't have imagined ever commanding a Cerberus crew, but the place was starting to feel a little more like hers. It certainly didn't hurt that the Ypres echoed the Normandy in almost every line: a lady every bit as gorgeous, graceful, and deadly as her predecessor.

Nihlus sat on the side of one of the beds when Shepard arrived in medbay. He turned to face her and opened his mouth, but didn't get a chance to speak before the doctor interrupted.

"Spectre Kryik is ready to go." Eis turned away from working on Shiala. "He needs to rest for a couple of days, starting immediately after eating at least eight hundred calories," she said.

"I can see to that." Shepard tilted her head, meeting Nihlus's stare with a teasing challenge before she bulldozed on. "Are all the members of the ground team being scanned for signs of indoctrination, doctor? Even the ones who aren't showing symptoms?"

"They are." Eis waved a hand at Nihlus's bed. "So, hop up there, Miranda can run the scans."

Shepard squashed a grin at Miranda's stiff-backed reaction to being volunteered. Thank goodness for another doctor who ruled her medbay with an iron fist. Eis's willingness to stand up to Miranda settled Shepard's trust in the doctor a little deeper. Very few people proved more important to the ultimate success of a crew or held as much power as the ship's doctor. She'd thought Chakwas a singularity, but she began to believe Eis cut from the same cloth.

Sitting up beside Nihlus, Shepard bumped him with her shoulder. "How are you feeling?"

He listed against her a little as he looked down into her eyes. "I really need a long nap. And maybe some chocolate."

She grinned and nodded. "Yeah, I hear you there. A whole damned lot of chocolate." Closing her eyes against the glow of Miranda's omnitool, Shepard let herself drift as the last of the adrenaline wore off, leaving her sinking slowly into the mattress.

"Dr. Eis?" The tone in Miranda's voice pried Shepard's eyelids open. "Can you take a look at this data, please?"

Shepard tried reading the scan results backwards, but they didn't make any sense.
"Huh," Eis grunted, leaning in. After a moment, she turned her omnitool on Shepard, then Miranda and Nihlus in turn. "This has to be significant, but hell if I know what it means."

Shepard waited for a full minute before she cleared her throat. "Since I seem to be the cause of some concern, maybe bring me in on the discussion?" Although both women appeared perplexed, neither one seemed alarmed, which was a pleasant deviation from the norm.

"You're showing negligible signs of being exposed to the Reaper indoctrination signal," Eis explained. She brought up a side by side comparison of Shepard's neural activity compared to five of the others. Even Shepard could see that hers followed a much different curve, even allowing for differences between species.

"When the pulse started getting strong at the end, I felt the … " She winced at describing the sensation and images, aware that she was making a horror vid out of it, but rolled her eyes and pushed on. " … the spiders … the manifestation of the indoctrination from the orbs … swarming around through my head, but they didn't try to co-opt my senses like they did before." Heat crept up her neck. "I thought they might be forming a barrier."

Miranda showed her weariness as a thoughtful frown creased her usual, porcelain calm. "Two different indoctrination signals?" Shepard didn't have to dig to find the operative's skepticism, she laid it all out on the surface as she continued, "That would imply two factions of Reapers."

"Remember when we were trying to find a way into the mountain," Nihlus said, "you said that the spiders felt as though they were afraid of what was inside."

Shepard nodded, the memory reasserting itself. "Yeah, and Tashac said that I couldn't take the dark ones inside. I thought she meant the Reapers, but maybe the Reapers didn't want whomever is behind the spiders getting in." Letting out a short, heavy breath, she slumped. "Two factions of Reapers? Because things weren't complicated enough already."

Seeing Miranda and Dr. Eis gearing up for the full works, Shepard threw up her hands. "Nope. We've just finished the day from hell. Debriefing at 0800 in the briefing room for everyone who was on the ground who is capable of attending. You two can send your data and anything EDI recorded of the indoctrination pulse back to Archangel for Dr. Chakwas and Mordin to have a look at, but I am too tired to play lab rat."

She slid down off the bed and held her arm out to Nihlus. "The old guy and I are going to try to eat something and get some sleep." Cutting off their protests with a sharp shake of her head, Shepard just ushered Nihlus out of medbay ahead of her. "Goodnight, ladies. Don't contact me unless someone or something is on fire."

Once the medbay door closed behind them, she patted Nihlus on the arm. "Go ahead," she told him. "I'll ask Sgt. Gardner to send something up. Feel like anything in particular?"

The Spectre shrugged, the gesture so exhausted that she wondered if she shouldn't accompany him up and just call for food once she got him settled. "Couple of protein bars is fine. The faster I can get it down, the better." He shuffled toward the elevator. "Remember when my plan was to be as lazy as possible?" His sharp chuff and dry chuckle rolled with subvocals she didn't need to be turian to understand.

"Go, get into bed, you big baby." She turned toward the galley, determined to get Nihlus something better than protein bars. After the day he'd been through, he deserved something hot. Did turians even have comfort food?
As it turned out, Sgt. Gardner was five klicks ahead of her, preparing a thick turian soup that she hadn't even known was Nihlus's favourite.

"Heard you and the Spectre got the crap kicked out of you pulling our people's asses out of the fire down there," the cook said, shrugging. "Thought he could use some decent food." He cleared his throat, as if the idea of being generous embarrassed him. "Made you a thermos of tomato, ma'am."

She picked up the two containers. "You're now officially my hero, Sergeant. If I wasn't so tired, I'd hop over the counter and kiss you." Shepard grinned as he flushed and turned to wipe the counter, grumbling under his breath. "Thank you for this. It's a very kind and welcome gesture."

When she arrived up in her cabin, she found Nihlus sitting at her desk watching the door. Stopping just over the threshold, she met his gaze for a moment then held out his container of soup. "A present from Sgt. Gardner." When his expression didn't change, she let out a soft sigh. Damn. Well, it wasn't as if she hadn't known the conversation was going to happen.

Letting out another sigh, she walked over and set his soup down in front of him. "Eat, you need to replace all that blood." She turned and started toward the stairs down to the couches.

"It was beautiful, wasn't it?" Nihlus snagged Shepard's hand, refusing to let her walk away. "The three of us … that future … it was beautiful."

She turned to look at him. The earnest pleading in his eyes tore at her heart, but she set her jaw as she blew a ragged breath out through her nose. "Yes, Nihlus, it was beautiful, but it was a dream. It wasn't reality." She broke from his hold and paced over to the fishtank, staring in at the caustics reflecting through the empty water.

Swallowing hard, trying to force the lump in her throat down far enough that she could keep talking, she bulwarked her shoulders to repel him. "Reality is Garrus pacing outside the room wondering why he isn't enough to make me happy, and then the same happening with you when I am with him. The reality is constantly feeling guilty for one of you being on the outside." Finally building the wall solid enough to face him, she turned back. "The reality is everything tearing apart and leaving all three of us broken."

He smiled and shook his head. "No, Jane. No." He stepped forward, hands raised, but then let them drop when she pulled away from him. Shrugging, he turned to pace to the desk and back a couple of times. "I don't want to have this talk without Garrus, because I know you're going to need to hear him say a great deal, but I want you to shake all that fear and moral judgement crap out of your head, and think about one thing."

"And that is?" She turned and leaned back, the curved glass cold across her hips and shoulders.

He sat in the chair, leaning forward with his forearms braced on his thighs. "I know you're in love with Garrus. The second you see him, your entire body changes. Your shoulders drop, you smile more easily, you can't help but glow. And I know he loves you." A faint shrug rippled across his shoulders. "You are his Kahri. He loved you enough to stay committed to a dead woman for two years. He went to bed at 2100 every night because you were waiting there in his dreams."

Wincing a little as that hit home again, Shepard shook her head. "And you're okay with what … ? Taking the back seat?" She scoffed. "That would last two days. When we met, you called me a whore for flirting to get information."

Head bobbing a little, he leaned back in the chair. "I know, and a lot has changed since then. I've changed since then." Slumping a little, he flipped his hands, a small, affable gesture. "I love Garrus,
not romantically, but that doesn't diminish the strength of what I feel. He's more important to me than anyone except you. I want him to be happy. You making him happy doesn't set loose a basket of snakes in my gut. I don't watch you together and wish it was me instead." He smiled and pushed out of his chair. "I see you together and wish it was me as well."

Heart racing, Shepard pulled away as he closed on her. Dammit, why did he have to make it all so much harder? "I'm sorry, Nihlus, but it just can't work in the real world."

He stopped, the sudden lack of pressure pulling a small, gasping puff of air from her lips. The intensity of his stare didn't let up, however. "I love you, Jane, and I know you love me." A talon cut the air back and forth between them. "And you know this pull between us has nothing to do with Tashac and Merol." He took half a step back, allowing her to relax down off the fish tank glass. "If I hadn't been such a coward at Udina's party, where would we be today?"

She shrugged, despite the flash of images that raced through her head. What good would come out of allowing herself to imagine them together? She needed to do the opposite. "Who knows, Nihlus. I wasn't ready for a relationship back then. We'd probably have ended in some horrific screaming match the first time you tried to touch me with any sort of intimacy."

Throwing up both hands, one still holding her thermos, she backed toward the door. "Enough, Nihlus. Really. Please … just … enough." She hit the door control. "It would be best if you slept on the couch tonight. The pillows and blankets are in the drawers under my closet."

"Jane … ." He took two quick steps after her, but she bolted into the elevator and hit the door control to close it behind her.

Not having a clue where to go, she hit the control for the crew deck. Surely there'd be somewhere down there she could drink her soup in peace. Maybe by the time she headed back up, he'd be asleep. Fat chance, but pretending to be asleep would be good enough.

On the crew deck, she stepped out of the elevator and looked around, still not sure where she intended to go. She just needed a few moments of peace and silence. Between Miranda, Kelly, Vincent, and Al, and then everything that had happened since the Cerberus base … silence had been in short supply … time to think and figure anything out almost nonexistent.

The doors of the observation lounge closed behind her, the vast black of space spread in front of her before she realized she'd chosen her destination. She sat on one of the long couches and took a sip of her soup before setting it aside, her hands moving automatically to her hip pack for an ampule of pain killers. She'd stuck it into the port on her armour before she realized she hadn't changed.

Shepard glanced over at the observation lounge door as it opened, and stuffed the empty ampule back into the pack. She forced a smile as Thane stepped through the door. "Hello." A faint sigh escaped as the painkillers poured through her bloodstream. "Were you looking for me? Is there something I can do for you?" Tossing him a shrug, she gestured toward the large port. "Or are you just here for the view?"

The assassin entered the room, eerily silent as he crossed to look out at the stars. Shepard watched him, but didn't move out of her seat. The silence stretched on, not uncomfortable exactly, just anticipatory. So, he'd come looking for her, which meant he had something to say. Letting out a thin hiss of relief as the pain and crazy backed off a bit, she decided that she could wait.

After a moment, his shoulders relaxed a little and he clasped his hands behind his back. "Do the injections help?"
Surprised by the directness of the question, she stammered a little before managing to reply. "Sure, yeah, of course. My entire body is a massive, open wound. After days like today, they're lifesavers."

Spinning to face her, Thane nodded. "Yes, I imagine your wounds are painful, but that wasn't what I referred to. He walked over and sat down beside her, his eyes staring out at the view. "You made some painful decisions today."

"The entire war is going to be painful decisions and leaving people to die." Shepard snorted softly, a rumble at the back of her throat. "That's just brutal reality, but what has me sitting here stewing is stomping all over the heart of one of my best friends." She shook her head and raised her hands in a vague, open-palmed gesture of apology. "Sorry, too much information. Forget I said anything." She picked up her thermos and took a long draught of steaming hot soup, savouring the burn as it slid down her throat.

"You and Spectre Kryik are not together?" he asked, his tone trying for neutral, but still carrying an edge of surprise.

She frowned and glanced over at him. "You know the general and I are committed to one another."

He tucked his feet under him on the couch, taking a meditative pose. "I apologize for assuming that the three of you had some other sort of arrangement." That time he managed a completely impassive tone.

Shepard let out a long breath and turned back to the view. "Yeah, well … they have an arrangement, but I'm not involved in it."

"Karifratrus," he said, his nod heavily weighted with gravitas. "It is an honorable and important bond. There is none more sacred to a turian outside of bond-mates and offspring." He took a long breath, his chest expanding as he filled his lungs. He held it for a few seconds, then let it out. "They swear only 'until and beyond death', and yet it means everything. Their entire lives shared. There can be no question of jealousy within the bond, what belongs to one belongs to both, which is why I assumed. My apologies."

Shepard took another drink, using the motion to buy herself a little time and space before turning back to stare at him once more. "You really think it could work?" He seemed to have some sort of close-hand experience with the whole mess.

A graceful shrug rolled across his shoulders, but otherwise he remained completely still. "I know it can, and it has throughout the ages. As with all relationships, it depends on the temperaments and commitment of the people involved." He opened his eyes and turned to look at her. "Humans pair bond for the most part, but it is not the norm for all other races. Those who pair bond amongst salarians and krogan are the outliers, most mating is through contracts with the one and with whomever seems most likely to create viable offspring with the other. Asari relationships are very fluid, the hanar often form large blooms or family groups that remain together through several generations, and vorcha rarely see their mating partners again."

Shepard wondered how he'd come to know so much about the mating practices of the different species, but he had a point. She'd been imposing human norms onto other species. "So, you really believe one person can love two mates?"

"Love is not finite." Turning back to the stars, he continued, "Respect and devotion are not finite. If that were the case, as more children were born into a family, or more friends gathered, the well would run dry." The assassin steepled his fingers before his lips. "Love is love, Shepard. It takes
many forms, changing for each circumstance. Trying to limit its acceptable forms or insisting that it conform to a set of rules is about control and fear, neither of which has a place in its truest form.”

Finishing off her thermos of soup, Shepard stared out at the long expanse of space, her almost-meditation interrupted by a huge yawn.

"I doubt you will discover the answers you seek by falling asleep on this bench," the drell said, his low rumble easing her further toward oblivion. "Do you wish me to escort you to your cabin, Captain?"

A hard head shake and another yawn pushed her weariness back far enough for her to stand. "No, thank you. And thanks for the talk." She walked to the door. "Goodnight, Thane."

"Goodnight, Shepard."

Shepard headed to the armory, stripping out of her armor, the well-worn motions feeding into her continued, almost-meditative, calm. Nihlus was right … the future that he dreamed, the one where love saturated their entire existence, peaceful and complete … the three of them living that reality … it had been beautiful.

She pushed her locker closed and turned toward the door. Did she want that future? She didn't deserve it, and it was insufferably greedy, but if it was possible—if everything wouldn't just explode in their faces—did she want it?

The lights were dimmed, only the lamp next to her side of the bed illuminating the cabin when she walked in the door. She headed into the bathroom, desperate for a shower, her skin crawling with afterimages of the day's long, waking nightmares. Arms braced against the wall, head hanging, she let her mind drift beneath the scalding spray. One thing kept cycling through her head over and over—leaving the loving arms of one husband to be welcomed into the arms of the other. No jealousy or anger, just a wide smile and warm conversation as she snuggled into Garrus's embrace, safe and adored.

"Damn." She slapped the wall, then spun to turn off the water. Why couldn't anything just be easy?

*Maybe the only one making things difficult is you, Janey.*

"Shut up, Bunny." Grabbing a towel, Shepard dried herself off. She brushed her teeth, and dressed in her usual shorts and t-shirt before heading out.

Nihlus lay on the couch, facing the backrest, most of his cowl hanging over the edge. She winced when she saw him. It couldn't be comfortable after the day they'd spent. The lack of snoring told her that the Spectre wasn't asleep. She paused by her armchair, mouth opening to speak, but then … what could she say that she hadn't already said? Well, other than that she'd changed her mind, and she certainly couldn't say that.

Heart aching, whispering to her about all the things she needed to do and to balance, Shepard climbed into bed. She plumped her pillows then packed them behind her head, using activity to delay the inevitable, but then she lay there, staring at his back in the pale blue light. If nothing else, he deserved a warm, soft-ish bed and kindness after the day he'd spent.

"Nihlus?"

He stirred but didn't reply.

A wry, sad sort of smile answered his obstinence. "Come on, that couch has to be uncomfortable as
Without a word, he rolled straight up onto his feet. Stepping around the coffee table, he strode to the other side of the bed, pulled back the covers and climbed in. Shepard held herself stiff as he settled in, but then he rolled over to face her, his stare heating the side of her face. They remained like that for nearly five minutes; he wasn't the only one who could play the stubborn card, even though what she really wanted was to curl in against his warmth.

"We'll figure it out, Jane," he said at last, a soft sigh whistling through his nose. "The three of us will figure it out." He slipped one arm under her neck, pulling her tight against him. She didn't resist, and he nuzzled her temple. "It'll all be okay. You'll see."

She rolled over and curled into him, not at all certain that anything would be okay, let alone everything. Still, right then, maybe it wasn't such a bad thing to just give them both a break and have a little faith. What was the worst that could happen?

(A-N: Little behind here. The yard apes (my nephews and niece) brought home the plague, so writing has taken a back seat to drugged stupors and sleep. Still, I am hoping to get a chapter up tomorrow as well.

Thanks for reading, and to those who check in to show their support. It means a lot. *hugs* )
"Hi, honey, I'm home!" she hollered and stepped through the door, only to lurch to a stop on the other side when she saw someone sitting across from him. "Oh," she said, a fiery flush heating her face, "I'm sorry, I didn't know you were in a meeting."

She started to back out the door, but Garrus jumped up off the couch, initial startlement transforming into a bright smile.

40 Days ASR

"Now there's a welcome sight." Nihlus yawned, jaws stretching wide in an impressive show of teeth, as he guided the cab in to land in front of Archangel headquarters. "Who would have thought this greasy, filthy pit would become home?"

Shepard grinned, straightening from her flopped against the door position to look out the window. "Home is supposed to be where the heart is, according to the old human proverb. I guess that's Omega, at least for now." As the grimy, but well-kept buildings grew in the windshield, she allowed herself to imagine something better, or at least something different. Maybe some day, if they managed to survive. For the time being, the saying was true ... her people ... her family lived there, and that made it home.

Unlike the last time they'd flown up to the base, no long lines milled around the front door. Apparently the refugees from the outer bases had all returned and been integrated. She climbed out, stretched, then reached into the back seat for her kit and Ingrid's gun case before she looked over at Nihlus.

"You okay?" she asked, angling her tone to encompass more than the wound he'd taken two days before. He'd been quiet ever since they climbed out of bed that morning. They'd spent the day prior debriefing the ground team and piecing together the best of the hardsuit footage as well as downloading all the raw footage for analysis. After all that was prepared, they met with Liara and her aunt—via the QEC—to discuss how best to approach the matriarchs. Nihlus had remained warm, close, and professional throughout, but that day, he'd hardly spoken a word despite being her steady shadow.

He slung his kit over his shoulder, picked up both of his gun cases in one hand, and nodded. "I'm fine. Looking forward to a good shower and my own bed."

Shepard let out a soft grunt of understanding, allowing him his lie, and led the way into the lobby. "I'll see about getting the mattress changed out while we're here. The thing is only marginally less painful than the one on the Normandy." She realized the implications of what she'd said about ten seconds too late, and turned away, hiding her flush by shuffling her grip on her rifle case.

The lobby stood as empty as the entry when they walked in. Shepard groaned when she saw the
dark kitchen. Activating her omnitool, she checked the time on the station. "Wow, no wonder it's all quiet on the home front … it's bedtime." She chuckled. "We really need to coordinate all these different time zones. I was just starting to think about supper."

Nihlus shook his head and herded her toward the stairs. "Don't worry, there are always meals packaged in the refrigerator. Marcie is good that way." A soft, ironic chuff added punctuation as he continued, "There are probably even cookies somewhere with your name, and various threats, written on the packaging." At the top of the stairs, he rested a hand on her shoulder as if unwilling to part ways, even just for a few hours.

Shepard understood. They'd sealed something solid and permanent between them while the Collector machine held them captive. It seemed strange not to share every breath … like her right half stepping away from her left. But the break had to come eventually. They had lives to get on with, lives that couldn't include occupying one another's back pockets.

*Even though you're going to start missing him about five seconds after he walks away.*

Yeah, well … . Reaching up, she patted his hand. "I'll see you in the morning. Sleep well, and enjoy your shower." Without waiting for him to release his grip on her shoulder, she turned toward Garrus's door and palmed the control. A wide smile greeted the welcoming, soft lighting and the smoky tang of his incense.

"Hi, honey, I'm home!" she hollered and stepped through the door, only to lurch to a stop on the other side when she saw someone sitting across from him. "Oh," she said, a fiery flush heating her face, "I'm sorry, I didn't know you were in a meeting."

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"Shepard!" He stepped around the table and strode across the room. "You're home early." He wrapped his arms around her, lifting her off the floor as he embraced her. Setting her down, he gripped her shoulders, holding her at arm's length while he looked her over. "Are you okay? You look wiped out."

Stiff and awkward, Shepard nodded, her gaze flitting back and forth between her boyfriend and his guest. All she could see of the person was wavy, graying hair pulled back in a pony tail. "Yeah," she said at last, dragging her attention back to his face, "we hit a lucky lull in the relay and docking queues." She ducked her head back toward the door, uncomfortable, her entire body twitchy, electricity lifting every hair as if a massive high pressure system circled at ceiling height, waiting to unleash a violent storm. She backed up a couple of steps. "Should I come back later?"

Garrus followed her, mandibles still spread in a smile as he wrapped his large hands around the balls of her shoulders. In an alarming contrast, the rest of his manner changed into his 'brace yourself' posture.

*Oh, for frig's sake, Janey. What now?*

"No, don't leave." He gathered her back into his arms, pressing her against his solid warmth. "But I do need to explain something, Shepard."

Her gut began to twist, knotting in on itself even as she settled her hands on his hips. "I feel like I should be sitting down for this," she whispered, not wanting the other person to hear her, and pulled back just far enough to see his face.
His smile softened a little as he rubbed her back, slowing her racing heart a smidge. He wouldn't be smiling if it was terrible. "It's a good thing, Kahri, just unexpected." He stepped back again, a fierce sort of set to his features, his shoulders braced. "Remember the promise you asked me to make? To make sure Anderson kept looking for Bunny?"

The room swooped hard to the right, nearly dumping Shepard on her ass even with Garrus gripping her arms. When it settled to rocking back and forth, she looked up, focusing on his eyes and the joy she saw there. "You found her?" she whispered, her voice barely carrying as fear and wonder snatched away her breath. "Is she okay?" The dizziness began to draw back, purpose and excitement bulldozing it aside. "Where is she, Garrus?"

She glanced over at the person who still sat on the couch with their back facing her, but no … that couldn't be Bunny. Even though clearly female, the curve to the woman's back and the faint gray streaked through the red hair both said middle age. "Where? We need to go get her. I can be ready to go in an hour."

Her torin chuckled and shook his head, one hand abandoning her shoulder to caress her cheek. "Breathe, Kahri, I'll answer all your questions, but first, let me explain."

Shepard gave him a sheepish grin, but nodded. "Okay, sorry … getting a little carried away." She twisted to set all of her gear on the floor. Taking a long, steadying breath, she turned back. "Right. you've got my complete, absolutely calm attention."

Garrus grinned and captured her hands in his. "A couple weeks back, Martin and I headed to the Citadel to meet an art appraiser who represented someone interested in acquiring some of the pieces from Donovan Hock's estate."

Shepard felt the blood rush from her face, the skin around her nose and mouth suddenly cold and numb. "Art appraiser?" No no no. It couldn't be … after all that time. Mama? No, Mama died on Mindoir. Pulling her hands free of Garrus's grip, Shepard reeled back a couple of steps. She'd always known that Mama died. Stepping around him, Shepard stared at the woman on the couch. Mama died, just like Daddy.

She clenched her fists, the dull ache of her nails digging into her palms a single anchor as guilt roared, washing over the last fifteen years. After escaping Mindoir, Shepard remained so sure of her mother's death that she'd never even looked. Sucking in a shaking breath, she took a single step forward.

Oh god, I never even looked for her.

The woman stood and turned to face Shepard. She smiled, and for a moment, Shepard felt sure that she faced a slightly warped mirror; the face so very like her own, but off. "Mama. Oh, gentle, sweet baby Jesus." Her stare flitted from feature to feature, the evidence of each new sin visited upon Lucille Shepard striking deeper and deeper.

And then a gentle smile transformed the downward cast of the mouth that lived in Shepard's memory as owning a perpetual scowl of disapproval, and the woman shook her head. "Taking the Lord's name in vain; that has to be my Janey."

Shepard felt rather than heard the bastard chuckle-gasp that tumbled from her mouth, and then the tile floor leapt up to smack her in the knees. Garrus crouched just behind her, cradling her between his legs. One arm wrapped around her shoulders while his other hand caressed her neck and around her ear. He didn't speak, his touch saying everything.
Leaning back into him, she settled onto her heels, heart racing once more, a leaf trembling in the embrace of a desert zephyr. Stare glued to her mother's face, Shepard waited for the mirage to vanish and leave her hands scrabbling at the sand. Instead, Lucy strode over to stand before her daughter. Reaching down, she grasped Shepard's hands in a tight, dry grip.

"Some things never change," Lucy said, her smile deepening as she drew Shepard back up onto her feet. She let go of one hand, hers lifting to press against Shepard's cheek. "Still so strong and beautiful."

Shepard leaned into her mother's touch, her pulse slowing as reality settled over her. "Mama? But … how?" Burning eyes drank in the face and gaze so changed, yet so very, achingly familiar. "How didn't I know you were alive?" Throwing her arms around the taller woman, Shepard buried her face in her mother's shoulder and took a deep breath. Subtle changes marked the passing of more than a decade, and yet the similarities—the earthy, floral scent that she recalled—turned those years to dust.

"Oh my god," she whispered, then chuckled as a gentle hand clipped her in the back of the head. "Sorry, Mama."

Strong, loving arms wrapped around her, arms so tight and so familiar that they set loose all the tears that shock had held captive. She'd been so wrapped up in her own drama since coming back that she hadn't given much thought to whether Garrus had kept his promise let alone fulfilled it.

Pulling back a little, she turned to her love. After swiping at the joy raining down her face, she held out her arm, inviting Garrus in. When he stepped up, pressing into her side, Shepard lifted a hand, stroking it along the smooth sweep of his undamaged mandible. Slipping the hand around his neck, she pulled him down until their brows touched. Gratitude and love flooded through her, quenching the pain in her body and heart more thoroughly than any painkiller. Damn, wasn't she in love with the most remarkable being in the entire galaxy?

"Thank you," she said, locking away the rest of what she needed to say: treasures waiting for privacy and time.

He simply nodded and relaxed against her, mandibles fluttering in a bashful smile when Lucy touched his wounded cheek.

The gesture started Shepard's tears anew, her mother's acceptance of Garrus just one more blessing. She allowed herself three, blissful moments of standing within their embrace before she pulled back, looking up into Garrus's eyes.

"Bunny?" The name tiptoed from her lips, a singular, fragile hope held in trembling hands.

Garrus nodded. "She's up in the hospital." His hand jumped up to thaw the terror that flash-froze her blood. "She's fine, Shepard. Well, as fine as can be expected." He nodded toward the couches. "Come and sit down. We'll explain everything."

Lucy pulled Shepard close again when Garrus stepped back, her hands cupping her daughter's cheeks. "I never dreamed that I'd get the chance to do this." She smiled, and then soft, maternal kisses pressed against Shepard's brow, nose and cheeks. Loving arms gathered her into a breath-stealing embrace.

Shepard wrapped her arms around her mother, her embrace gentle as she felt the bandages beneath Lucy's clothes. A numb, chilled sadness set in. What must her mother and sister have endured over the years? All those years that she wasted her life and then tore into it like a dog biting out of fear,
her family had truly been living in hell. She turned her face into her mother's neck, shame scalding her neck and cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, Mama. So sorry," she whispered, the apology scraping the depths of her bottomless well of self-pity.

Lucy stepped back, a strong grip taking Shepard by the shoulders, that oh, so familiar scowl lining her mother's brow. "For what, Janey?"

Shepard shrugged. How did someone apologize for fifteen years of freedom and life wasted, for not searching harder, for not being more dogged, more determined? "For not protecting Bunny. For Daddy. For not finding you so much sooner." Another shrug sloughed from her shoulders. "I'm just sorry."

The grip on her shoulders tightened, her mother's fingers digging into the crevasses in her flesh. "No!" The barked refusal startled Shepard from her guilt. "Don't you dare take all of that bastard's sins on yourself, Jane Gwendolyn Shepard." Lucy shook Shepard hard enough that her teeth clacked together. "He's standing before his maker, and his measure is being taken. He'll pay for what he's done."

Shepard barely recovered from her throttling before Lucy yanked her into another, almost ferocious hug. Her mother pressed her mouth next to Shepard's ear, her breath as heated as her words were passionate. "Stop paying for his crimes, Janey. It's a debt you don't owe." Lucy's kiss was rough, but loving. "You have done us all so very proud."

Throat too tight to speak, Shepard just nodded, giving her mother a tight-lipped smile when she pulled away. Letting Lucy take her by the hand, Shepard followed her mother to the couch and sat to listen to the story of how Garrus had found and rescued her family. As they told her of their chance meeting, which turned out to not be chance at all, and the huge operation that Garrus mounted to free them and the other slaves, Shepard watched her torin, in awe of what he'd accomplished.

An hour later, it was taking all of Shepard's self-control to keep from twitching, every cell in her body trying to levitate up through the floors to the hospital. After so many prayers and dreams about finding her baby sister, Bunny was in the same building. All she wanted to do was run to the elevator, and go see the woman her annoying little doll rescuer had become.

Lucy gave Shepard's hand a squeeze, smiling when the captain turned to look into her eyes. "I think we've tortured you long enough," her mother said and chuckled. "But, Janey, you have to know just how angry Bunny is. She was raised to believe lies, tortured and trained to focus all her hatred on you." Shaking her head, Lucy shifted, the leather creaking as she turned to face Shepard. "I don't know why he did it, but she's a danger to you as long as she's like this."

Shepard heart sank a little as she glanced over at Garrus, the depth of the worry in his eyes far more eloquent than any words. She nodded, more to assuage her mother's worry than out of any commitment to be careful around her sister. If that bastard had tortured Bunny and made her into a weapon, Shepard would damned well heal her and bring her back. If that took a little risk, then it did.

"Well, I'll head up and see how she's doing," Lucy said, breaking through Shepard's thoughts. She released Shepard's hand and stood. "I'll give you two a chance to catch your breath, and see you up there." Her finger brushed her daughter's cheek before she shuffled between the table and couch.

"Mama?" Shepard jumped up, two jogging steps catching her mother. When Lucy turned, the
captain wrapped her in a careful hug. "I love you."

"And I love you, my impossible girl." Lucy squeezed her tight, then kissed her brow. "See you in a few minutes."

Shepard watched her mother until the door closed behind her, then turned to face Garrus. The general stood between the couch and coffee table. She shook her head when he started to walk over to her. "Sit down, General."

His mandibles flicked. "Is that an order, Captain?" he asked, emphasizing her rank.

"Damned straight it is." She closed a couple of steps toward him. "Now, sit your asslessness down."

When he did as he was told, she walked over, kneeling on the couch beside him for a moment before swinging one leg over his to straddle his lap. She settled in, pressed as tightly against him as she could manage then draped her arms around his neck, hands clasped loosely behind him.

"Whatever am I going to do with you?" she asked, leaning in to brush his mouth with hers as she spoke.

A mandible brushed her face as he grinned. "I have several ideas about what you can do with me. None of them can be accomplished in the few minutes before we need to be upstairs, however."

She kissed him, all of her joy and love pouring out through the moist caresses of her lips and tongue. A deep, throaty chortle answered her fervour, and then his arms pulled her in hard against his left side, nipping lightly with his mouth plates, his tongue teasing hers. Passionate and eager, all of the old hesitancy gone, Shepard deepened the kiss, lips moving over his with a real and urgent hunger.

When they broke apart, breathless, Garrus leaned down to press his brow to hers. "On a scale of one to ten, that thank you just rocketed straight past a hundred." A sigh whispered between them, feather soft.

She tilted her head to kiss him, just a chaste brush of lips against his rough hide. "Oh, General, it's nothing compared to the thank you that you're going to get a little later." Pressing her cheek against his, she wrapped him in a tight hug. "This … ." She shook her head a little and cleared her throat, frustrated with her inability to articulate how she felt. "It's the most amazing thing, Garrus." Pulling back a little, she brushed her lips against his mouth. "I'll never be finished thanking you."

His nose whistled a little as he sighed. "Your happiness is the only thanks I need, Kahri. You know that."

She kissed her way up to his nose. "Happy doesn't even begin to cover it. Finding both of them alive after all this time is a miracle." She kissed him again, then swung off his lap and held out her hand. "Come on, let's go up and see just how much my baby sister hates me."

Garrus tugged on her hand, stopping her. "Kahri, wait." He pulled her close enough to take both of her hands in his. "She is a threat. Please, don't underestimate that."

Shepard backed toward the door, pulling him along with her. "She's my sister, Garrus. It's my job to love and protect her however I can, no matter what." She smiled, a soft, loving smile as that truth rang through every cell. "And you knew that would be my answer, because if there's something you understand, it's the need to protect."
His brow plates canted as his mandibles dropped and spread. "So you'll understand if I need to protect you from her?"

Nodding, she released one of his hands and reached up to press her palm against his keel. "As long as you obey one very important rule … and you know it's important because it's from Wonder Woman." She pressed her lips tight, her mouth tugging to one side at his bemused expression.

"Wonder Woman?"

"Yep, and here it is: Don't kill if you can wound, don't wound if you can subdue, don't subdue if you can pacify, and don't raise your hand at all until you've extended it." She raised her eyebrows. "Can you live with that?"

The general chuffed and struck out for the door. "That's remarkably wise coming from someone called Wonder Woman." He palmed the control and led her out, heading for the elevator.

Shepard shrugged and wrapped her arm around him. "What can I say, she was my hero when I was a kid."

The ride up to the twenty-fourth floor passed in silence, Shepard glad to be able to melt into Garrus's strength and relax. It felt as though it had been a hundred years since she just breathed and let all her muscles go slack. Something so simple shouldn't be so impossible to achieve. Maybe she'd ask Thane about teaching her to meditate. He certainly seemed to have the whole relaxation and peaceful heart thing figured out.

As the elevator door opened, her heart began to thump hard and quick, banging against her ribs harder with every step until it threatened to shatter ribs under its onslaught. Pressing her eyes closed, Shepard trusted Garrus to guide her while she wrangled her stampeding emotions back into line.

"Here." Garrus stopped and when she looked up, he nodded toward the door directly across from the nurse's station.

Shepard stepped up to the door, her heart flipping into reverse and flopping into her belly as she watched the young woman within pace between the two beds. Sweet baby Jesus, could that lovely, fierce amazon actually be her Bunny? "Look at her." Awe and love—worn but still aureate—tinted her whisper as she leaned into Garrus, borrowing his strength. "She's beautiful."

All the missing years wrapped around Shepard's chest, constricting until her pulse and breath tangled up with unshed tears to form a massive, choking ball in her throat. Her fingers dug at her neck, fighting to either claw it out or swallow it all down. "My little Bunny."

"And deadly," Bunny said without looking their way. "Don't forget that part." She stopped midway through her pacing cycle, her glare sharp-edged and scalding. "And I'm not your little anything." Shepard staggered a little, the words leaving welts as they slashed past. Damn, Garrus hadn't been wrong about the vehemence of the girl's hatred.

"I know who you are, oh late, great Captain Shepard." A sneer marred the beautiful face as Bunny laughed, a missile of frozen acid. "The universe fucking hates me. That's the only explanation for your big, hunky boyfriend screwing up my escape and dragging me back here to the Holy Cult of Jane fucking Shepard." A vicious shrug sliced across her shoulders. "So, what's it to be, big sister?" Bunny stalked two steps closer to the door. "Only warning: if you want to live, best put a slug right between my eyes."
Burying that idea under two metres of hell no, Shepard pulled her sidearm from her hip and held it out to Garrus.

"I'm right here," the general said as he took the gun from Shepard's fingers.

She nodded, his presence helping her wall up all the weak, terrified, wailing guilt, sealing it away where Bunny couldn't use it as a weapon. She could face anything with him at her side.

Opening the door a crack, Shepard squeezed through, unsure if Bunny would make a break for it given a big enough opening. Despite her resolve to avoid showing any emotion, a smile crept across her face when she looked over at her mother. "Mama, it's probably best if you wait outside."

For a moment, Shepard thought her mother intended to argue, but then Lucy nodded and stood. "Behave yourselves," she said, her hand warm and comforting as she gripped Shepard's shoulder on the way past. Shepard waited until Garrus stepped forward to close the door before she moved toward her sister. The laser drill of pure rage and hatred ramped up with every step that narrowed the distance between them. Shepard didn't blame her baby sister: four was too young to understand anything that had happened to them. Still, despite the gelid guilt worming its way through her guts, she slapped the guilt out of her body language before it exacerbated the issue.

"Have you had a good life?" Bunny asked, stalking to the far corner of the room. She spun once she got there. "Has your freedom been worth giving me to the slavers? Worth getting Daddy killed?"

Each word slammed an iron fist straight into Shepard's guts, but she clenched her jaw and breathed through it, doing her best to avoid reacting. She just closed in on Bunny, staying loose and ready, letting the love she'd felt for that little bundle of annoying cheeriness bleed through. Damn, but hadn't she adored the broken-doll-adopting, read-me-another-story-begging, big-sister's-stuff-breaking little pain in the ass?

More than anything. So much that you let those bastards . . .

Stomping on the scalding tears before they appeared, Shepard cleared her throat. Emotion would only register as manipulation and shove her sister further away.

"Don't." Bunny backed up a little more, then tried to squeeze past, escaping into the front of the room. When Shepard blocked her, she backed up. "Say something, damn it. You're creeping me out." Charging, she bulldozed past, hitting Shepard hard enough to spin her around. "If you're going to kill me, then do it. I don't want your love, your excuses, or your bullshit apologies."

Shepard closed, approaching her sister like a grappling opponent. She both knew and regretted that their reunion would turn into a wrestling match before it became anything more productive. Bunny always had matched her sister blow for blow in the stubbornness department. A slight smile tugged at Shepard's lips as she let that fact seep through her, reinforcing her resolve. They were sisters, joined in a way that could never truly be broken. She'd find a way to get her hug monster back.

"Seriously," Bunny said, the word a sharp bark, "back off before I start swinging." Tensed to spring, the teen circled, an ambush predator forced into a direct attack against prey it knew would fight back.

Shepard spread her arms, inviting the attack. It might just save a lot of time. "Then start swinging, because I'm not going anywhere." She took another step and another, upping the pressure until she could see Bunny shaking, the fury blazing fierce and hot across the teenager's face a new sort of hell.
Damn, and I thought I'd visited them all.

She threw that pain behind the wall with the rest and beckoned to Bunny. "Come on, sweetheart, show me how much you hate me. Turn it all loose."

Something flashed across the younger Shepard's face, something surprised and vulnerable and so very, very young that it set off a grenade in Shepard's chest, nearly taking out the wall. Bunny's body might be nineteen years old, but a huge part of her remained four and trapped in a nightmare she couldn't wake up from. Shepard knew that nightmare; after fifteen years, they remained old, hostile companions.

Screaming all bloody fury, Bunny launched herself at Shepard, fists aimed for the captain's solar plexus and throat. Shepard swept Bunny's lower hand aside, a feint to distract her sister from the hand that swung out and around to grip Bunny's wrist. Spinning the girl around, Shepard held her from behind.

Curses that should have melted their pious mother's ears ripped from Bunny's mouth at the gentle strength of Shepard's grip. Stabbing back with an elbow, Bunny twisted, wrenching herself free. As soon as she broke the hold, the teenager ducked her shoulder and drove it into Shepard's gut, ramming the captain into the bed. Grinning fierce and cold, she sneered at Shepard's gasp of pain.

Despite the bed frame tearing into the backs of her thighs, ripping open her wounds, Shepard merely spun away when Bunny backed up a step. Taking advantage of Bunny's thrown balance, Shepard gave herself room to react. Actually getting hurt didn't factor into her plans.

"Fight back," Bunny said, her voice a vicious growl. "Are you some sort of pacifist bitch?"

Shepard choked back a heavy wave of sympathy and love, opening her arms again, that time holding her hand out to her baby sister.

"You're fucking amazing." Bunny backed up a step, then circled. "You think I'm going to take that hand after what you did?" She stopped suddenly and looked down at her arm. After a second, she flexed her fingers, a thoughtful scowl swapping places with the rage. "You broke my arm." As she looked up, the rage returned. "You broke my fucking arm."

Shepard nodded, owning it. "We were running, trying to get to the rock across the creek." She withdrew her hand, but kept her arms open, welcoming the next attack. Some abscesses needed to be lanced with a scalpel. "The batarian, Remit, jumped out of the trees ahead of us. I slipped and we fell in a pile. I heard a snap." A thin smile cracked through her porcelain control to betray the love roaring through her veins. "You barely made a squawk. So brave."

"Fuck off. Seriously?" Bunny rushed her, barrelling into Shepard's embrace and slamming her back against the door. Her fist crashed into Shepard's belly, a small wrecking ball driving the wind out of her in a pained gasp. "This isn't some Sunday drive down memory lane." She threw another punch, but that one Shepard blocked, throwing it wide.

When Bunny came at her again, Shepard grabbed hold of her sister's arm and spun her, pulling the
arm across Bunny's stomach. Catching the other arm as it flailed, Shepard dragged the young woman down into the corner. Crouched, legs spread wide to stabilize her, Shepard held Bunny in kind, but implacably strong arms.

"Fuck off, Captain Shepard," Bunny spat, bitter emphasis drawing out Shepard's rank. She flailed, trying to get out of the hold. "I don't want your pity. You can shove your memories and love up your ass, bitch."

Shepard just hugged her, carefully keeping her face out of headbutt range. "Come on, Bunny," she whispered. "Jump. I'll catch you." She paused as her sister stopped fighting, freezing rigid in her arms. Good, maybe enough of the true memory remained to break through the batarian bastard's programming. Keeping a solid hold on the teenager, Shepard continued, "Good girl. You're only a few centimetres away from my hands. Let go. Come on, baby, you know I won't let you fall."

"Stop it," Bunny said, but it came out more like a mewl of pain than anger. She wriggled a little, trying to break free, but without her earlier force. "Just shut your face. You left me to that bastard."

"You fell in the mud and cut your palm," Shepard continued, determined to bull through even as her body trembled and her heart keened from the strain. "You threw a tantrum, beating up the mud and screaming for Mama and Daddy." She blew a short, sharp sigh out her nose and shifted a little, settling her back against the wall. "I lifted you out of the muck and kissed the cut on your hand, then told you that they'd meet us at the big rock."

When Bunny didn't take advantage of the change in position, Shepard lowered them both all the way to the floor so that her sister sat sideways, still restrained but cradled in her arms. "You were tired, but doing your best when Remit stepped out onto the path. I tried to stop, but slipped." Shepard scowled as the memories played out behind her eyes. Unlike the other times she'd set them loose, the memories didn't attack with meathooks and carving knives. Instead, Nihlus tangled through every one of them, his presence and comfort buffering the pain. A soft, relieved sigh drifted out as her muscles relaxed, still holding her sister, but loosely. "Remit picked you up by the collar of your pj's and said he was going to keep you for himself."

Bunny pulled away a little, twisting to look Shepard in the eye. The fire remained, but something lie beneath it, a slight crack that sent a flood of warmth pouring through to bulwark Shepard's weariness. Scowling and thoughtful, Bunny said, "He threw me at Kiral."

"Yeah, and then he grabbed me by the hair and pulled me up. He said he was going to take his time with me … that I was a tasty looking piece of meat." Shepard's shoulders popped a little, surprised that she could dismiss the horror. But, the protection of her guardian angel remained between her and the terror and revulsion, stalwart and comforting. "He shoved his fingers down my throat, so I did the only thing open to me."

"You bit him." Bunny withdrew a little further, her gaze dropping to the floor. "Just about bit right through his fingers … the farm's doctor had to do more than one surgery. The scars never faded."

"Good, I wish they'd rotted off, gone septic." A sharp, ferocious grimace slashed across Shepard's face. "I broke free and charged the one holding you, but Remit grabbed me again before I could wrestle you loose." Deciding the time had come for a show of trust, Shepard released her hold on her sister. When Bunny scrambled away to crouch just out of arm's reach, Shepard just adjusted her position, easing the pain gnawing at the backs of her thighs.

"You bit Kiral, too." The words came out with the same edge, but a thoughtfulness hid behind them.
Shepard let out a long breath, but kept her smile in check. Glory hallelujah. "Yeah, I attacked him on the roof after Daddy helped us get out my window. The batarian grabbed my shoulder, so I tried to take his thumb off."

Bunny stood and paced to the door, staring out at their audience for a moment before she turned. "Why would Remit try to turn me against you? If you were trying to protect me … if you didn't sell us out, why?" Bunny braced, so defensive and sharp that Shepard knew the teen would rebuff whatever she said. Still, as her father had always said, 'nothing ventured, nothing gained'.

"How better to make you a loyal slave?" Shepard pushed up onto her feet, wincing a little as the damage Bunny had inflicted began to howl. "Make him less the villain, turn you against anyone you might cling to emotionally." She shrugged and held out her hand. "But all I can do is guess. I can never know what he was thinking."

Rejecting Shepard's hand, Bunny jerked her head toward the door. "Get out."

"Okay." Unsurprised, but pleased with the progress she'd made, Shepard let her hand fall to her side. "But I'll be back in the morning. You aren't the only one who inherited Mama's stubbornness, so prepare yourself for that." When her sister didn't reply, the captain moved to the door. Looking back, she finally let the wall crumble, a gentle smile and slow tears meeting Bunny's spikes and claw traps. "I love you, kid. I never stopped looking for you."

"Yeah, bloody lot of good that did me." The teenager crossed her arms, the gate dropping, locking Shepard out.

Even though a deep, frantic ache insisted that Shepard push until she brought her baby sister all the way back from her personal hell, Shepard pressed the door control. Bunny had taken enough.

Garrus stepped up the second Shepard passed through the door, earning a slightly crooked smile. Ever the protector.

"I'm fine," she said, holding back the rest until she closed the door. Looking to her mother, Shepard said simply, "She'll need you."

Lucy nodded, drawing Shepard into a hug. "Thank you for being so kind with her. I'll see you in the morning." She pulled back, still gripping her daughter's shoulders. "You look worn out. Go get some sleep."

Shepard hugged her mother tight again, unable to put voice to the storm of gratitude and love and relief and joy that roared inside her. After a few moments, she managed to wrestle the lump in her throat down far enough to say, "Goodnight, Mama. I love you."

"And I love you. Goodnight." Lucy turned and entered Bunny's room, moving to sit on one of the beds. Instead of talking, she turned on the vid screen.

"You should go get checked over," Garrus said, his voice too soft to be heard through the door. "You're bleeding." He stepped into her, one hand pressed between her shoulder blades.

Turning to face him, Shepard nodded and looked up into his eyes. "Yeah, I'll take care of that now. Go ahead down. I won't be very long." Her stomach let out a ferocious growl. Laughing, she pressed a hand against it. "I think it can smell your brain again."

"I'll find it something better." He leaned down to nuzzle her lips, his subvocals rumbling when she returned the kiss, her tongue teasing his. "Don't be long."
"I won't." She kissed him again, then gave him a gentle push. "Go on, we're making out in front of my mother." Laughing at the bashful flick of his mandibles, she winked, then turned to look for Dr. Chakwas.

Chapter End Notes

(A-N: Yes, I am still sick. So sorry for it taking so long. Combining sick Kim with the chapter that grew to 12K words, well … here we are. The second half will post tomorrow unless my trip to the ER for antibiotics goes horribly wrong and they take me captive. If so … send rescue. So, without further ado, the first part of the second anniversary duo of chapters … Reunions.

Oh, and PS: I love you. Especially you hardy souls who have been reading for all two years. And the rest of you too. You all rock.)

Chapters 123 and 124 were written to:

Contact Redux (feat Meredith Hagan). It just suits the people and situations so very, very well.

Love Me Like You Do performed by Grace Kelly. Just a fantastic version.

The Doomsday Theme from Doctor Who. Cried so hard during the goodbye to Rose. *sob*

A Thousand Years by Christina Perri … because it is Garrus and Sassy's theme.

And Baba Yetu by Christopher Tin, just because it's freakin brilliant.
(Warning: NSFW. Consensual, committed couple enjoying one another. That's right, sex ... finally.)

He chuckled as he nuzzled his way under the sweep of her ribcage, lingering in all the places that drew whimpered curses and loving whispers in equal number. "This was always the time you'd ask for a story," he whispered, then froze and looked up, his expression a strange combination of fear and guilt.

Shepard smiled and ran a loving hand over his fringe. "In your dreams of sunlight and soft grass?" When he nodded, she leaned in to kiss him. "All sweet breezes and lying safe in your arms." She gently raked the underside of his fringe with her fingernails. "Beautiful dreams."

40 Days ASR

Despite Shepard's promise not to take long, by the time Dr. Chakwas treated and sealed her wounds and they made plans to get the brain trust together the next day to discuss the possibility of two indoctrination signals, a half hour had rolled by.

She palmed the control to Garrus's door, stepping through into the dimly lit space when it opened. He was standing behind the far couch, but turned, a wide grin greeting her as she entered. Gripped by a fierce joy, Shepard let the flood surge over the levees. Three running steps carried her across the floor, then two leaps cleared the couch, launching herself at him. He staggered back a step, grabbing her out of reflex as she latched her arms around his neck, her legs curling around his waist.

She kissed him, lips fervent and hungry against his mouth, tongue teasing, trying to coax him out from behind his teeth. Instead, he pulled away, a low rumble resonating in his throat. "What?" she asked, before kissing her way up his mandible to nibble at its wing.

He cleared his throat. "Kahri, my pari is here."

A low susurru of amusement rumbled from the direction of the other couch.

"Hello, sir," she said, pausing just as she began kissing her way down the groove of Garrus's throat. Instead, she met her boyfriend's eyes, her gaze crackling with gentle teasing. "Sorry, I was too eager to leap on your pahir to see you when I came in."

Herros chuckled, and she heard the leather groan as he stood. "That's quite all right. I'll leave you to your reunion and see you both in the morning."

Garrus let out an embarrassed mutter when the door closed behind his father. "That's two parents we've made out in front of today. Would you like to fly to Palaven so my mari can catch the show?"
She grinned and leaned back, one hand gripping the back of his neck, the other stroking the underside of his fringe. "Sure, we wouldn't want her to miss out." Chuckling, she hugged him tight. "All right, I promise to check that no parents are in attendance before I fling myself on you. Fair enough?" She pressed her lips against his mouth and whispered, "Will you kiss me back now?"

Strong arms pulled her in so tight that her body let out a few muted yelps as his mouth opened to claim hers. Despite the pain, she lifted into him, desperate to get closer. Damn, hadn't he been so very right? As soon as her heart made the leap, her body couldn't help but follow.

She leaned back a little to get at the fasteners down the front of Garrus's tunic, the action throwing off his balance enough that he stumbled.

Chuckling, he said, "Okay, this needs to continue somewhere a lot more stable." He skirted the couch and collapsed into the soft cushions, settling her on his lap. His stare warmed her face as she finished with his tunic, her hands laying it wide to search along the damaged plates.

"Oh, damn … Garrus, I forgot about … ." Worried hands flitted over his keel, checking all the little metal bars for blood or plate damage. "Did I hurt you?"

"I'm fine. Stop worrying." He stilled her fussing with a kiss. "No damage."

"Mmm," she murmured, kissing him back. Soft and slow, her lips moved over his mouth with no less passion but with growing patience. All her frantic eagerness from the moment before quieted and softened. There really was no need to hurry; bright, sunlit warm replaced the racing wind as her heartbeat calmed a little. Time to stop and cherish the gift she'd been given.

"You're so warm. I think I'm just going to move in right here." She let out a long, contented moan and slipped inside the flaps of his tunic to wrap her arms around him. "I missed you this week. Can we avoid doing anything crazy for the next few days and just spend some time together?"

Garrus nodded and nuzzled the top of her head. "We can." He let out a half breath, half sigh. "I missed you, too. The bed is far too empty and the days far too long when you're not with me."

Smiling, sentimental tears burning along her lashes, she looked up into his eyes. "I love you. Remind me to keep telling you that."

They kissed, long and slow and sweet, soft lips and rigid mouth plates moving against one another with ardor, tongues making silent promises of hours, days, and years to come.

"You should eat something." Garrus chuckled when her stomach let out a hearty bellow. "We're not in any hurry, and it'll destroy the mood if you pass out from hunger partway through." Shuddering, heavy and exaggerated, he pushed her away. "Or you try to eat my brain."

"Hey, I'm not a completely barbaric zombie," Shepard protested, crossing her arms and turning away, nose in the air. "There is a time and place for brain eating." The wolf pack in her belly howled again. "Buuuuut, then again, maybe we shouldn't push our luck."

Garrus's grin faded as he reached up to cradle her face between his hands. His thumb talons traced her cheekbones then brushed the permanent frown lines from her brow. "I don't know what I did to deserve this," he said, his voice tight with all the emotion that sang through his subvocals.

She didn't understand them the way another turian would, but she felt the intention behind them deep in her gut. "Most people would say that it must have been pretty terrible. I'm not much of a prize." Her eyes locked onto his. "You, on the other hand, you have been the solid, amazing, brilliant—"
"Sexy? Stunningly virile? Rakishly good-looking?" he asked, mandibles fluttering as his eyes sparkled, teasing.

Shepard sighed, but then gave a resigned shrug and nodded. "Sure, why not? I can be charitable."
Laughter bubbled up then erupted, bright and effervescent as he pulled her in and nipped her neck.
"Okay, okay! You're one incredibly sexy, virile, rakishly good-looking cookie."

"I'd be insulted if I didn't know how much you love cookies." He nipped her again, then loosened his grip. "Come on, eat something, and then we can climb into bed." He lifted Shepard with all the usual, careless ease, and turned her so she was sitting across his thighs, cradled between his arm and side.

Wriggling forward until she could reach the plate, Shepard grabbed it off the table and removed the lid. "Ooo, meatloaf. Nice."

Shepard relaxed back in Garrus's arms, his body deliciously warm against hers, and let out a long sigh. She picked at her food, her mind rolling back through everything Garrus and her mother had told her. From the sound of it, Archangel had received a generous influx of funds thanks to Remit, the slaving bastard.

She glanced up between mouthfuls. "So, Remit had billions invested in art and books like Hock? Billions that you just looted like a big ol' turian pirate." A crooked grin tugged at her lips as she raised her brows, looking at him from the corner of her eye. "Remember that first day in Fist's office? You were so scandalized by my suggesting that we strip his office for saleable goods."

He nuzzled the top of her head. "Yes, well, you were right. We're on the run and we need every credit we can get our hands on." Chuckling, he shrugged. "I think your mother was scandalized by my mercenary agenda for her collection."

Shepard turned back to her dinner, eating a couple of mouthfuls that might as well have been paste for all she tasted them, her mind racing along ten different paths before latching onto what he'd said. "I think that collection kept her sane," she said. "As much as she loved our family and life on Mindoir, her whole life up until she met my father had been training to curate for a museum or gallery."

He sighed, the sound laden with disgusted, furious tremors. "So, having that little piece of what she had always wanted helped keep her sane?" A slight nod answered that. "Yeah, I can see that. Any rope to cling to, right?"

*The room hung dark and silent around the two torins. "How do you do it, Vakarian?" Nihlus asked, his voice a slurred whisper from the couch.*

*She crept closer as Garrus sat on the edge of the coffee table. "How do I do what, Nihlus?"

"Keep breathing."

*Garrus let out a huff of breath, deflating a little. "I do what she wanted me to do, Nihlus." He shook his head and shrugged a little. "Sometimes when I'm planning or working, I'll swear that she's right beside me, pointing something out that I've missed or whispering suggestions to me. And when that happens, I feel peace. It's not much, but it's better than nothing."

Shepard shook her head. Too little sleep and too many of Nihlus's memories crammed into her head. Yeah. She shook off the breathless melancholy of the dark room and glanced up at Garrus. "Yeah, any rope to cling to." She shovelled in another mouthful, but then set the plate aside,
suddenly not the slightest bit hungry. Leaning up further, she kissed him. "Come on, let's get into bed, General Boyfriend." She clambered up off the couch and held out a hand.

"Your supper?" he asked, resisting. "You hardly ate anything."

A loving touch whispered along his mandible as she grasped his hand and pulled him up. "I'm far more hungry for turian boyfriend than meatloaf right now." She tipped her head toward the bed. "Come on."

Garrus trailed after her, far enough back that she had to extend her arm. Giving her room to change her mind, no doubt. But no, that night wasn't about playing it cautious or giving into fear. They'd waited long enough.

When they reached the bed, she kept hold of him with one hand while tugging off her boot with the other, trading hands to get them both. She stepped up onto the mattress, grinning when she actually came out a little taller than him. Beckoning to him with a slight pressure on his hand and a teasing nod, she drew him into her arms, wrapping them around his neck.

"I am the single, luckiest woman breathing," she said, voice low and throaty. Pressing her brow to his, she closed her eyes, inhaling long, deep breaths of him, his earthy myrrh and cloves scent settling something deep inside her. "Promise me something," she said, surprising herself as desire and adoration overwhelmed her usual caution.

"Anything," he said, tilting his chin to nuzzle her lips. His hands untucked her t-shirt and slipped beneath to circle her hips, the touch warm, rough, and perfect.

Feather-soft kisses brushed his mouth and mandibles, punctuating her words as she said, "We got a second chance, Garrus. Out of all the people in this crazy universe who deserve one … who pray for one … the powers that be chose us." She pressed her lips to his mouth, sucking gently as she pulled away. "I don't want to waste a second of it to fear or doubt." Drawing him in a little tighter, she tucked her head under his jaw, loving the way his cowl cradled it. "Let's just decide right here, right now, that no matter what, we don't walk away. We figure it out, fight it out, wrestle if we have to, but we never walk away."

Letting out a low rumble, the love and devotion woven through it so thick and heavy that it raised the hair on the back of her neck, Garrus held her tight, his large hands covering most of her back. Sweet Jesus, but those hands made her feel so safe … so cherished. That she could wrap herself up in that touch, that she make him feel just as safe and loved, that was all that mattered. Everything else would either sort itself out or fall away.

"All right," he said after a second. "No matter what. We never walk away." His mandible fluttered against her hair as he smiled, his grip pressing her against him. "You know what this means, don't you?"

Shepard pulled away to meet his gaze, but then shook her head. "Not now," she said, the words carrying no sting, just the desire for the moment to come in its proper time.

"Yeah." He nuzzled her brow, those beautiful eyes closing as the rumble from his second larynx gained strength. "But so you know it's coming, Kahri."

"It had better." Shepard slipped her hands inside the panels of his tunic, helping him ease his arms free of the heavy material, then carefully guided it over his head, giving his mandibles and damaged face plenty of clearance. She threw it over the back of the couch, then sat, deft, nimble fingers making short work of the many fasteners down his leggings. Finally freeing his spur, she
guided the waist over the sharp points of his hips and slid them down. Grinning as he steadied himself with a hand on her shoulder, she helped him step out of them then tossed them after his tunic.

"That's a big improvement." She slid her hands up the tight bands of muscle along the inside of his calves. "So," she said, fingertips brushing along the base of his spur, "I've heard a rumour that your spur is just loaded with nerve endings."

Garrus chuckled, talons playing through her hair. "When we slept together on the Normandy, you sent me into retreat at least once a night when you accidentally brushed it. I didn't think you wanted to get poked awake."

The flush of desire and heat that image sent tearing along her nerves startled her and set the muscles in her groin rolling like waves on a heavy sea. "That would have been a surprise." She skirted the base, teasing just until he started to rumble, then moved on, her palms flat and firm up the backs of his thighs.

"Mmm," she murmured, looking up into his eyes again as she rested her hands on his hips. "You're so beautiful." Leaning in, she pressed her cheek against the soft hide along his stomach. His warmth poured into her, travelling along her nerves to settle low in her belly. It gathered there, a light pulse that tugged at the muscles through her center, adding to the gentle waves of pleasure and need rolling up through her hips and down her thighs.

She kissed his stomach, her eyes closing as she savoured the texture of his hide, the intoxicating scent of him, the way his muscles trembled under her lips. "You know, I've come really close to doing this a few times over the years." More kisses painted a moist trail down the center of his stomach, stopping just above his plates. She brushed her bottom lip along their edge, smiling as they moved. "I didn't care about any of the men; it seemed easier that way. I told myself that I was letting the past cripple me, that I needed to push through it and get it over with."

An angry rumble answered that, and she nodded. The fact that he loved her, that he wanted her and waited so long for her to be ready … damn, but wasn't it the most remarkable thing? Wasn't he? She looked up, the depth of everything she felt burning through her stare; the flush that crept up her chest; her shallow, rapid breaths.

"I never thought I'd be so grateful that I waited." Her palms glided along the sweep of his chest plates to wrap around his waist.

His talons combed through her hair, then cupped her face. The pad of one thumb brushed her lips, his touch almost reverent. "I've never wanted anyone like this, Kahri … never dared to hope that I'd find someone so … that I … ." Stepping back, he slipped his hands over her shoulders and down her arms on the way to taking her hands in his, drawing her up onto her feet. He placed her hands on the rim of his cowl and then lifted her, holding her tight against him. Turning his face into her neck, he nipped the sensitive skin, his tongue hot and teasing along the line of her jaw.

Shepard tilted her head, opening her neck to him while her fingertips wandered along the small plates that dotted his neck. She chuckled at the lusty growl that accompanied her exploration of the border between hide and cowl. "Hmm, I'll have to remember that for later." Leaning back, trusting his arms to hold her, she reached down, grabbed the hem of her t-shirt, and swept it over her head. After tossing it on the pile, she unclasped her bra and shrugged out of it.

Garrus leaned down to draw a long, slow trail along her collarbone with the tip of his tongue, grinning wide as her skin lifted into gooseflesh and a long, sultry moan drifted from her throat.
"Damn ... that tongue." She intercepted his mouth and arched into him, her breasts brushing against his plates as their tongues tangled and teased.

"Dear spirits," he said, breaking the kiss. A heavy moan chased the oath from his mouth, and he stumbled a little as if his legs suddenly wouldn't hold them. Turning, he sank on the side of the bed, his chest heaving.

Shepard jumped up, frantic hands darting to touch him everywhere. He looked as though he'd seen a ghost. "What? Are you okay? Is it—"

Garrus pressed a talon pad to her lips, the gesture quieting her panic as well as her words. "I'm fine, Kahri. It's just ... that night before you ... after Sovereign, you curled in next to me, and your breast pressed against my chest like that. Every time you moved, it brushed against me, this soft, beautiful embodiment of trust." He pulled her in close, his hands circling her ribs. "After everything we'd been through ... . I didn't sleep for hours, content to lie there, holding you, your breath warm on my neck."

He looked down, his thumbs sweeping along the lower swell of both breasts. "Just now ... it hit me, I guess."

She stepped between his legs, caressing his mandibles with the backs of her fingers. "What hit you?"

His stare locked onto hers, the old laser-sight intensity comforting. Not everything changed. "That absolutely nothing in the last two years has felt as real as those moments." He leaned in to nuzzle the hollow between her collarbones. "Well, except for my dreams. Maybe that's just crazy."

Shepard backed out from between his thighs, her hands moving to the buckles on her belt. Quickly, but not rushed, she stripped off her trousers and tossed them. "It's not crazy, Garrus." When she moved to slide her panties down, he reached out and snagged her hands in his. Turning them over, he ran gentle thumb talons over her palms before lifting them to brush his mouth from the tip of each middle finger down to her wrists, nuzzling the soft, delicate skin there.

"Spirits," he said, the word barely more than a sigh. "You're so soft. How can you be so soft and so damned tough at the same time?"

She grinned and stepped in a little closer. "I'm one hundred percent pure magic."

A soft chuckle greeted that. "Yeah, I suppose you are." He tugged her in closer before he let her go, but just long enough to tuck his thumbs in the waist of her panties. Shepard's elcor gymnastics troupe kicked the wolves out of her belly and began to warm up, but their antics amounted to one hell of a clumsy cheerleading squad, all encouraging Garrus on rather than insisting she back him off. Her hands slipped over his fringe as he leaned in, his thumbs slowly dragging the panties over her skin.

"Oh, dear lord." A soft, musical moan spirited from her lips as the tips of his talons pressed into her flesh, leaving searing hot, blissfully intense trails down the outside of her thighs. Clinging to his cowl with trembling hands, Shepard closed her eyes, every nerve in her body focused on those two luscious points of contact. Then his mouth plates nuzzled into the hollow at the base of her sternum, and her knees nearly gave out, her moan building into a soft ululation of need.

He chuckled as he nuzzled his way under the sweep of her ribcage, lingering in all the places that drew whimpered curses and loving whispers in equal number. "This was always the time you'd ask
for a story," he whispered, then froze and looked up, his expression a strange combination of fear and guilt.

Shepard smiled and ran a loving hand over his fringe. "In your dreams of sunlight and soft grass?" When he nodded, she leaned in to kiss him. "All sweet breezes and lying safe in your arms." She gently raked the underside of his fringe with her fingernails. "Beautiful dreams." His soft purr of agreement sent vibrations tearing through her belly, all of them migrating straight to the fiery need at her center.

*The sun shone down, warm and bright, gleaming off Garrus's bare shoulders, bringing out the steel in his colouring. "Do you trust me, Shepard?" he asked.*

She frowned a little as she looked into his eyes, seeing so much in that gaze. Respect, longing, contentment, and love. A smile blossomed, eclipsing the frown. Of course she trusted him.

"With everything," she whispered.

"Kahri?" Garrus cocked a brow plate. "You okay?"

Opening her eyes, she nodded, reassuring him with a smile. She stepped out of her panties as they hit the floor then kicked them toward the couch. Moving into Garrus's arms, she pressed along his torso. "I'm perfect, and it looks as though we're both completely naked, General." She met his heated gaze with one that smoldered just as hot. "Whatever will we do?"

Garrus stood, sweeping her up in his arms. "I've got a few ideas." His brow plates rose, teasing her. "And now, we've got all the time in the galaxy."

Garrus knelt on the bed, leaning down to lay Shepard out on the mattress, but then he straightened, one knee still lifted onto the thick memcell. For long moments, he studied her naked form under a gaze as intense and torrid as Trebia's rays, his mandibles sweeping in and out. Something in that stare kept her from turtling up, from trying to hide herself … something that defied her usual need to throw up barriers and defenses. Tears misted along her lashes and pooled in the outer corners of her eyes, answering the beautiful, ferocious ache in her chest.

His stare was all heat and life and devotion … and love. Dear, sweet baby Jesus, a love so deep that she could drown in it. A love that laid him open and vulnerable, as vulnerable as she felt. Her beautiful, strong general. In that stare she saw the reason she'd never bullied herself into sex with anyone else … she'd been waiting for someone to look at her with everything layered in his gaze.

Of course, someone else looked at her in almost the exact same way.

She pushed that aside. It might well be true, and it might well have its time, but that was definitely not it. No, that night belonged to the torin who'd stolen her heart the moment he fastened her seatbelt in the Mako because he'd noticed how badly she'd hurt her hands.

As they gazed into one another, something new appeared in his ice-blue stare: a question. Was she sure? Was she truly ready, because if she turned him away … she saw how deep the blade would strike. By way of answering, she lifted her arms, beckoning for him to join her, but more than that, to join with her, to finally break down that last wall.

He lowered himself onto the mattress, his body all rough angles and sharp edges and perfection against hers. Holding himself up on an elbow, he kissed her, his incredibly talented tongue both stealing the air from her lungs and stopping time so she didn't need to breathe. He lifted into her, the edges of his plates and the blade of his keel dragging across her breast.
She moaned deep in her throat, lust and a little pain, but definitely not enough to want him to stop. Still, Garrus pulled away, concern flashing across his face, cloudy and dark.

Taking his hand in both of hers, Shepard pressed it against her belly, smiling to wipe away his worry. "That was a good sort of moan," she said, one hand lifting to caress his face. "It was an "I want to feel your hands and mouth all over me' moan."

Leaning down, he claimed her mouth again, his hand sliding up over her ribs until the web between his thumb and first talon cradled her breast. "I think I can help you with that," he said against her lips, subvocals almost drowning out his words. The power of the hunger behind that resonance arced along her skin, an electric sting so strong that she expected to see the fern-like fractals of a lightning strike painted between her wounds.

"Damn, I love that your voice can turn me into a twitching ball of raw, hungry nerve endings." The lusty rasp of her own voice surprised her. It lifted into another soft moan when his thumb dragged across her breast, the talon teasing the taut center.

His mouth abandoned hers, prompting a disappointed groan, but then he ran his teeth along her collarbone. She melted into him, her entire body weak and trembling, as she let the fire burning in her belly flare, roaring through her. If she wasn't careful, that fire would consume her.

She grinned. "Then let it consume me." Tears burned in her eyes, misting over her vision. It … no, he … was almost enough to give a girl back her faith.

Making love to him with her fingertips, Shepard's touch glided over his neck, caressing the sensitive border between scale and hide, trickling around the little patches of scale. Each touch a tiny, reverent prayer of devotion and passion, she tried to tell him everything her voice would probably never find the words to say.

Responding to his subtle encouragements, her fingers teased, kneaded, and stroked their way up to his crest. She dragged her knuckles along the underside of his fringe, pausing to roll them in slow circles or rake her nails over the skin when his breathing hitched or the underlying growl-purr coming from his subvocals changed in pitch.

He nuzzled her breasts, teasing them with tooth and tongue until she clung to him, dizzy and gasping, her body surrendering to his touch with an urgency both startled and reassured her. Gentle talons raked her skin, pressing just hard enough to furrow without scratching, his path careful to avoid the rents and fissures in her flesh. She gasped, her whole body undulating as the keen-edged sensation reminded her of the deadly potential behind those loving talons.

"Dear lord, ease up a bit," she said between breaths, her hands clinging to the rim of his cowl. "I'm going to have a heart attack."

"Not sure I can." He chuckled and lifted his head to capture her mouth, kissing her softly. "I don't think I'll ever get enough of touching you."

Eyes closed, Shepard returned his kisses, moving beneath him, savouring the delicious friction of plate and hide against her skin. "You'd better not."

Seemingly determined to prove the ardor of his oath, Garrus's hand pressed against her belly just below her navel, talons sweeping around it. As if testing the waters, his talons circled a couple of times before caressing over it, the pad dipping gently into the divot. Stiffening a little, Garrus pulled back.
Shepard opened her eyes and lifted her head. "Garrus?" A slightly confused smile greeted his searching stare, and the bewildered flutter of his mandibles as he looked down at her belly button.

"That can't be right," he said, letting out a bleak, embarrassed chuckle. "It's umm … ." He pressed the pad of a talon against it. "... far too ... " His mandibles twitched, his entire face as awkward and miserable-looking as she'd ever seen. " ... umm." Letting out a long, grumbling breath, he let his head drop, hanging from his shoulders.

"What, Garrus?" She pressed her hand against his face, turning him to look into her eyes. "Talk to me. What's wrong?"

"I never thought that I'd have to … ." Another wretched sigh tumbled out as his whole body slumped. "I didn't do any research, Kahri. Didn't think I'd ever need it. I don't know how we'll ... " He cleared his throat. "... fit."

Empathy and love begged her to put him out of his misery, the embarrassment in his eyes squeezing her heart in a tight fist. Shepard leaned up to kiss him even as she reached down to lace her fingers with his. "Let me guess. Female turians have their bits right about there?" She smiled against his lips. "Ours are just a touch lower." She slid his hand down her stomach to rest on the inside of her thigh, his knuckles brushing her faint smattering of hair.

Leaning back, she stared into his eyes, her breath coming quick and shallow as she slid her hand up his arm to his face, tracing the lines of his brow, cheekbone, and mandible. She released him and twisted to pile the pillows behind her back, then laid her hand over his again.

Giving in to the gorgeous, heady brew of desire and nerves bubbling in her stomach, Shepard kissed him, drawing his hand close enough to feel her heat, the dampness inside her thigh. "Do you want a guided tour, or would you like to just take your expedition afield and chart the unknown?" A loving smile bloomed in the face of his hesitancy to take her up on either option. "Hey. There be no dragons here." She caressed his cheek with her other hand. "It's okay, I'm nervous, but not afraid. I'm not going through the motions to indulge you, or any of that sort of nonsense. I love you, and I want you all over me in the worst way."

Her smile slanted into something a whole lot amorous as she met his stare, then leaned in to kiss him. "I intend to put in field time worthy of a doctoral thesis to learn every single millimetre of you." When he still hesitated, she cocked her head a little. "What is it, love?"

He leaned in, his breath panting low and quick against her skin. "I don't know … something … familiar, maybe? Here there be dragons … ." Brushing her brow with his, he shook his head. "Nothing to worry about."

"So that means you want the guided tour?" She laughed, feeling the sun pouring through her, it's brilliance saturating her with the most glorious feeling of contentment.

"Spirits," his oath came out breathy, an almost prayer. "I love you." His mouth pressed to hers, urgent, breathless, and hungry.

Increasingly thrilled with her wanton fearlessness, Shepard drew up her far knee, shivers of desire pulsing through her as her leg relaxed, opening her to him. She pressed his hand against her belly just above her pelvis. "Feel that?" she asked as the muscles pulsed hard and insistent.

He nodded, then kissed her. "Yes."

"That's my body basically shouting, get that torin inside me already." She grinned and rubbed the
end of her nose against his when his mandibles did the bashful flutter. "But, it's just going to have
to wait, we've got some exploring to do." She slid his hand down to brush over her, her hips lifting
into his touch when his talons played with the light dusting of hair. "You turians and your fixation
with hair. I swear it's jealousy." Her chuckle transformed into a delighted squeal when he tucked
his face into her neck, sharp teeth pinching the skin under her ear. "Oh! That's how it's going to
be?"

She laughed and gave him her best innocent smile. "Would now be a bad time to ask for a story?"

By way of answer, he nipped his way down her neck and across her shoulder, his teeth pinching
with enough force to make her jump each time.

"So," she said, slipping her hand up his, laying her index finger along his first talon, "was that
supposed to shut me up, or encourage me?"

He chuckled and nuzzled the center of the fractal wound over her shoulder. "When we get all of
these healed up, you'll find out." Pulling back a little he lifted a talon, caressing around her
shoulder. "They're looking better."

"According to Dr. Eis, I'm happy, and it's speeding my healing." She massaged his hand, kneading
his talons into the dampness of her inner thigh. "So, I guess this is going to be very good for me."
Leaning in close to his aural canal, she grinned and whispered. "So, how about that tour?"

Garrus's chuckle reverberated straight through her. "Leave me your number, and I'll give you a call
if I get lost."

"I don't know, I might be busy." And then he touched her, the teasing falling away. Eyes closing
and legs drifting further apart, her body softened under his talons, and suddenly she understood. All
those years that she'd used her sexuality as a weapon and a tool, she'd been murdering a part of her
soul, a twisted sort of self-loathing continuing what the batarians had started. That moment, the
torin she loved wrapped around her, that had always been its purpose.

"Never again," she whispered, drawing a sideways look from her general. She shook her head and
leaned in to pepper kisses along his mandible, drawing in long breaths of him. The spicy, metallic,
and increasingly male scent of him burrowed in deep, playing both her body and her heart like a
virtuoso.

Garrus lifted from his explorations and nibbled her lips before sliding down the bed. Mandibles
held high and away, his brow plates low, he took over, opening her, touching and stroking. Every
time she let out a sigh, a whine, or a moan, he looked up as if cataloguing her reactions, his
mandibles twitching with a decidedly delighted expression.

"You're so slippery." Clearing his throat, he moved to do a closer inspection, but then stopped,
looking up for her okay.

"Of course, love." She shifted a little so she could caress his face. "And yes, the slippery is a good
thing." Chuckling, she brushed her thumb along his mandible. "So that's what sexually aroused
fascination looks like on that face."

Leaning over her, Garrus nuzzled the inside of her thigh, circling as if checking the lay of the land
before committing to moving deeper into foreign territory. She squashed the image of him wearing
a pith helmet and khaki knee shorts before it could turn into laughter.

Then, letting out a sharp yelp of surprise, Shepard lunged right up off the bed as his tongue flicked,
just an experimental little flutter that hit right on the bullseye. He jumped back, but she just took a gulping breath and shook her head. "Oh, no you don't, Callor, there's no doing that once and then running off."

(A-N: So the long, tragic tale of Chapter 123, which turned into 123, 124, and 125. Yes, that's right, 125. I will be posting it tonight as well. It was just when 124 reached 12K words … yeah, I had to break it up. So … look for the continuation … just go potty, make a tea, get a plate of cookies first. :D

These two … these chapters … I both love them and am terrified, because of course, we're breaking new ground for this story, and I am still really sick which messes with my perception. (Just ask poor LilVy who dealt with my tears and despair last night while I threatened to just throw the whole story away. Sorry Vy.)

Anyway, I really hope you enjoy the ride. Onward to 125. *hugs and love*)
Chapter Summary

(Warning: NSFW. Garrus and Shepard continue their first time.)

He nuzzled her fingers, then turned his attention to her thigh, caressing and kneading gently where her flesh was whole. "Your whole body is so damned soft," he muttered as his talons reached the inside of her upper thigh, "but right here … it's worthy of a sweet baby Jesus."

Chapter Notes

I originally split to a new volume here, but having lost a lot … hundreds of people … decided to just keep posting on this original volume. Sorry for any confusion.

40 Days ASR

"What did I do?" He chuckled, looking down at her as if he'd accidentally solved some intricate puzzle and needed to figure out how to do it again.

Shepard slid her hand between them. "See that little—" He beat her to the button, quite literally, and the explanation turned into a throaty moan as he rolled a talon pad over it. Swallowing hard, she cleared her throat. "Yeah, that right there is the make Shepard sing in fifteen octaves button."

He nestled back in, his subvocals rolling. "Fifteen? Hmmm, that sounds like a challenge." Looking back, he shot her a sly grin and raised brow plate that made her fingers and toes tingle then go numb.

"Oh sweet baby Jesus," she whispered, her stomach muscles tightening in either anticipation or dread, she didn't quite know. "Go easy on me, I'm a beginner."

He nodded, a thoughtful scowl lowering over his features. "In order to approach this challenge scientifically, I need a much better angle," he announced, pushing up off the mattress. After pausing to kiss her, he moved around to the foot of the bed and settled between her legs. Then, through the teasing, his concern returned, warm and loving. Resting his chin on the inside of her thigh, he looked up into her eyes, not moving until she reached out to stroke his brow, drawing a line down his nose and mouth plate.

He nuzzled her fingers, then turned his attention to her thigh, caressing and kneading gently where her flesh was whole. "Your whole body is so damned soft," he muttered as his talons reached the inside of her upper thigh, "but right here … it's worthy of a sweet baby Jesus." He leaned in, his tongue flicking experimentally to see if he could get the same result. A sultry chuckle greeted the way her body spasmed, getting wetter and wetter. "You keep going like this, you're going to need to keep a bottle of water next to the bed."
She set her face, completely prepared to glare at him. But when he looked up, his entire posture screamed a teasing sort of cocky pleasure at being able to turn her into a mewling, soaking wet mess of want, and the glare evaporated into a cheeky grin. "Hey, Vakarian, I thought you were supposed to be … oooooooo." Arching hard off the mattress, Shepard threw back her head, fists balling up the sheets as his hard, pointed tongue moved deeper. "Oh wow, let's hear it for explorat … ooooooh, damn. That tongue." Every inch of her skin lifted into tiny, shivery peaks of pleasure.

Garrus chuckled, his hand caressing her belly, drawing soft little circles. "I love when your skin does that."

"It's definitely showing its appreciation for your spirit of discovery." She chuckled, taking the opportunity to catch her breath a little. "That's a whole different National Geographic Society, right there." She collapsed only to feel a talon gently caressing her length, then, finding her entrance, it slipped inside a little and the sheets wadded up in her fists once more.

"This spot seems much more accommodating." He looked up to watch her eyes as he pressed deeper. "This is my spot, here?" He grinned as she let out a tremulous mewl, meeting his stare for a second before her head drew back, her hips lifting into him. "Right," he said, chortling a little, "definitely my spot."

Shepard's eyes squeezed closed, hands pulling the sheets right off the mattress as Garrus grew bolder, his talon stroking in and out slowly, pushing a little deeper with each thrust. Each movement he made—even the weight of his head resting on her thigh and his breath as it tickled through her hair—stoked the fire until her muscles leaped and convulsed with even the slightest provocation.

"Garrus …" She gasped, his name the only coherent thought that managed to escape the tangled mess of love and desire. Need and passion … and just raw, painfully intense sensation tossed her back and forth between them, keeping her in the air, spinning about and helpless. And at her center, the slow smoldering fire caught the faint breeze of his breath and roared to life.

A strong hand caressed her side, his voice carving its way through the fucking amazing madness to anchor her. "It's okay, Kahri. I've got you."

One half-gasp, half-sob escaped her lips, and then that tongue … that tongue flicked and the world dissolved into crashing waves of pleasure, ice cold flipping to magma hot and back again. She cried out, at first just a vocal outpouring of release—fervent and hedonistic—but as the waves began to recede to a slow, pulsing tide, thought returned and his name tumbled out, tangled into various words of love.

Garrus watched her face, his smile pleased, adoring … and a little surprised. "Did I just make you orgasm?" he asked, not a trace of teasing in his tone or expression. He withdrew his talon, his smile widening as her entire body seized again.

"God, yes," she said, a soft chortle managing to muscle in between the gasps. "Either that, or you tried to kill me using my giblets as the murder weapon." She reached out for his hand, lacing her fingers with his, their joined hands resting on her trembling stomach. "Wow," she said once she started catching her breath. "That was …" Pausing, she shrugged and shook her head, at a loss for words. "... that was … dear lord, Garrus, I think my heart's going to explode." She scowled and raised her head, looking down between her legs. "And quite possibly most of my giblets as well."

"Giblets?" Garrus's brow plates peaked as he rested his cheek back on her thigh, his breath warm against her skin. "I don't know that one." His other hand caressed its way up her side, gliding over
"My very religious mama couldn't bring herself to use proper names for things, so she just warned me not to let the boys play with my giblets, and to certainly never let them put their giblets inside me." She squeezed his talons. "Considering what giblets actually are—I'll tell you some time when it won't destroy the mood—I was more than glad to obey her wishes."

"But, you're making an exception for me?" He nuzzled along the inside of her thigh to her center.

A soft, joyful laugh answered that. "My very religious mama couldn't bring herself to use proper names for things, so she just warned me not to let the boys play with my giblets, and to certainly never let them put their giblets inside me." She squeezed his talons. "Considering what giblets actually are—I'll tell you some time when it won't destroy the mood—I was more than glad to obey her wishes."

"But, you're making an exception for me?" He nuzzled along the inside of her thigh to her center.

Her body answered for her as her knees dropped to the outside and her pelvis lifted into the soft kiss. "I think that's a pretty resounding yes," she added, just in case he needed the clarification.

Garrus let out a long, contented sigh as he settled back between her thighs, his mouth plates brushing her skin. She smiled, knowing that he was simply savouring the softness.

Then, eyes closed, he drew in a deep breath through his mouth as if he was tasting the air. A low, rumbling moan followed. "Dear spirits, Kahri, you smell … ." A soft, mewling sound trembled in the air for a second before he fell silent, returning to his nuzzling.

Shepard waited for a moment, then chuckled, low and kind, hoping to loosen the blockage cutting off his words. "Hmmm, yeah, in grade three, Bobby Treller went out of his way to tell me that I was smelly a couple of times a day." Try as she might to keep the smartass out of her grin, she failed, and held her breath, hoping she hadn't shut him down.

A fleeting smile whispered across his face, but then he smacked her hip hard enough to sting. She jumped, a soft whimper of need escaping as all the muscles through her core clenched tight, a spasm of pleasure jerking her off the mattress. When she settled, his grin came both easily and heated as he echoed her. "Got to remember that one." Smile fading to something serious and beautiful, he shook his head. "But, no, that wasn't what I was trying to say, Kahri." A grumbling sigh rolled from him as he searched for words and failed. "It's what you said earlier about not walking away. You … ."

Heart unable to watch him fumble, looking more miserable by the minute, Shepard sat up and took his chin in her hand. "Don't worry about how it sounds, Garrus. You know you can't scare me off." Her other hand closed around his, and she leaned down to kiss his talons. "Just tell me the best way you can."

He nodded. "My pari said that he knew the moment he walked past my mari on a crowded street that he'd just passed his mate." Garrus turned his face into her palm, his eyes closing. "He spun and raced after her because he hadn't seen her … he'd just caught the perfect scent … the one person in all of the galaxy who'd been meant for him. Their love has never faltered."

Shepard pressed her lips together to stop them trembling, but the tears that gathered along her lashes would not be denied, breaking free to trickle around the curve of her nose. The soft layer of awe and longing running beneath his words reached down into her, evoking new emotions; deep, reaching down into the roots sorts of feelings that she'd honestly never expected to feel. Her heart sped up, fear peeking out of hiding but then excitement and joy wrestled it down while hope tied it up and gagged it. She caressed her love's face, soft touches encouraging him to continue.

"If I've known it from the moment we met," he said, his eyes gleaming as he looked up into hers, "but just now, I realized that this face is what I'm supposed to see first thing every morning and last thing every night." He leaned up and pressed his palm against her chest. "This heart is the one that has been entrusted into my care for the rest of my days. And … " He lowered his head to nuzzle
her belly. "... genetic impossibilities aside, this body is the one meant to bear my children. Your scent, it's the scent of the one person in all of the galaxy meant for me."

He sniffed, thick and throaty, then ducked his head, mandibles giving an embarrassed little flick. "How does that rate on the scaring you off scale?"

Oh for frig's sake. Shepard blinked hard, almost furiously, to clear away her tears and choked down the lump trying to strangle her. She couldn't just dissolve into a giant, hormonal puddle of tears immediately following her first orgasm. That mixed message could well go off like a grenade inside his head.

Tugging gently on his chin, she coaxed him up. "Come here."

"But your wounds," he protested, pulling back.

A soft smile and a raised eyebrow addressed his stubbornness. "I don't care." Releasing him, she laid back against the bank of pillows. "Come here."

Lifting onto his hands and knees, he crawled up the bed until his cheek pressed against hers, as if he was afraid to look her in the eyes. "Okay, I'm here," he said, holding himself rigid and clear of her body.

"Closer," she said, ironically pushing him back until she could focus on his face. "I want your body on mine when I say this." She interrupted his protests before they made it out of his mouth. "No arguments, General, just do it."

"Aye, aye, Captain." He shook his head but he lowered himself gingerly until all but his keel pressed along her left side, deliciously warm and solid. When she tilted her head, beckoning him closer, he let out an aggravated sigh and turned a little so that the side of his chest rested against her rather than the sharp blade down its center.

"Better." She wrapped an arm around his neck and drew his brow down to rest against hers. "Much better." Tilting her head, she kissed him, just a soft, chaste peck, then pulled him down, adjusting for his cowl until he could tuck his face in against her neck. She let out a long breath, her hand stroking his fringe, a motion that comforted her as well. It seemed that the earlier, unspoken question couldn't be completely avoided. Too much time and longing and heartache lay between them.

"We haven't had any time to decompress, have we?" she asked. "Everything seems like an emergency, even us, and we haven't stopped running since I came back." Pressing her lips to the top of his head, she let out a long sigh. "You know the answer will be yes, Garrus. You're right ... I've felt it since the beginning, as much as it terrified me. We might not be the same species, but the powers that be most definitely decided that we belonged together."

She pulled back and lifted his chin so their eyes met again, knowing everything she felt for her remarkable torin poured into that stare. "As for the when and the how of the official stuff, the time will appear. I'm not going to disappear on you again, love. The rain can't just erase me out here."

He lifted onto an elbow and leaned in to kiss her, his free hand wandering along her skin, his entire body trembling with passion as he moved against her. Then he balked, his body stiffening, eyes shuttering, his words measured as he spoke, "The rain can't erase you?"

Mouth open, lips moist, panting, she pressed into his hand as it cupped her breast, his thumb talon tracing her nipple. "I just mean that I'm not going anywhere. You're stuck with me." Her body
undulated in slow waves as he relaxed back into her, her thighs falling open, relaxed, almost begging him to stop teasing and to climb between them. Of course, her wounds would never stand the pressure of his full weight, but still.

Kissing the sensitive hide just under his jaw, Shepard did her best to give as good as she got, sucking and nipping, her tongue teasing. Getting bolder as he rumbled with pleasure, Shepard's hand slipped down his belly to run her thumb along the top edge of the plates protecting his groin.

"So," she whispered between kisses, "how does the whole plate thing work?" She blushed as he lifted his weight off her, leaning back on his elbow. Running her lower lip through her teeth, she raised her eyebrows and caressed her hand over both plates. "Do I have to do anything to help the process along?"

A long, heavy moan ground from Garrus's throat, startling her. "Spirits, no. You've more than helped the process along, I'm staying sheathed deliberately." Her hand rested on the seam, featherlight, drawing an almost whimper from him. "It's not easy, and it's definitely not comfortable, but once it comes out, it'll start to swell, and I didn't want to scare you or . . . ." Another miserable sort of grumble followed, but he shrugged. "It's different with tarins, Shepard. We'd rub our plates together, stroke one another, and I'd unsheath straight between her plates, seating there until it was over."

Shepard nodded, her fingertips stroking his face and neck, a soft, loving massage aimed at easing his discomfort. "Right. Well, human males get erect and then thrust into that much more accommodating spot until they are stimulated to an orgasm." She slipped her fingertips along the seam, both curiosity and desire wishing that he'd relax his rigid control and let her see him.

After a second, she looked up once more. "I don't think Shepard on the bottom is a good plan," she said. "And, I'd like to see your face when we do this, so that leaves lying on our sides or Garrus on his back." She gave him a teasing push. "Which is it, big guy?"

He sat up and adjusted the pillows behind him, his stare bright and eager again. She kissed him, her tongue dancing along his reassuring him that it would all work out just fine.

"That is the best choice, I think," she agreed. When he stopped adjusting the pillows, Shepard threw a leg over his hips, watching his face for any sign of discomfort as she settled her weight onto him a little. "This okay?"

He lifted himself further up the bed and reached out to drag his thumb across her bottom lip. She kissed it, noting that his hands smelled of her, their combined scents dumping an entire truckload of fuel on her fire. His mandibles flicked, warning her before his teasing even escaped his mouth. "Other than the fact that you're sitting a dozen centimetres too far down, you mean?"

She scowled and smacked the hand that reached up to fondle her breast, the backs of his talons slipping back and forth between it and the hard bone of her chest. "Yes, other than that. It hasn't been very long since those bastards took you apart, Garrus." Leaning forward, she kissed him. Letting her eyes slip closed, she delighted in the slightly rough texture of his tongue and the delicious sensation of his pelvis brushing against hers.

He returned her kiss, hips moving under her, a slow roll back and forth that transferred her slick, hot, wetness to his hide. Closing his eyes, Garrus sighed, loud and full as their surfaces glided over one another. "You weigh three kilos, trust me, I'll be fine."

Shepard sat back, trailing her hands down his body, teasing as she went. When she reached his plates, she stroked them apart with her thumbs. "Time to let go, Garrus," she whispered. "Time to
His eyes latched onto hers, his breathing quick and erratic. "Shepard, I just don't want to scare you or hurt you."

She nodded. She couldn't blame him for being worried after the fierce push-pull of their relationship. The only way to ease his fear was to prove it wrong. "Right now," she said, dropping her voice down low and husky, "I want you inside me badly enough to go in after it, so make your choice, Vakarian: fumbling, inexperienced fingers groping inside your sheath, or just trust me and let go. I've fought naked asari monstrosities, I'm not going to shatter at the sight of a turian erection."

Despite giving her a truly rock-crushing scowl, he nodded. "Fine ... impossible woman." Then, letting out a groan of such profound relief that it made her heart ache, he relaxed and slipped free of his plates.

Leaning forward, she slapped his arm. "Damn it, Garrus. Next time talk to me rather than suffering to try to protect me. That had to be hurting like hell." When she straightened, she caressed the velvet soft skin with gentle fingertips, biting her lip to hide a grin when his hips lifted into her touch. "Oh, and look, you were worried for nothing, because it's just like the rest of you." She glared at him without any real heat and closed her hand around him when his pelvis rocked again. "Different, but perfect."

And it was both very different and perfect. Her palm slid up his length, her turn to be enraptured by the softness of his skin. As she indulged her fascination, she watched his face, relishing every mandible flick of delight and the wanton way his head tipped back, mouth open, chest heaving as he tried to keep from thrusting up into her hand. And failed.

Pressing her lips tight, she lifted her eyebrows, peering down at him with sharp-edged, smart ass curiosity. "Oh, does that feel better than caging it for the last hour or so?"

Growling, a heavy rumble of subvocals that set all her hair on end, he reached down, wrapping his talons around her arms. "Get up here."

"How could a girl possibly not obey such a tantalizing order?" She crawled up his body, low enough her breasts pressed against him and his erection trailed along her belly.

"Wait. Stop, Kahri," he said when he slipped between her legs. Garrus grabbed her waist, the sharpness in his voice and movements freezing her in place.

Holding herself as still as she could, she searched his face for the problem, worry slicing through her, cold and sharp. "What? Are you okay? Damn it, I damaged something, didn't I?"

Garrus shook his head, one hand pressing against her cheek. "No, I'm fine. Just give me a second." He gasped, his voice a reed floating on a river of subvocals, his breath hot and sweet against her face. "It's just ... a lot of, um ... Spirits ... " He leaned in to rest his brow against hers, his whole body jumping as his erection moved within the slick heat between her legs. Another almost pained grunt bullied its way out between his clenched teeth. "It's just a lot more stimulation than I'm used to." He nipped at her chin, teeth grazing her. "Damn, woman, you feel amazing ... no, not amazing ... different, but perfect."

Shepard grinned and kissed him. "And you're not even in your spot, yet. What's going to happen when you are?" Despite her teasing, she held herself as still as she could, letting him shift beneath her, exploring and adjusting. Her eyes closed as she savoured the new, intoxicating sensation of her
torin sliding against her sensitive, deliciously aching bits.

"Where are you?" he asked. He rolled his hips front to back, sending a thousand tiny jolts of electric bliss zipping along her nerves. When they reached the end of the line, they exploded, leaving her trembling, fine beads of sweat glistening along her brow, lip, and between her breasts.

Once again, the sun burst through the dim lighting of that room on Omega, its hot rays beating down on her skin and and glowing bright against her eyelids. She opened her eyes, catching one side of her lower lip between her teeth as she shook her head. "Mmm … I'm right here with you." She moved against him a little, pressing down into the ridge along his underside. Back arching with pleasure, she let her mouth drop open, a rich moan tumbling out. And then his open mouth pressed to hers, his breath sultry on her tongue, teeth sharp against her lips.

"Dear spirits, is that the fifteen octaves button?" He yelped, thrusting up against her as Shepard rubbed it against his tip.

"Yes, it is, and that thing you're doing there—" She let out a soft grunt as a wave of hot, wet pleasure poured through her and over him. As Garrus responded to the wash of her lust by grinding up into her, Shepard's grunt grew into a whine of sheer, wanton desire, the sound reaching a pitch and volume she'd thought impossible. "Oh god, yeah … that, right there. Holy … blessed … Enkindlers."

She planted soft, yearning kisses along his mandible as her hands caressed and kneaded, trying to ease the need growing both stronger and harder to reach every second … the need to somehow mould their two aching, striving bodies into a single being, sated and complete.

"Hey, know anyplace around here where an explorer can hire a guide?" he whispered, the tremulous thread of control woven through his subvocals betraying the raw voracity beneath his teasing.

She grinned and brushed the end of her nose against his. "I know one, but she's pricey as hell and a real pain in the ass. You might just want to—"

"I like a challenge." His arm clamped around her, an intractable steel band pinning her against his chest, while the other grasped her jaw, pulling her into a kiss so deep and wide that it set her heart thrashing against her ribs.

His need … good lord, his need roared over her, a forest fire leaping across an open area to wash against new, virgin ground. For two years, all he'd wanted was for the two of them to be together, and for two years, her fear and then her death had held that simple desire out of his grasp. No longer. He deserved so much better.

Deepening the kiss, she threw herself into the fire and let it burn.

As the inferno swept her up, she slipped a hand between them, guiding him into place. A low susurrus of pleasure drifted between them as she lowered herself slowly, wanting to savour every second and sensation. They'd only ever get one first time. Afterwards, the rest of their lives lay before them, days, months, and years to layer in all the nuances that came with love shared over time.

But that time, their first time, was for closing her eyes, clinging to her love, and discovering the sweet friction of him sliding into her depths. It was for finally feeling the barrier that kept Jane Shepard isolated and alone shatter as Garrus filled her. For gasping at the rake of his talons across her skin and the sharp, aching pressure of his keel between her breasts.
The memory of antiseptic bit deeply through the dim, blue light.

"Officer Vak—" Dr. Chakwas sighed, a thin, tight sound. "Garrus, you need to eat something. It's been two days."

In front of her, her beautiful torin clung to someone's hand, the person obscured by a stasis field. Garrus shook his head, and when he opened his mouth, a reedy sort of keen bled beneath his words. "I can't. She's afraid of the dark."

"I love you." His oath pulled her out of her head, out of the wash of sensations—of memories?—and back into the tight, almost desperate grip of Garrus's arms.

A soft, adoring smile answered him, and she reached up, her fingertips just grazing his nose and mouth, thumb sweeping over his cheekbone and mandible. Then, closing her eyes once more, she slipped her hands over the arch of his neck, caressing under his crest and along the border between hide and plate, each touch promising an end to his waiting.

"And I love you." Her words came out in a soft cry as he thrust, and the inferno burst through her skin, searing along her nerves to burn bright and fierce in her belly. She stiffened, the brilliant light revealing all the small, dark frozen corners hidden within her heart. Clinging to her love, feeling no fear as his arms held her … so tight and so strong … she reached out to touch the next dark place.

Garrus stepped away from the circle of people and leaned down to press his talons against the box at their center. She started to follow, but then he caressed the smooth, gray metal, and suddenly she felt like an intruder. "Shepard was brave. Loyal to a fault. Infuriating. Terrified. Honourable. Strong . . . so much stronger than she believed. Perfect in her flaws . . . and I loved . . . love her." He swallowed, the rigid, violent movement painful to watch, and closed his eyes. Unable to bear his isolation for another second, she stepped to his side, slipping her hand into his.

The moment flashed like lightning between one gasp and the next. She lifted into Garrus's embrace, her arms wrapping around his neck, her mouth open and pressed against his mandible. She ran the flats of her teeth down the edge … how did she know that he loved it when she did that? How did she know that her flat, impotent teeth could pull a cry of bliss from him that they'd hear down at Afterlife?

His much more impressive teeth nicked the skin under her ear. The slight pain just tossed her higher, and her lover remained too caught up in the dance between their bodies to respond with his usual concern.

His thrusts deepened, his body apparently deciding it liked the human method of intercourse. Her muscles rolled with his every movement, her body gripping him tight as he withdrew, then spreading open to draw him back. Oh dear lord, the delicious friction … each stroke more intense than the last until she cried out with every one. The fire roared higher, daring her to reach for the next patch of shaded truth.

Garrus set the book down at one end of the cushions and laid down. He spread a couple of blankets over himself, then tucked a pillow between his head and his cowl. Closing his eyes, he breathed in, the expression of twisted pain and love on his face telling her whose pillow it was.

She curled in against him, her back pressed into his front, trying to feel his warmth.

"I had so many plans for us," he whispered to the air. "I didn't want to scare you by laying out everything I saw for us, but I never intended to let you get further than an arm's length away." She rolled over to face him, still tucked in as tightly as she could manage. His laboured breaths passed
through her as he continued, "If we died in flames, fighting Reapers, we'd die together, wearing one another's collars. If we survived, and ever saw the end of war, I thought maybe we'd live somewhere quiet, put down the guns, and who knows ... maybe even have a family." The soft keen broke the air again and he curled around the pillow, pulling it in against him.

Garrus thrust into her hard and fast, her whole body rocking with the force of his passion, each movement promising a release that drew so close ... so painfully close. He stiffened against her, his subvocals keening, matching her cry for cry.

"Garrus." His name tumbled from her, begging for him to end the frantic climb, to punch through the glass holding completion so tauntingly out of reach. "Please."

"Kahri," he rumbled, his mouth pressing against the hollow under her jaw where her jugular groove began. "I ... spirits ... I'm just about ... ." His words disappeared into a deep cry of needful bliss. Then it was her turn to moan as his tongue traced a long, slow path down her throat. Damn, that bloody amazing tongue.

Garrus followed Anderson down the aisle, straight and proud as he parted the presidium crowd. Shepard strode beside him, her hand tight in his. After a quick glance around her memorial, wondering who the council thought they were burying, nothing she saw had the slightest bit to do with her, she focused on her torins. Poor Nihlus, wounded so deeply his soul bled out, and Garrus ... so strong, so beautiful even in his grief.

"You can do this," she whispered to him. "You can lead these people and win this war. I know you can. Take care of my people ... your people, General Vakarian."

Garrus pulled in a deep breath and nodded. He stopped at the entrance to the park and turned back to look at her hologram. "Spirits, you would have hated this memorial, Kahri." He laughed and took a deep breath, his shoulders settling. "I thought I'd lost you," he whispered, staring at her image, "but you're right here. You'll always be right here." He backed up, following Anderson. "Let's show them."

As she crashed closer and closer to orgasm, the images sped up, flickering past so fast they barely registered before disappearing.

"I'm going to ... ." Garrus gasped, his breath hot on her cheek and lips as his mouth returned to hers. "I'm so close, Kahri." He kissed her, and then his one hand slipped down between them, the pad of his thumb brushing over her. "Yes?" he asked, pulling back to look into her eyes.

"Ohhh, yes," she said, the word a heaving sigh. "Except, more: harder, faster ... whatever, just more."

"Okay," he whispered, his mouth still brushing hers, bringing with his touch the brilliant sun, sweet breeze, and the sighing grass.

Her torin stretched out along her side and curled his arm under her neck. Shepard burrowed in against his side, smiling, completely content and happy in a way she could never remember feeling.

He shook his head and nuzzled his way down her jaw. "You and your stories," he whispered against her neck.

She sighed and closed her eyes, pressing into his solid warmth. One day it would end, and her world would crash down around her, but maybe ... just maybe ... not that day.
Her body responded and not subtly, the fire bursting forth like a star going nova. She mewed, shrill, breathless, the sound building to a cry that bordered on a scream. Her heart thundered as her body arched hard, muscles tying themselves into knots of pure bliss.

Lightheaded and reeling, she pressed her brow against the sweating hide of his neck and clung to him, one hand around his neck, the other clamped over the hand still rubbing in slow, light circles. In return he wrapped himself around her, her truest, safest place in the galaxy.

"And they had to live as refugees in Callor and Katrana's lands?" Shepard laughed. "Smart cookie. I imagine that Katrana found him completely irresistible after that." She pulled back, reaching up to trace the lines of his face with tender fingers. "I would have. Love a torin who uses what's between his ears." She leaned up and looked at both sides of his head. "Or in the case of turians, I suppose ... ummm ... aural canals? Tympanic membranes?"

He dragged her back down and rolled over to pin her down as he kissed her. Passion and joy roared through her. The taste of his mouth, the solid weight of his body laying over hers, and the way his talons caressed her all combined into a heady, intoxicating brew. Too bad he'd find it all empty one day and never return.

She shoved that aside. "Did they end up joining their states and finding their happily ever after?" Shepard whispered, nibbling along his mandible between words.

Breathing like she'd just run fifteen klicks in full gear, Shepard began to ease down from the full rigor of breaking orgasm, her body rippling with slow, deep waves of pleasure. Her body helped coax him to his release, and then he called out, his voice rich and rumbling with layers of love, devotion, and euphoria.

His subvocals rolled through her with enough force that aftershocks sent her arcing into him again as he spilled into her. She gripped him tight as he collapsed back, pulling her in to nestle against his chest. Limbs tangled, she lay draped over him, his swollen member deep inside her, pulsing softly. He buried his face in the curve of her neck, breathing hard and ragged against her skin.

"Dear spirits, woman," he whispered, letting out a long, decadent groan, "I think you may have killed me." One hand stroked up her side to cup her breast, caressing it with the gentlest of touches as he moved within her.

Leaning forward, she kissed him, long and slow and sweet, the most wonderful, comforting sense of connection setting in, roots anchoring her in that new, off-kilter-feeling life. "I discovered why I don't recall any sort of afterlife." She drew back just far enough to look into his eyes, her heart thumping hard as she watched him sort through what she'd said.

Garrus's grip on her loosened and fell away, his body freezing under her. "Kahri?" he whispered, her nickname sounding very much like a prayer.

She grasped his hands, the fear in his voice demanding that she comfort it, to wrap him in the same wonderful peace that she'd discovered. Drawing his talons to her lips, she said, "It's because I never once left your side, love. I stayed with you through it all."

(A-N: Not much to say here, except ... Yeah, it was long, but it was important to them. Sorry if you hate love scenes. I do try to keep them romantic rather than smutty. Thanks as always. *hugs*

theherocomplex is someone I truly cherish as a friend and fellow-writer-guide. She is writing a
fantastic story called Ghost, Ghost, I know you live within me. I highly recommend reading it if you aren't already. Although her story also has Shepard sticking around as a spirit, that is where the similarities end. I have no desire nor intention to tread upon her toes. The stories are very different stories, our Shepards are nearly polar opposites, and this is the extent of my Shepard's dead archives. I am examining questions of the soul, what makes people what they are, naturally the idea of spirits or ghosts is going to come into it because Shepard had to go somewhere, or did she? I received a guest review on FFN saying I plagiarized hero's story because of these last few lines. It's sort of surprising considering how different our stories are, but I wanted to address it, because I have no intention to do any such thing. She is my favourite writer in the known galaxy, my friend, and one of the people who beats this story into shape.)
The grin widened as she raked a hand through her hair, a ghost of that touch skating along his stomach and thighs. Calling the night before well worth the wait amounted to the understatement of all time. She never stopped amazing him. When they'd made love, well, he'd never imagined feeling so much at once. The few times he'd blown off steam with different tarins had been great, but Shepard had turned him inside out, rearranged him, and then put him back together a little more content, a little more sure, a little more the torin he wanted to be.

And of course, even more helplessly in love.

41 Days ASR

Garrus's eyes never left Shepard as she paced the parameter of the senior staff's briefing room. She'd probably punch him for having noticed and catalogued the fact that she paced in fourteen distinct ways depending on her mood or the problem at hand, but he had. She'd call it creepy. He called it attentive.

Anyway, she thought better on her feet, movement syphoning away any energy that might interfere with that razor-sharp mind. Right then, she marched, spine rigid, shoulders braced, eyes studying the floor without seeing it: her 'I don't see how this changes anything, but I'm trying' pace. He let a tiny smile flutter along his mandibles. She might not believe that two factions of Reapers changed anything, but that didn't mean she wouldn't try to find a way to use it.

The grin widened as she raked a hand through her hair, a ghost of that touch skating along his stomach and thighs. Calling the night before well worth the wait amounted to the understatement of all time. She never stopped amazing him. When they'd made love, well, he'd never imagined feeling so much at once. The few times he'd blown off steam with different tarins had been great, but Shepard had turned him inside out, rearranged him, and then put him back together a little more content, a little more sure, a little more the torin he wanted to be.

And of course, even more helplessly in love.

He realized he was staring at her when Nihlus jabbed him with an elbow, drawing his attention back to the packed briefing room. Heat flushed up Garrus's neck as his fratrin chuckled under his breath and patted his shoulder. Nihlus had pulled Garrus and Shepard out of bed early in order to prepare them for a great deal of whispering and to advise that the general get his room soundproofed.

Garrus grinned. After the traumas of Shepard's past, he hadn't known if they'd ever make love. Last night, his beautiful Kahri turned her passion loose in a way he'd never dared hope. After her allowing it to carry her away the way she had, he'd soundproof the entire base twice so she felt free to fly.

Of course, despite Nihlus's warning, everyone just seemed really pleased for them. No one was crass enough to mention anything except Butler, who just shook his head and said, "We always
knew you were married, General. Just didn't figure it was to the angel herself." He walked away a few strides, then turned back. "Judging by what the second floor is saying, you're going to have most of the females around here asking you to give their men lessons." A bellowing laugh echoed through the lobby and that was the end of it.

"As fascinating as two factions of Reapers is," Shepard said, breaking her silence and pulling Garrus back to the present, "it doesn't really change all that much."

A flash of orange on the other side of the room drew both Garrus and Shepard's attention. Miranda Lawson's fingers skipped across her omnitool's interface, then the glow died.

Scowling, Garrus looked back to Shepard just in time to see a blade-edged shudder roll up her spine, lodging at the base of her skull. A heavy scowl dropped Garrus's brow plates and mandibles as Shepard cracked her neck, the heel of her right hand lifting to press against her temple. A headache?

Shepard shook it off and forced her hand down, the movement rusted and tense. Her jaw tightened as if it hurt her to speak. "Trust me, the ones behind the orbs are just as busy ripping my brain to shreds as the Sovereign ones. They're not potential allies, just enemies coming at us from a different angle."

Lawson's arm glowed for another couple of seconds, but then Nihlus cleared his throat.

"You won't get an argument from anyone who went aboard the Haestrom shipyard," he agreed. "There was nothing benevolent going on there." When Shepard looked over at the Spectre, she gave him a thin, tired-looking smile.

"However," Dr. Chakwas said cutting through the wave of murmuring that followed Nihlus's statement, "it's something else to work with in our treatment of indoctrination. I've already pulled the scans I did on Han'Gerrel, Lady Benezia, and the Feros colonists." She stood and the rest of the conversations died. "We know that Lady Benezia and Shiala were indoctrinated by Sovereign." She twisted to face Shepard, turning to follow the Captain's progress back to the center of the room. "Comparing their scans and yours to Han'Gerrel's, I can confirm he was indoctrinated by Sovereign."

Mordin cleared his throat and straightened in his chair. "Fact that one form of indoctrination—orbs ... Sovereign ... Thorian—disrupts other kinds very useful. Also need to continue work with Mr. Weaver. Implants reason orbs did not affect him. Filtering technology possible."

Garrus met Shepard's eyes and nodded, a crooked grin following to her chair. Clearing his throat, he calmed the renewed wave of discussion. "We need to continue our research, but I agree that we're just facing two enemies, not any sort of potential ally. The enemy of my enemy is still my enemy if he's shooting at me or tearing apart my brain." He watched Shepard sit, her head falling into her hand for a moment before she took a deep breath and straightened. Cerberus had bought her some more time with their rebuild of her brain, but it hadn't driven the dark spiders out of her. Who knew how much time she had without a proper cure?

Stomping on his fear and tearing his eyes from his mate, he returned to Chakwas and Mordin. "Use whatever resources you need to continue your research. Bring in any personnel you need. Just cc me on large requisitions and salary offers." He pushed up out of his chair, smiling at the doctor as she returned to hers. "I signed the deal on the rachni statue yesterday and am setting those funds aside for the R&D department."

He strode to the end of the room where the QEC pads all stood empty and turned back. "The fight
is here, but so far it's against shadows, and we possess only scattered clues as to its shape. To combat that, we need to expand the research and development department." An indulgent nod greeted a small, excited outburst from Mordin about their funding nearing the levels of the STG. "I'm clearing the accounting and operations departments out of floors fifteen through twenty. They'll move to building three, and we'll renovate the five floors here to suit. We'll begin that process when I return midweek."

His gaze travelled over everyone assembled there, resting on Nyreen Kandros and Martin. "When do the people from Lorek arrive?"

The tarin leaned forward in her chair. "Later today. The four day lead time gave us a chance to get enough rooms in building three prepared for them." She activated her omnitool. "We've had our people going through the ships, taking down information so that we can try to reunite family members if they so choose." Scrolling down the list, she nodded and then turned to Martin.

The kid shrugged. "We've done our best to prepare for the extranet use. Each room has access. And, along with family information, we've been asking people where they might want to be taken." The kid's face told Garrus everything before he spoke. "Not surprising, a lot of them just have no clue. They were born and raised there." He glanced over at Shepard. "A lot of families died either in the raids or since."

"I got damned lucky," Shepard said, her voice low and rough.

"Shepard … ." Martin said, flailing a little.

She just shook her head, a watered down smile trying to reassure the kid. Damn, she looked as though someone had turned her inside out then shaken her half to death. "Don't worry, kid. I wasn't putting anything out there other than the facts. My family has somewhere to go. A lot of other ones might need to find that for themselves." Looking up at Garrus, she raised her eyebrows. "Any ideas, General?"

He smiled and nodded. "Yes, I have one in fact. Thank you, Captain." Letting out a long breath, he turned to meet each set of eyes in the room before speaking. "You all know about the Illusive Man's security breach a month ago." When the chorus of agreement and the nasty glares being tossed at Miranda died down, he continued, "TIM, as we've all come to call him, said something to me that day that was a cold splash of reality. He said that when the Reapers arrive, we would have a rush of recruitment, people of all sorts running to sign up. The condition of their service would be safety for their families."

He walked over to Emily Wong and rested a hand on her shoulder. "I've asked Miss Wong to oversee the Sanctuary project, and she's agreed after much charm and persuasion."

The reporter brushed his hand from her shoulder. "You're not as charming as you believe, General," she said, haughty but teasing.

"Of course, I am." He grinned at the laughter and moved back to the QEC console. "Sanctuary will be a large, civilian refuge located in a tucked away corner of the galaxy. All of its development and placement details will be kept as top secret as we can manage, but if any of you have suggestions for locations, feel free to let me know." Shepard shifted in her chair, the movement drawing his gaze back to her. He stared for a second, the circles under her eyes worrying him. They hadn't been there that morning.

"I'm going to be heading to Palaven for a few days," he continued. "That will give you research heads time to dream up a million ideas for your new space. It will also give the Lorek resettlers
time to move in and get oriented." He spun on his talons to lock onto Vortash and Butler. "If any of them want to become recruits, take them through an extended orientation and screening. They're more than welcome, but let's ensure that they're making the best decision for them rather than grasping for the only rope they can see."

"Understood, General," Butler agreed. "We'll see to them." He raised his eyebrows, a huge smile displaying all his broken and missing teeth. "So, you're heading to Palaven?"

Garrus shook his head at the unspoken context. "Adrien Victus contacted me this morning. All he'd say is that I needed to see something, so we'll give the Hierarch a ride home." He glanced over at his pari.

When Martin lunged forward in his chair, Garrus chuckled. "Sorry, kid. You're needed here. In addition to playing lab rat for Dr. Solus, you're in charge of making sure that the Shepards have everything they need."

Martin grinned and settled back. "Yeah, I can do that." He looked over at Shepard. "Don't worry, they'll be treated like queens."

Garrus looked around the room. "Any other business?"

After twenty minutes of dealing with small in-house matters, Garrus adjourned the briefing and walked over to Nihlus. "Stay behind?" he asked, moving on to Shepard when the Spectre agreed.

"Palaven?" Shepard smiled wearily and stood. "Way to give a captain notice there, General."

He gripped her shoulders. "Adrien called just before I came in." Bending down to look into her eyes, he frowned, a frozen hand shoving itself between his plates. "Are you okay? You looked like a headache settled in while you were up there."

"Yeah, a pretty decent one. Don't worry, I'll head up to get checked out before we leave." The smile she gave him came off forced. "When do we ship out?"

"Three hours." He stroked a hand over her hair then turned to stop Dr. Chakwas as the doctor walked past. "Doc, Shepard needs your services."

The doctor gripped Shepard's chin for a moment, then nodded. "Come up as soon as you're done here, and I'll take a look." She frowned. "It's not the indoctrination?"

Shepard held her head as if balancing something incredibly fragile on top of her neck. "No spiders, Doc, just a sudden, brain splitting pain."

"Come right up, I'll wait." When Shepard nodded, the doctor headed out.

Garrus pulled his mate in close, tucking her in against his side. Would there come a single day when he didn't worry about her? He chuffed, knowing the answer, especially since she'd always been right about him worrying even when he didn't need to. He nuzzled the top of her head. "Go take care of your head and then meet me downstairs in thirty?"

Despite nodding her agreement, Shepard wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed close. He checked her heart rate with his visor, but didn't need to. He could feel her heart racing against his side. "I'll get Ma—"

"General Vakarian," Miranda Lawson called, pushing through the crowd to get to them. "Am I to assume that since I've heard nothing about this trip to Palaven that the captain will not be travelling
with her crew?" Her omnitool flared to life.

"That's correct. We'll be travelling on the Passchendaele." He turned away, dismissing her.

"Shepard," the operative continued, "I can't overstress my objection. After Thessia, the Collectors are going to be a serious security concern."

Garrus's jaw clamped down so hard, he sunk a tooth into the edge of his tongue as he spun back around. Insubordination? If Shepard didn't rip her down, he would.

Shepard stepped away from his side. "Operative Lawson, I've declared war on the Collectors. My security is going to be a concern everywhere I go, even while on board the Ypres." She laughed but it could have flash frozen a space cow. "Unless you're so delusional that you have dismissed the possibility of indoctrinated agents on our crew?" Shaking her head, Shepard opened her omnitool. "I'm ordering two rotations of shore leave for the crew. Forty eight hours each. The team needs it after Thessia. Make sure you're included in one of those rotations. Lieutenant Cortez can take the boat."

Miranda entered something into her tool. Garrus tried to move around to see what she was doing, but she covered the interface. "Captain, if you need to go to Palaven, General and Hierarch Vakarian can be accommodated as guests aboard the Ypres."

Shepard hesitated and looked up, pain and confusion staring back at him. She shrugged. "We could take the—"

Fear snapped through Garrus's shock. Shepard backing down? "You're right, Captain. That's a much better idea." He turned to Miranda. "On second thought," Garrus said before either woman could speak, "we'll be travelling aboard the Normandy. Good day, Operative Lawson, and enjoy your shore leave." Gripping Shepard's arm, he propelled her toward the door. When they made it out into the hallway, he searched the crowd and beckoned Martin over before looking down into Shepard's confused stare. "Kahri, were you about to give in to her?"

Shepard shook her head, her stare clearing a little. "No." Another shake. "I don't know. I don't think so. This headache just keeps getting worse. I've got to go do something before my brain implodes." She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him. "I'll meet you downstairs in a half hour."

"General?" Martin asked, stepping up beside them.

"Shepard has something she wants to discuss with you on the way to the medbay," Garrus answered. He turned to point at Miranda. "If Operative Lawson comes within ten metres, shoot her."

"Yes, sir." Martin placed himself between Miranda and Shepard.

Garrus pressed a hand against Shepard's cheek, then turned away, two steps carrying him into Miranda's space. The fury that had marked Shepard's return resurged, flaring into blue flame. "I suggest you take your leave away from Archangel, Operative Lawson." He held a hand in front of her, stopping her without making contact. "Tread carefully."

The woman met his stare with a calculated one, but then a sharp nod cut the air, and she stepped away.

Garrus walked over to lean against the QEC console, stiff and wary as the room emptied out. Did Shepard have to put up with that stult the entire time she tried to command that ship? Fuck, no. He'd give her one of the dreadnoughts and name it the ACV Up Your Ass, Cerberus.
"Jane doesn't look well," Nihlus said, his voice too soft to carry. "Could it be a reaction?" He cleared his throat and ducked into an awkward shrug. "From, you know."

"No, I don't think so." Garrus shook his head, a sense of impending connection slithering around in the back of his head. "Something's going on, and it's to do with Lawson." He nodded toward the woman. "How is she with Shepard? Respectful?"

Nihlus shrugged. "She'd be strapped to the hull for a relay jump if it was a turian ship, but Shepard seems to be earning her respect. Sits her back when she has to." Scowl deepening, he started to rise, but sank back down when Garrus shook his head.

"Give me a second. I want to talk to you, but I need to talk to Anderson first." Clearing his plan with Anderson probably should have been a first step, but the way that Shepard just folded when Lawson insisted on them taking the Ypres threw him. He shuddered. Something happened that morning, something that was behind the headache, Kahri's dazed confusion, and Lawson tightening the leash. The slithering in his gut ramped up. Damn. He needed the old crew.

Hopefully Anderson agreed.

"General," the Captain replied, "what can I do for you?"

"Anderson, something strange is going on with Shepard." He sighed, the air coming out in a growl. "I don't know what it is, but I have a really bad feeling about Cerberus. I want Chakwas's opinion. Possibly Mordin's as well." Each step tight and controlled with worry and suppressed violence, Garrus stalked across the room and back. "Adrien Victus asked me to meet him on Palaven. He wouldn't say what it was about even over the QEC, so it's sensitive and important."

"And with Shepard acting strangely, you want familiar faces along for the ride?" Anderson cleared his throat. He muttered a little under his breath. "There isn't room on the Normandy unless you're willing to bunk in the shuttle bay."

Garrus could hear the man pacing and grinned, a chilled smile of shared worry.

"The Normandy can escort the Passch to Palaven. I'll call it a command experience exercise for Alenko. Myself, Chakwas, and Mordin can all stay aboard the Passch to help keep an eye on Shepard." He cleared his throat. "Acceptable?"

"More than." The general let out a long breath of relief. "Thank you, Anderson. We were due to set out in just over two and a half hours."

"Knock it back an hour and a half? I've got to round up crew, although I doubt there will be any grousing when I tell them they're trading shore leave on Omega for Palaven." He chuckled. "Contact me if anything changes."

"I will. Thank you, Captain. See you in a few hours." Garrus closed the channel and sagged against the nearest chair.

"Anderson's going to head to Palaven with you?" Nihlus's chair squeaked as the Spectre stood.

"Yes. I want Chakwas and Mordin along as well." The general turned to face his fratri. "Come with us," he said, keeping his voice pitched low, subvocals welcoming.

Nihlus shook his head and turned away, pacing to the QEC panel. "No. You two need some time without me between you." He turned and leaned back against the console. "I am going to head to Illium, finally close down my apartment, get everything shipped here." His mandibles fluttered.
"She's here, so I guess that officially makes it home."

Garrus strode over, stepping into his fratrin's space. "Come with us. You can spend two days relaxing on Palaven and meeting with war contacts without your brain exploding. Besides, you look like hell. Thessia kicked the tarc out of you."

He chuckled, but it faded quickly. If he knew anything for sure, it was that they had to present karifratus as real and viable right from the beginning. "Look, Nihlus, if we're going to make this work, you need to be in it from the start." He blew out a rough sigh, his shoulders dropping. "Shepard is going to fight it. Not because she doesn't want it, but because she's so damned worried about hurting either one of us. If we set our relationship as she and I, then bring you in as an addition after the fact." Brow plates raised, he shook his head. "How do you think that's going to go?"

Nihlus scowled and looked down. "Are you even okay with it, or are you taking a hit because you feel sorry for me?"

Fury flared again, burning hot and quick down Garrus's spine and out his hand as it cracked against Nihlus's cheek. "Just don't, Nihlus." He pressed his hand over the cheek he'd just slapped. "Self pity has no place in this. It's going to be hard enough to make Kahrí comfortable without that sort of poison." He leaned in, eyes narrow. "Do you want it?"

"She's my breath, Garrus." Nihlus held eye contact for a moment before looking down.

"Then pack for Palaven and be aboard the Passch in three hours." Garrus patted his fratrin's cheek and turned away. "You can catch a ride to Illium from there."

"Are you okay with this, Garrus?" Nihlus called after him.

Letting out a long sigh, Garrus stopped and turned back. "It's not about being okay with it, Nihlus. It's about the three of us finding a way to be happy." He smiled, a shallow, affectionate flutter. "I'm not unhappy about it, Nihlus. I'm not jealous, and I know that she loves me no less with you in our lives than she would without you. She has the most remarkably big heart. If anyone has enough love for two torins, it's Shepard."

Garrus scowled. "I'm not sure this is for me to tell, but I'm going to tell you anyway." He let out a sharp breath and returned to the seat closest to the door. Sitting on the edge, he looked up at Nihlus. "She didn't leave us, Nihlus." He smiled, but his mandibles flailed a little. Everytime he allowed the implications of what she'd told him to really register, it overwhelmed him anew.

Nihlus's frown matched Garrus's as the Spectre strode over to sit next to him. "What do you mean?"

Glancing down at the Spectre's clenched fists, Garrus shook his head. "The first moment she remembers is standing across her body from me the second day after she died." He smiled and looked up to meet his fratrin's stare when Nihlus's hand darted out to clamp onto his wrist. "Yeah, she doesn't remember every second, but she remembers a lot of it. Haestrom, when I thought I was just hallucinating because of the cold … it was her."

Garrus clapped his hand over Nihlus's. "The night we swore karifratus, she watched the whole thing, and then curled up with your drunken ass on the couch."

"Spirits." Nihlus yanked his hands from Garrus's and threw himself out of his chair. "Damn her!" He paced to the other end of the room before spinning back. "Trust Jane to throw away any chance
of peace to take care of us." He let out a thin keen and turned away, his eyes glistening.

Garrus leaned back and crossed his arms. "Why are you angry, Nihlus? She loves us, and to Jane
Shepard, that means sticking with us even after death."

Nihlus shook his head, hard and furious. "Because she deserves so much better than that. She
deserves better than this. They stole her body out of the black and dragged her back to all this fear
and death." He chuffed so violently that spit flew. "But what did it matter? She'd tied herself to it
anyway?"

Garrus chuckled, then held up his hands to halt Nihlus's anger when it turned on him. "All right.
I'm not mocking you." He stood and walked over to take his fratrin by the shoulders, warmth
flooding through the contact. As much as karifratrus had done for Nihlus, it had blessed Garrus in
just as many ways. "This is why I'm okay with everything, Nihlus. How could I deny her a love
with that much passion behind it?" He bent down to touch brows with the shorter torin. "Go pack.
I'm going to go round her up and get her aboard."

Nihlus leaned into him, the thin keen still sliding beneath his words. "She deserves so much better
than me."

Garrus nodded. "Maybe, but apparently, that doesn't matter to her." He gripped Nihlus by the back
of the neck. "How can you deny that this is all meant to be when the woman we love died, and still
couldn't leave us?" He bumped his brow off the Spectre's. "See you aboard."

Garrus passed through the door, then jumped. "Eavesdropping is bad form," he said. Shepard just
shrugged. He slipped an arm around her and steered her out the door. "But best that Nihlus not
know you heard all that."

She shook her head, her jaw held in that stubborn clench that meant he wasn't going to get away
with skirting the topic. "I didn't hear the whole conversation. Karin scanned me and gave me a shot
for my head. She thinks one of my implants is misbehaving." Looking up at him, she opened her
mouth, but then just gave her head another shake and stalked along beside him until they reached
the elevator.

He pulled her in tight against his side and nuzzled the top of her head. "Are you feeling any better?"
He hid a smile as she held herself stiffly beside him. Spirits, he loved her impossible, stubborn
heart.

She muttered under her breath and kicked her heel against the wall. "I guess, although I could just
be distracted by the whole 'sharing Shepard is meant to be' thing." She remained rigid for the rest of
the trip down and into his quarters. Once there, she pulled away from him and paced over to the
unmade bed, the sheets still mostly pulled off and wadded in the center of the mattress.

When the door shut behind him, Garrus closed his eyes and inhaled the mingled scents of Shepard
and himself and their love making. He suppressed a wry chuckle, not wanting Shepard to think him
making light of her feelings when the humor was for his own, sudden turn toward the primitive.

He'd never been the slightest bit possessive over anything, but with Shepard, there he was,
preening at the proof of his having made love to her. Worse, he didn't care if it was primitive or
not particularly correct, that scent, of having finally lain with his mate … it was all he could do to
keep from shouting so loud his mari would hear it.

Then his love's quiet, solemn whisper cut through the silence. "You told Nihlus that I stayed with
you both," she said, her back still turned toward him.
"Yes." He closed half the distance between them, but then stopped, leaving her lots of space. Some hard work lay ahead and his suffocating her wouldn't help. Letting out a long breath, he changed course, striding over to his small kitchen area. After setting a kettle on to boil he broke open his incense box. Mixing together a small amount of oil and soothing herbs, he set it over the heat. The oil turned out better if allowed to sit for a day or so, but heat worked well enough for what he had planned.

He felt Shepard's eyes on him, warm but hesitant.

"Why?" She shifted a little, her clothes whispering against her skin.

"Because it's true." He pulled a shallow bowl and two mugs from the cupboard, spooning hot chocolate into one mug, amarceru leaves into the other.

"I didn't say anything about Nihlus last night." The cavernous space open between them echoed through her voice, setting his heart pounding. He needed to get a bridge up and fast.

Nodding, he said, "You didn't." Removing the oil from the heat, he poured it through a strainer into the bowl. While it dripped through, he braced the heels of his hands into the counter, his arms tight against his sides. "Are you going to tell me that you weren't crouched under that table in Afterlife, your arms wrapped around his neck? You weren't whispering threats about how badly you'd kick his ass if he used that shotgun?"

Letting out a long breath, he shoved off the counter and turned to face her. "Don't you think I've spent most of the hours since you dropped that bomb putting together all the different times you interacted with us? Influenced us?"

Shepard met his eyes for a second, then looked down. "Maybe this is why I didn't remember. You weren't supposed to know. He wasn't supposed to know. It's just going to make everything harder."

A harsh, dull-bladed sigh gashed the air. "He's constantly being hurt, Garrus. Enough! What good comes out of telling him about that?"

Garrus poured water into the mugs and then carried everything over to the coffee table and set them down. "Come here." He held out his hand, cocking a brow plate when she just stared at his hand. "Come on, we haven't got much time before we're due to leave, and I want to do this."

She walked over, her feet dragging a little, a guilty child caught doing something wrong. "Do what?"

Grabbing the throw pillows off both couches, he piled them against the arm of the one couch. "It's a turian thing." He grasped her fingers in his hand and pulled her over. "Sit." He eased her down against the cushions with her feet up on the couch. He tapped her leg. "Pull them up so that I can sit." The sadness on her face tugged at him, making his entire body ache. He thought he understood where it came from, but it was so completely unnecessary.

When she pulled her feet up, he sat next to her, then laid her legs over his. "Nihlus told you about the reason turians wear gloves?" he asked, pulling one of her boots off.

She frowned and leaned up, her elbows braced against the couch arm behind her, watching him. "Yeah, make your talons less intimidating." She cleared her throat. "And he said that bare talon on talon contact with someone who isn't a blood relative signifies willingness for a closer relationship."

Garrus eased her other boot off, and looked down at her bare feet. "Don't humans usually wear
something on their feet inside their boots?” He rested both hands on her shins, wanting to get through what he had to say before touching her more intimately.

A smile broke through for the first time since the briefing. When they woke that morning, Shepard draped across his chest, she'd been nothing but smiles. Wriggling her toes a little, she nodded. "It's not regulation, but socks make my feet feel like they're being choked to death. My ten little piggies need to run wild and free." She reached up and pressed her hand against his mandible. "So, turians and touching?"

Closing his eyes, Garrus leaned into the contact. "We're a people of rich traditions," he continued, then turned and nuzzled her palm before taking her hand in his. "We have very few stigmas associated with sex. It's considered recreational for the most part. Our true intimacies come from ancient ritual. My mari could tell you where they all come from, and probably will. She's the member of our family who's obsessed with history and culture."

He leaned forward and dipped his fingers in the oil, its warmth soothing, and rubbed it into his hands. "Because the most sensitive and erogenous locations on our bodies are also those most likely to cripple us if injured, touching someone else's ankles, feet, spurs, and hands is a sign of deep connection and trust."

He lifted her right foot into his hands, slipped the trouser leg up a little, then began rubbing the oil into her feet. "This is something only done between mates," he said.

"Then I get to do yours?" she asked, a soft smile relaxing the tightness around her eyes and mouth. She closed her eyes and took a long breath. "That oil smells wonderful. What is it?"

"I added some dried rylamia." He held his hand out. Grasping it around his wrist, she drew it to her face and inhaled as he explained, "Rylamia promotes peace and openness." A guilty sort of grin answered the glare she shot him, but then she snuggled her face into his hand, ignoring the fine coating of oil.

For long minutes, she stayed like that, his thumb caressing her cheekbone and temple.

Then she drew away, walls and shields in place as she released his hand and leaned over to pick up her hot chocolate. Mug resting on her belly, cradled between her hands, she laid back, staring up at him. "So, why do you think that I was in Afterlife that night?"

His chest and shoulders heaved with his sigh. "You truly are impossible." When she didn't reply, he sighed again. "Sidonis ran back here, said that despite Nihlus waving a gun around, Aria's people were staying out of it. Then, when I got there, she hinted that she thought you and Nihlus were together." He shrugged. "Not hard to imagine why. I expect having a spirit whispering the certainty of doom into her ear would be enough to convince even Aria to call off her goons."

Shepard sipped at her hot chocolate, her stare still challenging. It didn't feel as though she was challenging him, but the entire idea that she'd remained behind. He could see why she'd doubt it. That calculating mind, deprived of the heady pleasure and emotions of the night before, would start to consider all sorts of more logical options. She needed him to help her believe it in the murky, slightly greasy light of Omega's day.

He traded feet. The intoxicating slippery, softness of her skin contrasted with the fine bones just beneath weren't helping in the whole tight plates, business as usual department. Every cell in his body screamed to cradle her in his lap, to slip free of his plates and savour the quiet intimacy of their joining as he massaged the oil into her entire body. The continually cycling words, 'too much, too soon', kept things contained as he rolled the muscles between gentle hands.
"When I got to Nihlus, his shotgun was sitting next to him on the floor while he watched that
damned footage over and over. Sidonis and Wrex said he'd threatened to use his shotgun; I think he
went into that bar to commit suicide by Aria. When that didn't work, he decided to do it himself."
He glanced at her, brow plates raised, his gut aching as the remembered fear curled through him, a
wisp of smoke the colour of a rainy dawn. A crooked smile tugged at one mandible when she just
sipped her hot chocolate. So stubborn.

"When I got to him, the vehemence behind his denial and his reason—that you'd kick his ass if he
ate a bullet—" He glided his hands up her shins as far as the cuffs of her trousers, the bone pressing
into his palm as he kneaded the muscle with his talons. "I didn't make anything of it at the time, but
now I know you had those arms wrapped around him." Raising his brow plates, he waited for a
moment before asking, "What did you say to him?"

She shook her head and sipped her hot chocolate. "I don't know." When he simply stared at her, she
shrugged and wriggled a little deeper into the cushions. "What? Just what he said."

Garrus let her keep her secret. "And then, when we got back here, did you suggest karifratrus to
me?" He reached out for one hand, caressing the oil into the mug-warmed flesh when she
surrendered it.

Shepard frowned and shook her head, that answer leaping forward. "I didn't even know it existed."
She tried to tug her hand free, giving up when he kept massaging it.

Garrus let out a tiny, whistling breath. "But you said something, right?" He stared into her eyes,
smiling gently. He needed to coax her around to the truth carefully, lovingly. "What did you say?"

Her scowl deepened as she searched her memory, eyes moving back and forth as if she was reading
it from a book. After a second, he saw realization hit and she looked up, her expression even sadder
than before. "Oh god, I asked you to look after him. I said he needed a brother."

Answering her with a single nod, he decided to push a little harder. "And then afterwards, when I
changed and headed out onto the bridge. Did you follow me?"

Sitting up, she nodded, balancing her mug on her knee as she turned thoughtful and searching
again. "Yeah. You said something about not being able to do it, that it was all too much, but I
knew it was a lie. You'd done so well getting them all organized. Proud didn't even begin to cover
it."

Lifting her mug to her lips, she sipped then let it fall. Disappointment briefly dropped her shoulders
before she leaned over to set the empty mug on the table. "I knew that even though you were in
pain, you'd recover. You'd lead Archangel brilliantly—I hated the name, by the way—and you'd be
okay."

He tugged her hand to his mouth, nuzzling her fingers, nipping the tips lightly. The memory of that
night materialized between them: the sudden surge of surety, the sense of her love, so strong and
present and palpable. If she'd left him then, he would have mourned her, but he would have pulled
through. "Yeah, I felt it, and in that moment, I knew I could do it as well." He traded to her other
hand.

Keeping his tone light and neutral, he asked, "If you'd just been here for me, you would have
moved on then, wouldn't you? Gone wherever you were meant to go?"

Shepard's brow furrowed into intense, thoughtful lines, then she let out a tiny gasp and yanked her
hand from his grip. Her eyes darted to his face, her expression dissolving into something halfway
between joy and misery. "Oh, Garrus, I saw Daddy at the end of the bridge. Just where the barricade was." She let out a soft mewl of sound and snatched his hand between both of hers, clinging to him. "He called me over, but then I heard Nihlus cry out for me in his sleep."

Her eyes shone with tears, breaking his heart a little as she stared at him. Clambering up, she crawled onto his lap, sitting astride his thighs. She flung her arms around his neck, fitting herself along his length and buried her face in his neck, her tears dampening his hide. "Daddy smiled, nodded, and just disappeared."

Wrapping his arms around her, Garrus held her close. "And you went upstairs, curled up with Nihlus, and stayed." Garrus turned to nuzzle her ear. "You stayed for Nihlus, Kahri, because he needed you, and you loved him too much to desert him." He pushed her away just far enough to kiss her, chaste and damp with her tears. "That's why I told him what I did," he whispered against her lips.

Weighing his next words carefully, Garrus decided on full disclosure and said, "My people believe that spirits come into the world connected. Sometimes they are connected one on one, sometimes they are connected in groups of thousands. Those connected spirits form a whole: the spirit of a military unit or vessel, or the spirit of a family."

She drew back. "Soul-mates?"

The word didn't translate, and his confusion must have shown because she sighed and leaned in, resting her brow against his chin. "Some humans believe we all have a perfect match, and we'll only be truly happy if we find that one person."

Garrus nodded. "Spirits don't just come in pairs, Kahri. Sometimes they come in threes or fours." He kissed her and drew back, cupping her cheek in his hand. Thumb talon brushing her hair from her face, he smiled. "You realize that if there is an interloper in this relationship, it has always been me?" The surprise and refusal that snapped over her features tugged his mandibles into a bright smile. The depth of his love struck him anew, a flood of blues and forest greens, of the metallic, earthy scent of rain and the bright nip of new snow.

He waited for the tide to ebb before he trusted his voice again. "I knew you loved Nihlus and he loved you from the first moment I met you both. It was new and fragile, but it was there." Kissing her softly, he tasted the salt of her tears. "But I also felt certain that you and I were meant to be together." Letting his eyes slip closed, he deepened the kiss. When they came up for air, he raked gentle talons through her hair. "Just like right now, I'm certain that the three of us are meant to build this family, Kahri. You will never be truly happy without him, and truthfully, neither will I."
A slow smile blossomed as the past two years settled in her head. It wasn't perfect, nor complete or happy, but there, and suddenly she knew how to be Jane Gwendolyn Shepard again. That blank spot had taunted her, laughing at any attempt to reclaim her life. How could she move forward not even knowing if she was the same person?

**Maribellas** - Beautiful female … meant more toward a younger female or one with a greater social distance from the speaker.

**Asperta** - Rough housing, wrestling play

**41 Days ASR**

Shepard jolted awake, her nerves screaming as if they were being individually electrocuted. "Ow." Lifting her head, the only part of her that didn't hurt, she looked down to see Garrus lying beneath her. Well, that explained all of her body parts either being asleep or in agony. "Got to stop falling asleep on top of the boney, spikey boyfriend," she grumbled.

Garrus jumped under her—that explained what woke her up—his hand leaping to his radio. "Yes?" He bolted upright sending Shepard tumbling off the couch. A quick lunge and a long arm answered her yelp, catching her before she hit the floor.

Pulling her in, he nuzzled her forehead, but then turned his attention to his comms. "Sorry, Doc, I just tried to fling your patient across the room." He chuckled. "Well, you know how she can be." He glanced at Shepard out of the corner of his eye, his mandibles high and spread.

"Glad you're proud of that one," she whispered and then punched him in the shoulder. Scrambling up, she turned on her heel. "Because you will pay for it."

Garrus's soft laughter followed her to the bathroom. "So, Doc, are you and Mordin all right with taking a trip to Palaven?"

Shepard paused inside the door as a heavy, very unhappy rumble rolled across the room. She almost turned back, but then nature demanded that she take care of its demands first. Once the door closed, she couldn't hear anything Garrus said, but that rumble had been an angry one. Something wasn't looking good. Considering both her luck and her earlier headache, she felt safe laying money on that being the cause.

She stabbed her elbows into her thighs, dropped her head into her hands, and yawned.

*Note to self: Turian massages induce a comatose state. Do not drive or operate heavy machinery.*

A slow smile blossomed as the past two years settled in her head. It wasn't perfect, nor complete or happy, but there, and suddenly she knew how to be Jane Gwendolyn Shepard again. That blank spot had taunted her, laughing at any attempt to reclaim her life. How could she move forward not even knowing if she was the same person?
But she was. Her body had stopped, but the rest of her had continued on, and in the most stubborn,
self-destructive way possible. She laughed, low and wry. How could she doubt her identity with an
MO like that?

Her smile spread. And Garrus had been fine. Damn, but he'd been fine. Yes, he took refuge in his
dreams, but he hadn't been falling apart. His dreams amounted to going home at the end of a long
day at work. He hadn't needed her, as comfortable as her presence there became. Nihlus … . Well,
as arrogant as she'd been thinking he needed her, he hadn't. She'd been a shadow at midnight, not
even offering shade.

As much as Garrus wanted to make her their mystical spirit guru, she knew the truth. She hadn't
done anything. Garrus's compassion and Nihlus's undying hope had proven to be the heroes. The
best thing she could have done for Nihlus was leave him to Garrus. The pair of them were a
genuine miracle.

Talons rapped against the door, distracting her. "Kahri? You ready to get packed up? Forty-five
minutes."

She tidied up, washing her face and hands, then headed out. "I didn't get unpacked," she said,
giving him a wide, easy smile. "You didn't give me time before throwing family members at me
and ripping my clothes off." Stepping into him, she wrapped her arms around his waist and looked
up. The teasing died when she met his eyes. "What's going on, big guy?" Rage and fear
smouldered, magma beneath the ice, a combination she hadn't seen at that intensity since Feros.

A single, wooden shake of his head bounced her concern off into a corner. "Don't know yet, but
Dr. Chakwas and Mordin will meet us on the Passch as soon as we can get over there. She wants to
run a few more tests to see what caused your headache."

Shepard stood on tiptoes and pulled him down for a kiss. She started as it impacted against rigid
mouth plates. Ouch. Switching to humour, she said, "Trust Cerberus to put me back together using
bargain parts they bought over the extranet." Pressing her brow to his as that attempt slammed into
the wall as well, she let out a soft sigh. "You know whatever it is, we'll fix it. That's what we do."

His mouth didn't move under hers when she kissed him again. Whatever had him rattled, it was
taking all his concentration to hang on to his temper, and he wouldn't be cuddled out of his
concern. In the time it had taken her to pee, the air had shifted from moonlit spring night to an
incoming storm so charged that it raised the hair on her arms.

"Okay, let's just get ready to go," she said, letting her disappointment bleed out along a sigh. "I can
convince you to kiss me once we've met with Karin."

She pulled away. "Can I get some laundry done on the Passch? All my stuff is packed, but this
uniform is all I've got that's clean." Looking down at her kit, she cocked her head. "I'm sort of
surprised it hasn't crawled across the floor to find somewhere to spawn." Smiling when he shot a
cautious, 'I didn't know clothes could get that dirty' glance at her duffel, she turned and walked
over to his closet. "You, on the other hand, aren't packed, so let's get moving, General. Your
chariot awaits."

That finally got a reaction out of Garrus, although not a verbal one. He simply stalked over to his
closet and dragged out his duffel, already mostly packed, just in case. Between them, they finished
his packing and loaded their gear into a car in under ten minutes.

The silence followed them into the car, growing heavier each second until it neared levels
sufficient to crush the vehicle into a meal tray.
Shepard reached over, wrapping her hand around his. The question burrowed its way up her throat, tenaciously clinging to the back of her tongue even as she tried to swallow it down, but she caged it behind her teeth. Pressing him to tell her what Chakwas had said was about cutting a hole in the silence to make herself more comfortable, so she simply laced her fingers with his talons and waited. Whatever had set his teeth on edge would reveal itself once they reached the Passch.

"Great glowing asses of the Enkindlers." A whistle of awe and delight greeted their entry into Archangel's second docking bay and her first glimpse of the fleet. "Look at you! Aren't you all beautiful?" The Ypres docked in the public docks, and she hadn't had time to spit let alone explore Archangel's assets.

Well, Archangel's less personal assets, anyway.

Excitement prickled along the back of her neck as she looked over what she knew amounted to less than a quarter of the fleet. "They're amazing, Callor." Pulling her hand free, she sprang to the edge of her seat and stared out the window, neck craned, eyes wide, her fingers gripping the dash like a child trying to see over a candy counter.

"Oh! What are those?" she asked, stabbing a finger at a line of medium frigates. What looked like a series of focusers and emitters covered their hulls. Shooting a glanced over at Garrus, she asked, "Shield strippers?"

He nodded, a slight smile flicking his mandibles. "We call them Stingers. They can take down the shields of nearly any ship out there in a single hit. The geth basically upsized their energy drain tech and stuck it inside a hull." He let out a long breath, his neck arching a little, betraying his pride. She reached over and took his hand again. He deserved to be proud. What he'd done with an idea and a little bit of cash amazed her, and she didn't think it would ever stop amazing her.

Garrus pointed to a line of large frigates. "The Stingers are basically glass cannons, so they always go in with at least a few heavy frigates."

Shepard grinned at him, then turned back to the view: row upon row of sleek black and gold ships. "They're gorgeous, and not at all bug shaped. How did you talk the geth out of that?" When he didn't answer, she squeezed his fingers. As they progressed down the docking bay, one of the dreadnoughts appeared, hanging in space just outside the massive hangar doors, far too large to dock. Shepard whistled again. "Wow. Add that baby to my christmas list."

She leaned back in her seat. "How many crew on one of those beauties?" she asked, her mind racing, trying to encompass the size of the organization.

Garrus shifted, straightening a little. "Not as many as you'd think. Despite being half the size of the Destiny Ascension, they only require an organic crew of fifteen hundred." He chuffed. "Only fifteen hundred."

"Geth crew?" Shepard's mouth twisted a little. "Bet the council will love that. Another reason for Archangel to be public enemy number one."

A sharp chuff answered that. "If our breaking the Treaty of Farixen wasn't reason enough." Shrugging, sharp enough to cut, he stiffened. "Not that it matters. Even with the integrated geth servers, I don't know how we'll ever find enough crew. Archangel has exploded lately, but still, we're just over five thousand strong." He squeezed her fingers, mandibles twitching once before drawing in tighter than before. "Would have been a lot fewer if someone hadn't dropped a tiny, redhead nuclear weapon on the mercs."
Shepard pulled his hand to her lips, then allowed their laced fingers drift down onto her lap.

One-handed, talons moving deftly over the controls, he brought the car in to land at the end of the Passchendaele's ramp. "All the frigates were running with skeleton crews. And now, with all the shipyards shut down, we aren't making fighters for the carriers … not that we have enough trained fighter pilots." He let out a ragged sigh as he released her hand. "Not concerns for right now, however." He shrugged his armour up his shoulders and tugged at its yoke.

Shepard nodded and climbed out. Leaning into the back seat, she grabbed her gear. "I swear I carried all this stuff off a ship less than twenty-four hours ago," she said, not sure if she was joking or complaining. She boosted her duffel up her shoulder, and sorted a gun case into either hand before looking up at the ship. "So much for our couple of days just for us."

Garrus awaited her at the bottom of the ramp and wrapped his arm around her, gun case and all. "We'll find some time. And I think you'll like Adrien. He's a troublemaker, too."

The shuttle bay teemed with activity: crew stowing gear, several helping the quartermaster with a shipment of supplies, still more checking systems. Judging by sounds of life echoing everywhere, the Passch must not be heading out with a skeleton crew that trip. Conversation and laughter, banging metal and sliding crates rang off the hull: the familiar, welcome music of her life. She breathed it in, filling herself with it.

Shepard didn't get a chance to answer the troublemaker accusation before two cadets trotted up to relieve them of their kits. "Both for your cabin, General?" one asked, then immediately turned a red so brilliant that it put Sparky's blushes to shame. "Um, I mean—"

Garrus simply passed his gear over. "Log our weapons in with the quartermaster, then my kit goes to my quarters." The general slipped Shepard's duffel off her shoulder. "Anything in here that you don't want people to see?" he asked her without any trace of his usual humour.

Shepard shook her head, a chorus of popcorn crunching sounds betraying the extent Garrus's tension had infected her. "Nope, nothing scandalous, just stinky." She stretched her neck and rolled her shoulders.

Garrus passed her duffel to one of the cadets. "Take this to the laundry, then it can be sent up to my quarters." A curt nod answered their salutes. "Thank you." He slipped his arm back around her, guiding her past the nearly full elevator to the stairs.

Shepard chuckled as she trotted up the curved staircase. "Sick of slow elevators?" she asked, casting a quick glance back.

Garrus climbed three stairs at a time, his stare fixed on the deck plating. "And I didn't want to ride up with twenty people eyeballing us so they could giggle about how adorable we are later." He passed her at the top, and held an arm out to guide her. "The layout of the heavy frigates is almost identical to the Normandy," he said. Crew deck has my quarters, Captain L'Tsai's quarters and medbay all in the stern; galley and dining midship; crew quarters, heads, gym, and lounges in the bow."

"She's gorgeous, General. A worthy flagship." She stepped into his side and took his hand. "So, let's stop fussing and stalling, and go find out what Karin told you that has your teeth clenched so tight that I can hear them shattering."

Gripping her hand tight enough that it hurt, he nodded, and led the way. Just before they reached the medbay door, the docking clamps released, their heavy thump and shiver reverberating through
Shepard closed her eyes and smiled as the inertial dampeners kicked in, her belly doing a little swoop in the fraction of a second between Omega's gravity holding her to the deck and the *Passchendaele*’s taking over. "That never gets old," she said, turning a smile to her wall of angry turian. Despite softening ever so slightly, he just pulled her toward medbay. She sighed. "Being hauled around like a misbehaving puppy does, however."

Her right brow arched when he didn't even twitch. Maybe she was dying. Could they have missed a massive brain tumor or brain-snacking parasite in the plethora of scans she'd had over the past week or two?

When the door opened to medbay, Shepard stopped short, letting out a low whistle as she ogled the immaculate, gleaming banks of state of the art equipment. "Holy crap. Look at this place. It's like walking into a really clean oven, but with beds and snazzy equipment." She let Garrus pull her over the threshold. "Is it bad that I want to take vid to send to TIM, just to see him cry."

"Shepard, come in and hop up on a bed," Dr. Chakwas directed, her lack of preamble grinding up the last kernel of Shepard's humour. The doc gestured toward the first of eight beds, hovering as Shepard did as she'd been told. Both doctors crowded in on her, their haste dragging handfuls of bad-tempered nettles down her spine. She expected Garrus to overreact to any and all threats to her wellbeing; them, not so much.

Mordin's scanner attacked before Shepard even managed to get settled. "Okay, so you know ... you two are freaking me out. Stop it. What's going on with my head?"

Chakwas looked from Shepard to Garrus before she activated her omnitool and focused her attention on her scans. "Did you see Operative Lawson before you left?"

Shepard spun to face Garrus, slapping a hand against his chest, banging on the door. Why the hell had they locked her out? "Miranda? What does Miranda have to do with my headache? I was joking about the cheap replacement parts."

Garrus stepped up behind her, pressing his hand in the center of her back, but spoke to Chakwas, "I didn't see her, and my people reported that she returned to the *Ypres* immediately after I confronted her."

Shepard stabbed a hand up between them. "Hold up. Stop talking around me. What about Miranda?" Something cold and slimy wormed its way through her guts drawing an ugly picture. She winced away from it before the connections started linking up in her head. "Someone had better start explaining what the hell is going on before I let the twitchy inner bitch loose."

Mordin stepped in front of Shepard, the set of his mouth even more grim than usual. He stared at her for a few seconds before he began tapping at his omnitool. "Captain, discovered something during last scan." He opened a graphic file, presumably of her brain. A speck about the size of her baby finger nail glowed near the base of her skull. A web of spider-silk tendrils snaked out of it, weaving a fine web that appeared to infiltrate most of her brain.

Shepard leaned in to look at it and then shrugged, trying for casual dismissal despite the churning in belly. "We've never been introduced, and I don't know if you noticed, but I have a metric assload of tech inside this skull." She glanced from one to the other. "I only breathe and have a pulse because of a tiny supercomputer, but I couldn't tell you where it is or what it looks like." Glancing up at Mordin, she waited for him to explain, but when he just started another scan, she asked, "Was I being too subtle there? What the hell is it?"
The salarian looked over at Chakwas, his hand lifting to rub at his lip. The silence between them screamed as it added a cheese grater to the nettles raking down Shepard's spine. Instead of answering her, they turned to one another, apparently communicating telepathically as they compared data.

She let out a thin, exasperated hiss when the scanners turned on her again. "Okay, come on, people. More information, less drama."

Garrus rubbed her back. "Let them finish their scans, Kahri. They'll explain when they're done."

Shepard huffed. "When has patience ever been one of my virtues?"

Karin looked up from her omnitool and stepped away from Mordin, her face a study in professional compassion. Despite the fact it meant bad news, the effect eased Shepard's nerves somewhat. At least it wasn't strained bewilderment. "It's a behavioural modification chip, Shepard."

Shepard stared at the doctor for a solid minute, her brain trying to comprehend the sounds that had entered her ears. Liquid nitrogen poured into her head, flash freezing everything but for a single, impotent sentence that parroted the doc. "Behavioural modification chip." Her voice disappeared into the resonant throbbing of the engines, the gale-roar of the air vents, and the thunder of her blood rushing through her veins. No wonder the docs had stood there checking things over and over. No wonder Garrus looked as though he could bite straight through the hull. Cerberus had hacked her brain.

"Yes, Captain." Karin let out a long, tight breath, slamming a door on the deafening silence. "A control chip, to put it crudely."

"Burn it," Shepard said without even a second worth of thought, the words hissing between clenched teeth. Liquid fury dripped down her cheeks, but she didn't give the tears the satisfaction of wiping them away. Her entire return from the dead amounted to a lie. No, not a lie, a joke. We need Captain Shepard to lead us in the fight. Bullshit. They needed a fucking puppet to hold up and dance for the kiddies.

Sweet fucking … . Every time Miranda activated that damned omnitool … . How many bloody times had that thing come up, right in her face? Dance dead soldier girl, dance. A rush of acid, sour and powerless, raced up her throat, but she bullied it back down.

How entertaining she must have been, stomping around, taking control. How many decisions made over the past month and a half had actually been hers? She could pretty much guarantee that anytime she'd changed her mind or backed down it had been the damned chip. The thing's tendrils itched and burned beneath her skull, mocking her.

The medbay dropped as silent as it had been cacophonous the moment before. She bit back the tears, cooling the fury by sheer force of will. They'd get no more of her than they'd already taken. Not one gram.

"Burn it." When Mordin hesitated, Shepard looked to Chakwas. "Leave it in place, but fry the sucker. Make sure it can't so much as change my coffee order." She gripped the salarian's wrist when he moved away, the expression on his face far from convinced. "Not a single word leaves this room."

Chakwas nodded. "Our loyalty is to you, Captain, not Miranda or the nightmare she works for." Professional concern morphed ever so slightly into fear for a friend. "But this thing has tendrils
spread all through your brain. We couldn't remove it even if you wanted us to. And if we try to overload it, those filaments could do some serious damage to your brain tissue." Her jaw clenched, as much a tell as Chakwas could allow herself. "Not to mention what an electrical discharge could do to your implants, including the computer that keeps you alive."

Shepard braced to say she didn't care what happened. Living as a slave to Cerberus, being forced to do who-the-hell-knew-what … . No. She'd rather be dead.

But then Garrus cleared his throat. "If this thing has been in her head for the last month, why is she just getting headaches from it today?"

"Because we slept together," Shepard said, speaking even as the idea solidified in her head. "She heard about our night and started cranking it up." She glanced back. "She used it three or four times just in the space of the briefing. Most I can remember prior is twice on the day you were shot by the rocket."

Garrus nodded. "She's worried that you'll tell Cerberus where to go."

"Yeah." Shepard took a deep breath and straightened, bracing the heels of her hands against the edge of the bed. "So, how do we kill it?"

Mordin bent over the computer on the desk, his fingers flying over the interface. "Device possesses defense mechanisms. Need to disable in one strong attack without damaging rest of implants or brain tissue. Difficult. Perhaps impossible."

Chakwas stepped between Shepard and the salarian, her entire body angled for a fight. "Any attack strong enough to disable the chip could well burn out the rest of the captain's implants if not her entire neural network. I don't make a habit of electrocuting my patients." She shook her head, a solid wall of denial that Shepard knew wouldn't back down. "If the chip's defenses shunt the energy, sending it arcing through her skull, brain injury would be the best we could hope for."

Mordin's fingers sprang to his mouth, his brows lowering over narrowed eyes. "Possible to attack physically. Enter skull, use precise laser directly on chip. Defenses aimed to deflecting exterior attack or accident." He focused back on the computer for a moment, but Shepard could see the wheels turning. "Yes. Yes, should work. Minimal danger of disability or death." He looked up, his features animated in a way that almost frightened her.

"Define minimal," Garrus said, his voice a low growl that rumbled out of his chest.

Shepard wouldn't mind that definition either considering Mordin was suggesting using a laser to fry a tiny piece of tech buried inside her brain. She looked back to Karin. "Living through the procedure is my first choice. What do you think, Doc?"

Karin scowled. "It could work, but the chip isn't just sitting on the surface of your brain with a little heat resistant pad beneath it." She turned back to her omnitool. "This would be intricate brain surgery, and we'd be digging through the part of your brain that is responsible for balance, movement, and coordination."

"So, I could end up disabled." Shepard twisted to look into Garrus's eyes, his hand like a brand burning through the back of her uniform. His ice-blue stare met hers, a false calm circulating between them, the eye of the hurricane. He'd never tell her not to do it. He respected her too much, and he knew her too well. She was also pretty sure that if their places were reversed, he'd be telling them to do the exact same thing. Her general would never allow himself to be anyone's slave.
"They don't get to steal all of this from me," she said. Certainty and resolve calmed the nettle sting along her spine, a balm that seeped into her muscles and settled into her bones. "They don't get to steal you away from me, and they'll try again and again."

He nodded and his hand dropped away. "I'll be back in a second." Without meeting her eyes, he spun on his talons and walked out the door.

The mattress squeaked under her palms, the only sound as both doctors concentrated on their omnitools. Shepard walked her butt back a little on the mattress and glanced at the door every ten seconds.

Dr. Chakwas cleared her throat after a good ten minutes, stepping into Shepard's narrowed vision. "I'm assuming that you're going to bulldoze through the risks and want this done now?"

Shepard braced her hands and leaned forward, pulling her shoulders up to her ears. "Will waiting change anything? Can you better prepare given a day or a week?" Looking up from under shattered eyelids, she shrugged. "If you can tell me that waiting will severely increase my odds—"

A tiny grenade wrapped in cotton batting went off inside Shepard's skull, dropping her head straight into her hand. A wall of napalm rolled along the midline of her skull, flooding her eyes and filling her nose with the scent of old copper. "Damn it." Pressing the heel of her right hand into her temple, she glanced up. "Scan me, Doc. I think she's putting the whammy on me again."

"Damn." Chakwas looked up at the door when it opened. "Did you do this?" she demanded, as Garrus stepped through, followed by Nihlus. The orange of her omnitool burned far too bright, sending Shepard into retreat behind her eyelids.

"I did," Nihlus said. "We're almost to the relay. Garrus wanted to test the chip's range, so I contacted the Ypres, told Yeoman Chambers to pack Shepard's gear." Two long strides crossed the floor, and then his talons brushed over her hair. "Are you all right?" He sat on the other side of the bed, his hip pressing against the small of her back.

Shepard nodded. "Yeah, I'll live. Just don't do that again." Leaning into Nihlus a little, she focused on Dr. Chakwas. "Burn it."

The doctor nodded and let out a long sigh. "I don't see that we have a choice." She lifted her omnitool. "We'll need to do some very precise scans to map out the surgery, so you'll have to be sedated." Her manner softening without losing the professional corners, Chakwas closed the metre between them. "I'll keep you under for the entire procedure. When you wake, you may experience disorientation, dizziness, difficulty moving or speaking."

Nihlus pressed in behind her. "We'll be here the whole time," he said, a warm hand wrapping over her ribs.

Shepard looked at Garrus, who stood closer to the door. He nodded and stepped up, his arm circling her shoulders as he leaned down to press his brow to hers.

"They've got to disable it before she does damage," he said, his voice a low, comforting rumble despite sounding as though he wished he could be saying anything else. "But Nihlus is right. We aren't going anywhere."

Shepard kissed him and smiled, trying to pass her certainty on to him. She'd come through five by five. She knew it. "Hey, I'll be fine. They used to do this sort of thing to people's brains all the time and call it treatment." Shepard shrugged, tilting her head a little to one side. "I might wake up
"Wrong part of the brain, and it was a barbaric practice that was discontinued over a century ago, Shepard," Chakwas said, her protest strident and stiff-backed. "And it was never proven to cure mental illness of any sort."

Shepard let out a long, dramatic sigh. "Damn, well, a girl can hope, right?" She gave Chakwas a wink and glanced back at her torins. "Let's get this show on the road. I want to have a little vacation time once we get to Palaven."

Chakwas levelled a stern finger at Nihlus and Garrus. "If you two are staying, disinfect and keep out from underfoot"

Chuckling, Shepard shrugged. "You heard the doctor, get moving and stay out of the way." She grinned, then pulled Garrus in for another kiss. "See you in a couple of hours. You owe me some days without any craziness."

That time he kissed her back, his arms pulling her in tight. "You'll get them," he promised before releasing her.

Ducking her head a little, Shepard beckoned Nihlus over into a hug, then took a deep breath. "All right, Docs. I'm all yours."

Mordin passed her a gown while Chakwas lowered the privacy shades over the windows. Equipment rolled in from everywhere, and quicker than she would have guessed, she found herself face down with her head in some sort of padded clamp-shaped torture device.

"Hey, you two." Shepard reached out her hands for Garrus and Nihlus. She squeezed Garrus's hand. "You were wrong, you know?" Letting out a long, sighing breath, she relaxed into the drugs' heavy, warm sleepiness. "I did nothing but lurk in the corner for two years. Every brave and beautiful thing you did was all you." She squeezed their talons. "I didn't do anything but watch."

"Shepard … ." Garrus crouched down next to the bed.

Forcing her eyes open took more energy than she would have thought, but she managed to peek out from under her ozmium eyelids. "If this doesn't work, take care of one another."

Her torin leaned in to nuzzle her ear. "You're going to be just fine."

Nihlus just reached out to stroke the hair around her ear, those remarkably green eyes narrow and glassy.

Smiling, eyes refusing to remain open any longer, Shepard faded into the black. "Damn right, I will be. I love you … ."

The rabbit hole opened beneath Shepard, sending her tumbling head over heels into the darkness.

Curiouser and curiouser.

Later

The darkness peeled back, not whole and elegant like the curl of a perfectly peeled mandarin, but in tiny pieces, disjointed and patchy, torn apart like an old navel orange.

Shepard forced her eyes open. Shapes, light gray blur against a dark gray blur, moved around her
bed. Dizzying. Her stomach heaved, and a white blur appeared under her head. She tried to wipe her mouth, but her arm remained stuck to the bed, impossibly heavy. Someone stepped in to do it for her.

"Captain?" A dark shape appeared above her, blurry and washed out into shades of grey. "Captain! I need you to remain calm."

Miranda? Wait, where was she? Pain chopped her into wafer-thin slices. No. No, she couldn't be … . She'd woken up. Panic grabbed hold of her diaphragm, yanking at it until all she could do was gasp in shallow, ineffectual breaths.

Shepard tried to lift her head, but nothing happened. Trying to move her hands and feet, she discovered that they didn't move either.

"It'll be over in just a few more moments, Captain," the woman said, the blur of her face leaning over. Miranda? Chakwas? "Just stay calm and breathe slowly. We're just assessing your motor coordination."

Breathe slowly? She couldn't get any air. Her hands insisted on leaping to her throat, but they wouldn't move. Why wouldn't anything move? The blurs began to swirl around her in lopsided orbits. Her stomach heaved again. Air! Damn it, she just needed air!


She winced away from a bright, orange light as it exploded above her.

"You're fine, Shepard," the woman said. Chakwas?

It had to be Chakwas. Why couldn't she think? She'd woken up. Over a month ago, Miranda had dragged her back half-healed and in unbelievable pain, but alive.

Garrus! Where was Garrus? She'd found him … was back where she belonged. She tried to speak, tried to call for him, but a fine croaking sound was all that she could muster.

Then a strong, calloused grip encircled her hand, and a steel gray blur appeared next to her. "You're okay, Kahril. It was a long surgery, but they deactivated the chip." Talons brushed her cheek with the gentlest of touches, calming her frantic heartbeat. "They'll let you go back to sleep in a second, and when you wake up, you'll be back to normal."

He nuzzled her cheek, mouth plates gentle and comforting. "Go back to sleep. Nihlus and I are right here."

"She should drift back off now," Chakwas said from somewhere above. "Things are looking very … ."

*You would have to be half mad to dream this up.*

*We're all mad here.*

**Still later …**

Strong arms wrapped behind her back and under her thighs, cradling her tight against an angular body. Shrouded in softness and warmth, she melted into the comfort and safety of those arms, her whole body deliciously heavy and loose. She smiled as the faint sounds of traffic and hushed
conversation drifted into the stillness, wrapping her in a beautiful, familiar cocoon … one she hadn't experienced in a long time.

"We're just about there," Garrus whispered, his breath soft on her face. How did he always manage to smell like autumn and cloves? "Go back to sleep."

Instead, Shepard opened her eyes. Darkness filled the car, bodies in the other seats, hushed in the soft glow of the control panel and the lights flickering past. Eyes slipping closed, she curled into her lover's arms. "It went okay?"

Garrus kissed the top of her head. "It went better than they expected. You might have a limp and a bit of dizziness for a few days, but when the swelling goes down, you'll be one hundred percent." He let out a long sigh. "Go back to sleep. We'll be at my parent's home in a half hour."

Shepard smiled and nodded then glanced toward the front seat. "Hello, sir."

Herros chuckled, the warm rumble so very much like his son's. "Good to see you again, Captain."

Shepard leaned up to kiss Garrus's mandible and snuggled back in. "This is my favourite place in the galaxy." Another yawn cracked her jaw then the rabbit leaped up and yanked her back down the hole.

42 Days ASR

Cool air, damp with rain, curled past Shepard's nose, teasing her with the sweet scents of rich earth, succulent plant life, and flowers. She took a deep breath. Oh, the flowers! Spicy with a honey tang, like clover in late June, it danced with a feminine, exotic perfume. The scent reached down inside her, whispering softly of romance and a more amorous sort of love as it curled deep into her belly. A gentle smile eased across her face as she filled her lungs with its magic and stretched out, purring like a fat, happy cat as silky-soft covers caressed her from head to toe.

Nothing better than waking up in a cozy bed on a rainy morning.

Lifting her head off her poofy, cylindrical pillow, she looked around the room. A peaceful sort of watery, blue-gray light trickled in through a large window that curved to follow the winged shape of the wall. Even though the room was foreign, she definitely recognized the gangly turian featured in holos on the walls and scattered on shelves.

Shepard sat up and crossed her legs, grinning as she took in her Callor's history. Shelves of hideth turram trophies, academic awards, datapads, action figures—action figures! She resisted the urge to squeal a little … barely—covered two walls. Art spread across the other walls and squeezed into every spare space. Sweet baby Jesus, the art!

Heart beating hard and steady, Shepard climbed out of bed and walked over to the closest, her hands lifting to her mouth. Awe battled with disbelief. Her Callor had drawn or painted all of them? A smile blossomed behind her fingers. Of course he had. The combination of that eye, that perception, and that big, gorgeous heart … how could he not be an artist? She reached out to run reverent fingers along the edge of a painting, her heart aching with a quiet joy at witnessing that hidden piece of her love.

From simple sketches to lush landscapes and portraits painted in pigments of all types, the walls exploded with a beauty and talent that would have made her mother light-headed. She stopped in front of a piece done in charcoals or something similar. Herros and a young turian, Solana, she presumed, sat hunched over a game, their expressions riveted and priceless. Herros was winning,
that was clear from the arch of his neck and the cocky set to his shoulders. Solana looked ticked off and determined to kick his butt.

"Oh, Garrus," she whispered, "you beautiful genius. What the hell were you doing in C-Sec?"

After another moment, she turned to walk over to the window, testing her limbs as she went. Her balance felt a little unsteady, and her left leg kept threatening to give at the knee. Considering they'd shot a laser into her brain, she couldn't really complain. No, definitely more profound gratitude than complaints. Garrus and the docs had freed her from chains she hadn't even known enslaved her.

She looked out through the rain-spattered glass but her view of the grounds below were obscured by a huge canopy. Oh well, she supposed the only way to discover what hid beneath it was to head down and see. She turned back to the room, spotting her kit at the end of the bed, but no sign of a note of anything to tell her where Garrus had gone.

Unsure about the protocol of waking up alone in an unfamiliar turian household, she opted for getting dressed and seeing if she could find Garrus. Hopefully wandering the house wasn't incredibly rude.

She dressed quickly, but then sat on the side of the bed for a few minutes, basking in the wonderful sense of peace. The Cerberus station had felt like a giant venus fly trap. The Ypres still felt like enemy territory. Omega felt grimy and revolting. Nowhere she'd been since she woke up had just felt like … well, like a home.

Pushing up, she walked to the door and opened it, peeking out. A hallway curved toward a set of stairs. Probably a good place to start. Or it would be, if she didn't have to pee quite so badly. Bathroom first. She cringed slightly and turned away from the stairs, hoping for an open door. Were turian toilets different from human ones? Accidentally peeing in a closet might not be the best way to meet her boyfriend's mother.

She found the washroom, and even managed to figure out how to work the facilities, but winced as the plumbing shattered the quiet, introducing her to the household. Guess what everyone? Shepard's up and peeing! Good morning, Vakarian household!

Tiptoeing, she made her way to the stairs, and then down into a huge, beautiful room. A massive earthwork fireplace stood in the center, a sitting room on one side, what looked like a kitchen on the other.

"Good morning," a soft, flanged voice said, drawing Shepard's attention to a chair in front of a set of open glass doors at the back of the house.

"Hello," Shepard replied, creeping forward a little. She smiled at the frail but elegant tarin dwarfed by a heavy mantle of blankets. "I hope it's okay that I just came down."

The female turian turned, the movement appearing to cause her pain that didn't show in her gentle smile, the expression as lovely and welcoming as the home. "Of course, maribellas. Come and sit with me. Garrus and Nihlus are sparring, but I see far more asperta going on out there than actual sparring." A thin, trembling arm appeared out from under the blankets, pointing to a chair. "Please, come and sit, Jane. I've been looking forward to meeting you for … well, for two cycles." The tarin smiled, a soft flutter of mandibles. "May I call you Jane?"

Shepard wiped her palms down the front of her trousers, and hurried over. "Oh, of course. Yes, sure, Jane is fine." She offered her hand to the female, wincing at her social clumsiness. Good lord,
you'd swear she'd been raised by wolves. "Sorry, please forgive my manners."

"There is nothing to forgive. Welcomed as family, enter our dwelling, and take your ease." Garrus's mother gripped Shepard's wrist, the dry contact stronger than the captain would have guessed. It and the tarin's kind, open expression settled her nerves instantly.

"Please sit. We can get to know one another while they play." She smiled, dark, brilliant blue eyes sparkling. "I'm Garrus and Nihlus's mari, by the way. My name is Treana, but my friends call me Trea." Again, that graceful sweep of mandibles. "I'd be honoured if you felt comfortable to use the more familiar form."
An army of unquiet ants marched up and down (Shepard's) spine as she followed Trea's stare out to the two fools out in the garden. Stripped to the waist, Garrus and Nihlus wrapped around one another, both trying to pull the other's legs out from under him. It looked as though they were trying to throw one another into the pond. When their battle endangered a flower bed, they disengaged to hop over it, then set into one another again.

**Buratrum** - The realm of the spirits of dishonourable association.

**Dilan** - fiancee

**Dilekmarim** - Beloved mother

**Diume** - My joy. A term of love specific to family.

**Puer** - Pueri plural. Child.

**Quirte** - Applies to both genders equally. The equivalent of Mister or Miss, Mrs.

**SARL** - Standard Alliance Readiness Level. 1 is highest, prepared for imminent attack. 10 is lowest.

**Sorau dulca** - Sweet sister. A term of affection between females of any social tier, but particularly mother/daughter, sisters, aunt/niece, grandmother/granddaughter.

**42 Days ASR**

"I'd be glad to call you Trea, thank you." Shepard perched on the edge of the chair and looked away from Garrus's mari to glance around the kitchen area. Earthen walls, like cob houses on Earth, the colour of coffee with a splash of cream circled the main floor, arching upward like wings as they approached the outside of the house. A mosaic of flowers and leaves rolled in loose waves amidst the warm brown, bits of glass, metal, and wood seeming to tumble in the wind. Small almost-birds—**merillien**, like Nihlus's childhood pet—gleamed, pearlescent jewels amidst the glorious, cacophonous beauty.

Shepard took a deep breath. A wonderful, light sort of loving happiness whispered from the walls; the dark, well oiled and loved furnishings; and the mementos of the family that hung or stood everywhere. It embraced her, murmuring assurances that despite looking the part of the odd person out, she belonged: a home. After drifting for so long, sitting on that chair felt like being the very proverbial square peg. She choked back the urge to run back upstairs and wait for Garrus.

*You do belong here. Those two idiots in the yard mean that you belong. Breath.*

"Your domin is so beautiful," she said, turning to face Garrus's mother. "I woke up feeling like … ." Letting the words drift off, she uttered a soft huff at her inability to put what she felt into words.
"It's been so long since … ," she tried again, then cut herself off, one shoulder lifting in a small shrug. "I guess what I'm trying to say is thank you for inviting me into your home."

"It's our pleasure, sorau dulca." The tarin inclined her head toward the warriors battling away in the garden, a loving smile greeting their antics. "A domin is a reflection of the family it shelters, and you have greatly enriched this family. That makes you as much a part of it as the rest of us."

Unsure if such a generous welcome made her more or less comfortable, Shepard forced herself to settle back into the armchair. An army of unquiet ants marched up and down her spine as she followed Trea's stare out to the two fools out in the garden. Stripped to the waist, Garrus and Nihlus wrapped around one another, both trying to pull the other's legs out from under him. It looked as though they were trying to throw one another into the pond. When their battle endangered a flower bed, they disengaged to hop over it, then set into one another again.

"How did this begin?" Shepard asked, turning an incredulous smile to Trea.

A thoughtful frown drew the tarin's brow plates low over her eyes, but like her smile, a sharp but loving sort of teasing prowled beneath it. "I believe it started with Nihlus trying to shove Garrus into the pond." A quick nod confirmed the validity of her words. Her mandibles fluttered. "Then Garrus taunted Nihlus, calling him old and frail. Nihlus called Garrus young and empty-headed, and behold the results." A trembling hand broke through the blankets, sweeping out to present the filthy, scuffling, cussing evidence.

"They're ten," Shepard said, her grin widening as Trea hummed her agreement. "But look at them. She shook her head and let out a long breath, muscles relaxing a little. "They're happy and having fun. Can't ask for more than that."

"As a matrula, it becomes all you hope for. All the rest of your ambitions and dreams for your children eventually distill down to wishing them more moments of joy than sorrow." She peeled back the top layer of blankets, struggling a little against the heavy layers. A sharp chuff and grumble betrayed her frustration as the blankets fought back. "I swear Herros believes he can cook me back to health."

"May I?" Shepard asked, leaning forward. "Just let me know how many layers you want to keep."

"One is quite sufficient. It's a cool morning, but not one likely to cause a chill." Trea let out a sigh of relief when Shepard lifted away most of the blankets. "Thank you, that's much less crushing and incinerating." Her mandibles flicked hard, but her annoyance cooled before it reached her eyes. "My bond-mate is a wonderful torin, but he forgets that my illness does not erase that I am turian. The stronger and more vicious the enemy you put in front of us, the harder and more unrelenting we fight." A crooked smile accompanied her cocked brow plate. "I'm still the tarin who battled her way through a drug den with a round embedded in her lung."

Understanding Trea's issue completely, Shepard draped the ten kilos of blankets over the back of her chair. "So Garrus comes by his overprotectiveness naturally, then?"

"Most definitely." Trea's mandibles softened to match her eyes. "Born to test my patience to its limit." She ducked her head; a small shrug. "Still, I'm glad that my Betru grew into that sort of torin."

Glancing outside to make sure Garrus and Nihlus wouldn't overhear her, Shepard whispered, "I'd never admit it to him, even under torture, but I do sort of like it when he takes care of me. Sometimes." She looked down at the tarin's nearly empty mug. "Not to toss our relationship immediately in the direction we were just grousing about, but may I warm up your amarcerus for
you?"

Trea nodded, a single, abrupt incline of her head. "Thank you. There's a pot in the warmer. Top door on the caman."

Shepard picked up the mug, taking it to the basin to rinse it out before refilling it. "Garrus drinks this stuff like it's going to run out. Nihlus not so much." Moving through that kitchen, it struck her again how right and comfortable it felt, and how much she stuck out in relief. Sort of like the depth perception portion of the Alliance physical. She'd spent a half hour poking whichever object or fish appeared to be 3D.

*One of these things is not like the others? Pft. Don't fool yourself, Janey. You're exactly like these others.*

She ran her fingertips over the counter top. A scene of *drellaks* grazing in a mountain meadow had been carved into the blue-black wood, and then inlaid with different metals and woods to give it a rich, three dimensional beauty. It looked old, and not antique store old, but generations upon generations old. Old in the way that would have her mother turning inside out over someone making tea on it.

"Jane?"

Shepard tore herself from the work of art to meet Trea's curious gaze. "Sorry, I was admiring the countertop. It's beautiful." Her fingers returned to skate over the thick, lustrous lacquer once more before she forced herself back on task. "Do you take your *amarceru* straight, or do you add the sweet, flowery-smelling powder?"

"Straight. Only Garrus adds *rylamia* sugar. Bad habit, along with drinking so much *amarceru*. He picked it up in the military—my fault, really." She lifted herself in her chair, the passing grimace that accompanied her movement much lighter without the blankets. "Ah, being able to move is wonderful, thank you. I can breathe," Trea said, her keen, measuring gaze following Shepard across the room.

"You're welcome." Shepard set the steaming mug down on the table. Sinking back into the silky, rose-beige fabric of her chair, she looked outside. Garrus had Nihlus pinned and mercilessly teased him, jabbing him here and there, while Nihlus spouted ridiculous threats involving some truly imaginative body part rearrangement. Laughing bright and happy, Shepard allowed some of the tension to drain out of her body. "God, it's good to see them just play. I didn't even know they could after everything." She cleared her throat, ducking a shoulder as if she could just tip her death off her back and let it roll away. "I mean, with all the burdens they carry."

As Trea lifted her mug to drink, Shepard frowned, remembering what the tarin had said. "How is it your fault that Garrus caught his *amarceru* with sugar habit from the military?"

His *mari* took a couple of sips, then set the cup down, the ceramic rattling against the table top. As Trea looked out the door at her sons, her body softened a little under the chunky cream and gold weave of the blanket. "His former CO and I grew up as sisters. She's a talented and caring leader, very popular with her crew. She's a talented and caring leader, very popular with her crew. I knew she'd look after him, so I pulled a few strings."

Shepard choked back her surprise that Garrus's mother had influenced his first posting, feeling a combination of affection and embarrassment, the latter for Garrus, and she wondered if he suspected.

Something of her surprise must have registered, because Trea's shoulders rose a little. "I know I
shouldn't have interfered, but I worried for him. Not the fighting; he possessed impressive skills, and I knew he could take care of himself." A soft, musical sigh whistled through her nose. "As a youngster, he spent his time in virtual solitude, preferring to draw and read or take things apart and put them back together rather than associating with his peers. The military can prove merciless to loners: the rigor of it requires the support of a strong peer group."

She paused and smiled, the piercing stare that met Shepard's revealing a strength and intellect that all but nullified her frailty. "Anyway, Lanara can't be without a mug of amarceru within arm's reach," Trea continued, "and it needs to contain enough rylamia sugar that it tastes like hot, flowery syrup." A brief grimace melted into a fond smile. "Terrible stuff, but her entire crew ended up addicted to the effects. First time Garrus came home on leave, he was so strung out on the combination of stimulant and sugar, he practically vibrated."

Shepard watched the expressions and emotions drift across the tarin's face, greeting them with a soft smile before looking back out. Disengaged and resting, Garrus and Nihlus sat side by side on the ground, watching the rain pour down the blue-green leaves of a towering plant, the water channeled along gleaming silver veins. Whatever they were talking about, both looked relaxed, their smiles easy and broad.

"He's an amazing leader," Shepard said, awe shaping the words. "I haven't had much time to watch him work since I got back, but the way his people respond to him tells me everything." She looked over at Trea as the remembered darkness and horror of being trapped beneath that building on Feros darkened the rain-drenched air. "When I think back to our first days on the Normandy—the hothead who ran off after Saren, getting us buried under that building—I'm tempted to say that I had no idea, but it would be a lie. Down there, in the dark, I asked him to take up the fight if I fell, so I saw it."

Trea lifted her amarceru off the side table, but instead of drinking, she rolled the squarish mug between her hands, an old habit judging by the absent nature of the motion. "He brought Nihlus home a few weeks after your death, and I could barely believe that torin—the general—was my pahir." She smiled and shrugged. "I hadn't seen him in a couple of cycles outside of vidcalls, but suddenly, there he was, the torin I'd always seen inside my mind when my awkward little Betru grew up."

Shepard nodded and swallowed a sudden tightness in her throat. She'd never thought much about being a parent. Never thought about what it must be like to bear all that hope and fear, to pour all that love and discipline and encouragement into a child, imagining the end result. And suddenly, she wondered if she would ever experience the moment of looking into the eyes of her grown child to see someone remarkable there.

Pushing that ridiculousness aside, she nodded in response to what Trea said. "He has the strongest, most wonderful heart."

"Who does?" Garrus asked from the doorway. Hands braced against the frame, he leaned through, his eyes sparkling with happiness. He met Shepard's gaze, a teasing smile sending his mandibles fluttering high and wide. "You must be talking about me."

"Clearly," Nihlus said, nearly tossing Garrus on his backside as he shoved past, "she was talking about me. Your delusions are starting to concern me, General." He grinned at Shepard, then walked over to Trea, cradling the tarin's hand in both of his. "I see you convinced someone to let you out of your blanket cage."

Shepard shook her head as she watched Nihlus and Trea. The oath of karifraturus clearly extended beyond Garrus and Nihlus. A fiery, joyful warmth flared in her chest. Thank goodness for
blessings both great and small. He needed family, people who loved him the way his mother hadn't been able to.

Trea grinned, a cocky sort of victory arching her neck and straightening her back. "At last, the spirits have sent me an ally against the forces of overprotectiveness." She lifted her hand, patting his cheek with enough force to emphasize her point. "You two side with your pari far too often."

Nihlus touched brows again, then drew back. "If you weren't so determined to push yourself, we wouldn't need to." He turned away from his mari, stepping over to nuzzle the top of Shepard's head. "Good morning, haksaya kubenar."

Shepard gripped his hand. "You look rested."

The Spectre grinned as he shrugged and walked past to take a large cup off a shelf and pour himself some water. "Kicking Garrus around doesn't take any great amount of energy or effort."

Shepard watched Garrus as his boyfriend chuffed and bent to touch his brow to his mother's before lifting her talons to nuzzle them. "As for you, dilekmarim, since Sol sides with Pari as well, you might want to consider that we can't all be wrong." He grinned when his mari chuffed, then leaned down to rest his brow against hers. "You can't blame us for wanting to keep you."

"I can blame you for coddling me until it's more painful than my actual ailment," his mother retorted. "If Jane hadn't rescued me, I'd be flattened and cooked into a krellin wafer." Trea grinned at her son and tipped her head toward Shepard. "Quit fussing over me, and go say good morning to your dilan."

As Shepard watched the unspoken currents running between mother and son, the shape and colour of their history burst through the space, the sun coming out from behind heavy cloud. Why had Garrus stayed away for so long, waiting until illness threatened to take her before reconnecting?

Then Garrus crouched between Shepard's knees, distracting her from her thoughts as he looked into her eyes and gently raked his talons through her hair. "Good morning. I didn't think you'd be up yet. How are you holding up?"

A smile and nod answered his question. "I'm a little wobbly but considering the last couple of days," she said, leaning into his hand, "I've never been better." Despite her entire body insisting that she kiss him, she waited for Garrus to initiate contact. She really needed to study up on turian customs. Out on the Normandy or Omega, they made up their own rules quite well, but the last few minutes crystalised the fact that she was a part of a turian family. Alienating them amounted to the last thing she wanted to do.

But then he leaned in, nuzzling her lips in a soft, chaste kiss. "You look good. Happy."

Taking his face between her hands, she touched her brow to his. "I am happy." A soft sigh escaped as she closed her eyes. "You two looked like you were having fun out there."

"Someone has to keep the Spectre from getting too cocky." Garrus chuckled when Nihlus made a choking sort of retching noise. "We're going to go for a run, so I can humiliate him again. When we get back, we'll make some breakfast." He pulled back and frowned. "Are you okay entertaining Mari until then?"

Shepard nodded, but then cocked an eyebrow at him. "You're going for a run? The both of you?" Her second eyebrow joined the first. "Running? Really?" She glanced over her shoulder at Nihlus. "Quirte Lazy-Pants is going to run without anything chasing him?"
Nihlus polished off a second glass of water and shrugged. "Don't often get a chance to breathe non
recycled air and feel ground beneath my feet. Don't worry, we won't be long." His mandibles
spread as he straightened, standing a little taller. "Garrus won't make the bottom of the street."

Garrus caressed the side of Shepard's face, pulling her attention back to him. His stare fixed behind
her, shooting darts at his frarits for a moment before returning to her eyes. "We'll be a half hour at
the most, and not because I'll be the one quitting." He kissed her, then stood and strode over to get
a drink.

The sub-vocals beneath Nihlus's rough laughter brushed the back of her neck, warming it. He
belonged there, was loved there. A chill splinter pierced the warmth, sliding a steel pin into her
resolve. If she wasn't careful, she could blow apart everything Nihlus had just discovered.

Garrus gave the Spectre a push toward the door. "Come on, let's go. I'm getting hungry." He turned
back before stepping out the front door. "See you two in a few minutes."

Shepard glanced over at Trea. "I feel like I've just been handed a case full of stolen eezo and the
cops are about to burst through the door." She chuckled and levelled a narrow-eyed stare on the
tarin. "So, tell me, are my instincts correct? Is this a set up?"

A bright chuckle answered her. "They couldn't have been much more graceless or obvious about
it." Her mandibles flicked hard and quick. "Their lack of subtlety alarms me considering their
professions." Shifting in her chair, she winced, her entire body stiffening, one arm clenching tight
around her stomach for a moment. Then she relaxed and shrugged. "But, they mean well, and
torins in love … well, they behave in peculiar ways."

Shepard nodded, staying loose and wary. "That's universal and gender inclusive." She canted her
head a little, a wave of dizziness tilting the world on its ear. "But——"

Trea lifted a talon for the barest of seconds, the slight gesture asking for Shepard's indulgence. The
captain smiled and nodded, more than willing to give it. The peace and wisdom in Trea Vakarian's
eyes, the combination of an honourable warrior's gentle strength and stubborn grace reached deep
into Shepard's gut, settling it. She sighed and chuckled softly under her breath.

Damn, you already love her.

"They want me to tell you about my family." She smiled and reached up to pull her blanket a little
tighter, but shook her head before Shepard could ask whether she wanted another. "My mari and
her best friend, Rhian, went into the military together. They swore karifratrus after their first real
battle. My mari took a serious wound and came close to death. Neither of them had family—my
mari's parents died the year she went to the academy, and Rhian's patrem had also passed—and so
they swore the oath, making one another their family."

Shepard sat quietly as Trea paused to drink some of her amarceru, curious to hear what the tarin
had to say. Even though she'd been a child, and likely sheltered from some of the stickier aspects of
the relationship, Trea had lived eyeball deep in karifratrus.

"As best friends often do, Mari and Rhian met another set of best friends. My pari and Lanara's
patrem had been on the same crew from their first day. When the four of them eventually became
bond-mates, the two torins swore karifratrus as well." She sipped, almost absently, her eyes staring
out into the rain.

Shepard followed the tarin's example, more than willing to wait for Trea to continue. Mist wafted
from the ground, lending the world an ethereal quality, everything beyond the garden a world of
muted shadows. She smiled. A gorgeous morning. If not recovering from brain surgery, she might have gone running with Garrus and Nihlus just to feel the wind and rain on her face. She inhaled, the cool moisture clinging around her nostrils. Quickly swiping at the tickle, she closed her eyes. As a child, how many mornings had she spent lying in bed, listening to the rain on the roof? That morning, the rain didn't make any sound on the roof, even over the single storey of the common area, but the drops drummed thick and fat on the canvas spread over the yard.

Trea rumbled a little, clearing her throat before she continued. "Our parents were the best of friends, _fratrins_ and _filitrins_ in truth. Lenara and I spent our first few cycles living next door to one another, but when her _pari_ died, her family moved in with ours."

Shepard opened her eyes and looked over at the _tarin_, trying to iron out the confused frown furrowing her brow and drawing her eyebrows down tight over her eyes. "You all lived together?"

Trea nodded, her manner solid and stiff as she turned to meet Shepard's gaze. "I grew up with two _maris_ and a _pari_. They loved and remained devoted to each other until my _mari_'s death. Rhian and my _pari_ still live in our home. When _Mari_ died, myself and my brother, Lenara and her sisters—my brother and sisters—all inherited her legacy equally."

She paused, a soft-edged frown dropping her brow plates and mandibles as she leaned forward, her elbows on the arms of her chair. "_Sorau dulca_, when it comes to families joined by _karifratrus_, there is no mine or yours, there is ours." Slowly, the frown transformed into a smile, the _tarin_’s blue eyes shining. "It is a selfless, beautiful promise that cannot be broken. The oath of bonding—marriage in human culture—can be and is dissolved all the time; families joined by blood fall out, that bond left behind; _karifratrus_ cannot be dissolved or left behind. Ever. It is a family created by choice and honour rather than blood and accident, a decision and responsibility to place another ahead of yourself."

"Until and beyond death," Shepard whispered, melting a little further into her chair.

"Yes." Trea reached out her hand, a surprisingly strong grip closing around Shepard's fingers. "They will never tell you that you must be bonded with them both." She shook her head. "That's not the way it works for bond-mates, but you needn't worry about hurting one by loving both. The hurt only comes if there is a lack of equality." The grip on Shepard's fingers tightened for a moment. "And what I've seen doesn't worry me for either of my _pahirs_."

Despite nodding, a thin-lipped smile of thanks quickly dissolved into something far more pressed and pinched. She gripped Trea's stare as tightly as her hand as she tried to put her dread into words. "I don't know if I've got that much love … energy … hope?" Then it didn't matter, the words vanishing as she caught something in her peripherals.

Movement in the yard.

Shepard released Trea's hand and jumped up, peering out into the misty downpour. A shadow slunk amidst the plants. "Trea." The alarm at the base of Shepard's skull began to wail, and a thin trickle of tar-black whispered between her neurons. "Is there a back entrance to the garden?" Her hand slapped at her hip for a sidearm she wasn't wearing.

The shadow solidified into a turian. At least it looked like a turian until it came within three metres of the glass doors. Blue lights glowed in place of eyes and up its misshapen brow. Metal clad most of the thing's head and encased its torso in strips. Every turian aspect of the creature had been warped, made vicious, sharp, and tangled: a mockery of the _torin_ it had once been.

"Dear God—" Fear flared, but then before her heart could send it pouring out into her muscles, an
incendiary combination of training and rage sent it up in flames. How dare they come at her there?

*That's the shape of the coming war, Janey. No honour, no taboos, just death from every quarter.*

"T … t … th … th … eh … eh … eh … ay … ay … ay ay ay," the thing stuttered, it's voice a combination of dual larynges and machine chatter.

Trea lunged from her chair, a pistol appearing in her hand. Steadying her gun hand with her other, the *tarin* strode toward the Reaper, unleashing a barrage of three shot volleys. The construct let out another garbled, mechanical burst of sound or language and crumpled.

Had the Reaper been trying to communicate? Stunned, Shepard stared at it until Trea turned and reached out.

"Jane—" The *tarin's* strength gave way, her knees buckling, the gun clattering to the tile.

A single leap and Shepard's arm snaked around Trea's waist, keeping her from crumpling to the floor. Before she could inhale to speak, or turn to help the *tarin* into her chair, the front door burst open.

"The gun!"

Obeying that shout, Shepard swept a foot toward the pistol, releasing Trea just long enough to snatch it up. She lowered the *tarin* to the floor, landing next to her on one knee, the pistol already lined up at the open portal. Waiting until the forms at the door solidified into either friend or foe, she braced the gun with her second hand.

Lights where eyes should be.

Shepard opened fire, grateful for the antiquated weapon's lack of heat sinks. "Am I clear behind?" she called as the second invader fell. Breath slow and steady, heart thumping, adrenaline distilling the world down into action and keen edges, Shepard waited, her senses stretched out into the fog and rain.

"Clear," Trea replied. "Front?"

The silence dripped down, expectant crystals shattering on the floor. Shepard took a breath. "Clear for the moment." Looking down, she offered the *tarin* an arm to pull herself up, helping her lean back against the chair. The upholstery shone bright rose, almost blinding her as if she'd stared at a light too long. Blinking and giving her head a shake, Shepard asked, "Is there another gun down here?"

Trea stabbed a thumb toward the far side of the front room. "Top drawer on the right hand side of the shelving unit." Talons plucked the one from Shepard's hand. "Are these Reapers?" she asked, twisting to lift herself up onto a knee. Impatient talons pulled her blanket off the chair and tossed it aside.

"Looks that way." Snapping her head around, Shepard checked both entrances before she ducked low, and raced around the back side of the *caman* into the sitting room. Yanking open the top, right-hand drawer, she scooped out the Carnifex and handful of heat sinks. Before she could ask if they were still clear, gunfire erupted from the kitchen.

Damn it! Way to go, Janey, leave the terminally ill *tarin* to fight on her own.

Mechanical, dual-layered muttering announced incoming at the front door, ending her internal
diatribe. Trea could more than hold her own. Shepard shoved the spare heat sinks into her pocket and aimed the gun at the threshold, slapping a heat sink into the pistol even as she lifted it. Lowering herself into a half crouch, she slipped back toward the kitchen, gun raised, feet skimming the floor. The ex-turian appeared in the doorway, no apparent weapon in its hands.

It stepped over the dead one and turned faced her, but stopped. It didn't reach for a weapon or lunge toward her, it just stared. The gelid, blue lights slid over her like clammy fingers inside her clothes. She bit down on her tongue, bringing a quick end to that nonsense. It was scanning her, not staring. That thing no longer possessed anything as benign as eyes. Nothing alive inhabited that muck and crust of steel, not anymore.

It was a puppet, an empty thing, and killing it amounted to a mercy.

As she centered the Carnifex on the cluster of lights, a chattering, stuttering sound came out of the dark hole between the creature's mandibles. Shepard froze. What the hell?

"Th … they … they they s … s … strike f … f … from ben … n … neath the … the … the wings." It didn't move as the words stuttered from its mouth. Not a twitch.

One second stretched into a long, breathless second as her brain struggled to string together the sounds. As two seconds ticked over into three, Shepard shook off the shock and opened fire. Two headshots sent the husk sprawling, the back of it's head flying outside onto the step.

Shepard gave herself another, strong shake and kept the pistol aimed at the doorway. What the hell was going on? Talking husks? Why hadn't they come in firing? And what in the name of the sweet baby Jesus had that one said to her?

*They strike from beneath the wings?*

What it said made no more sense than it talking in the first place. The Reapers on Thessia had attacked, rather than chatting. Well …. She pulled back on the reins. If the Collectors on Thessia had truly wanted her dead—at least at the beginning—they could have sent two or three of the banshees and overwhelmed them easily enough. She and Nihlus had been cattle herded into a corral. Why? To study them? Get them in the machine? Or something else? Something bigger that required them making another attempt?

If so, that meant what? Indoctrination? That thought stabbed a rusty, metal fence post into her guts, giving it a hard twist. That made an evil sort of sense. Indoctrinate the leaders of the resistance, eliminate it completely. Worse, make the Reapers' work a whole lot easier. Saren had set a convincing example; they might just want more of him.

Trea's weapon fell silent, grabbing hold of the threads of Shepard's tangled thoughts and yanking them loose. Shepard opened her mouth to call out, get proof of life, but then clamped it shut. The last thing she needed to do was alert a whole pile of the monsters to her location.

Establishing a straight eye line on the front door, she saw a shadow run in from the street. Breath whistling between clenched teeth, heart calming, she let her gun drop a few degrees toward the floor. She'd recognize that silhouette anywhere.

"Trea, Garrus and Nihlus incoming. Front door," she said, throwing the words over her shoulder.

"Roger that." The tarin's 'squad voice' tugged at one corner of Shepard's mouth. No such thing as an ex-soldier.

Garrus paused for half a heartbeat at the threshold before holstering his sidearm and leaping over
the dead Reapers and running the few steps to her. Grasping her upper arms, he pulled her into a
distraught embrace, then shoved her away just as suddenly. Shaking talons traced the line of her jaw.
"We heard the gunfire from down the street. Are you all right?"

A quick nod and smile answered his question before Shepard looked past him to the Spectre.
"Nihlus, see to Trea." When his face froze, she shook her head. "She's fine, just took out a couple
of Reapers, in fact." Focusing on her torin, Shepard nodded toward the door. "Four reaperized
turians. I don't know if there are any more."

"Okay, I'll be right back." Garrus looked over her shoulder into the other room. "Mari, you okay?"

Shepard turned to look at Trea when the tarin chuckled. "Surely you're joking, Betru. Ambushed
by monsters from the pits ... I haven't been better in a cycle." Taking Nihlus's arm, she allowed her
pahir to help her off the floor and into the chair. "Thank you, diume." Gentle slaps warded off his
hands as he tried to check her for injury. "Jane guarded me well. You two should check the
neighbourhood, make sure there were only four."

A quick kiss brushed Shepard's lips, then Garrus pulled his sidearm. "I'll circle front and right,
Nihlus," he called as he stepped outside.

"Roger that." Shepard heard the back door close and lock a fraction of a second before the front
one locked. Despite knowing that a locked door didn't mean much against Reapers, that little bit of
security helped ease the alarm in her head from SARL 1 to SARL 3.

Shepard trained her weapon on the door, forcing herself to stay vigilant. "I've got the front covered,
Trea." She backed toward the kitchen, slipping behind the caman, using the large hearth as cover.
"Now that the forces of overprotectiveness are out of earshot, how are you doing?"

Trea chuckled, the bright, bell-like laugh killing Shepard's concern and breaking up the chill
enough for the caman's heat to penetrate, warming her right side. She couldn't help but grin when
Trea let out a contented sigh and said, "I can't believe I let myself forget what it felt like to get that
rush, to drop into that easy, automatic reflex place inside my head where everything is muscle
memory and training." Shepard heard the chair whisper, fabric against fabric. "I've got a bruise or
two, but I feel like I could take on an army of those things."

A warm, surprised laugh rolled from Shepard's gut, adrenaline sharpening its edge. "Blessed
Enkindlers, let's hope that doesn't happen. I haven't had any breakfast." As Trea's laughter mingled
with hers, the last of the threat rose to dissipate against the ceiling.

Garrus and Nihlus returned a few minutes later. Before they spoke, the two torins hung their
sidearms on their hips and locked down the doors. Shepard watched them, a pale sadness replacing
the tight twist in her guts. Vigilance and worry hung heavily from their cowls, the lightness and
playfulness of moments before evaporated like the mist. Damn Reapers couldn't let them have a
single day.

"I didn't see any more of them, and scans registered nothing." Garrus closed on Shepard, pulling
her into his arms before she could even hang up the gun. "You're all right? No more damage than
usual?" When she grinned and shook her head, he nuzzled the top of her head, rubbed her back, and
released her, snapping back to all business. "Okay. Pari and Sol are on their way home. Adrien
Victus is coming with Pari. I don't want to leave the domin unguarded."

Shepard resisted the urge to follow him, to cling to his strength, as he stepped away. The
adrenaline leached from her blood, the vacuum filled with dizziness and trembling. Chakwas
probably wouldn't have recommended combat for the morning after brain surgery. Oh well, such
was the shape of her life. She turned to face Trea, to make sure the tarin had come through as unscathed as it appeared. Her knee gave, forcing her to slap a hand against the caman to avoid falling.

Garrus must have caught the motion in his peripherals, because he spun, reaching out a hand to steady her. Shepard smiled and shook it off.

"I'm fine, love, the adrenaline is just wearing off." Shepard nodded toward the dead invaders. "They didn't fire, at least none of the ones I saw did." Raised eyebrows queried Trea, the tarin shaking her head, solidifying Shepard's observation. Taking a deep breath, Shepard braced herself for their reactions to the crazy. "And here's the really weird part: two of them talked." She ducked her head and lifted a hand, waggling it in a little weighing gesture. "Well, one didn't really talk, it just stuttered a little, but the other got out an entire sentence before I put the front of its head through the back."

Nihlus looked down at the corpse closest to the door. "They've never done that before. What did it say?" He met her gaze, curiosity and alarm trading places in a rotating loop behind the brilliant green.

"They strike from beneath the wings." Shepard stepped around the chair and moved to sit, stopping when, in her peripherals, she saw all three of them stiffen. She looked up, still half bent over, one hand reaching for the chair's arm. "What? I take it that line makes perfect sense to all of you?" The look on their faces set her heart racing. What was it? A combination of bone-deep terror and realization, as if some part of them had been waiting to hear those words. She straightened.

Nihlus nodded toward the chair. "Sit down, kubenar, you're trembling." He took a step toward her.

Shepard shook off his assistance. "I'm fine, Nihlus. What is it about that line that has you all looking so spooked?"

Garrus's brow plates hunkered down over his eyes, so low she could barely make out blue glints. "It's a very old tale." Still not meeting her stare, he strode across the floor and picked up his mari's blanket,. He shook it out and folded it as he returned to drape it around her shoulders. "I told you about the famactylus the night we met Thane Krios." He glanced over at her, brow plates lifting until she nodded that she remembered. "That line is from the last of a series of stories about the creatures."

Outside, thunder rumbled, the sky growing darker, the clouds pressing down to steal all but a watery glimmer of daylight. A flash lit up the room: dry-bone white. As Garrus and Nihlus spun toward the lightning, Shepard gasped, sour and poisonous. For those few brief flares, death painted over the faces of the torins she loved, searing away life to leave hollow-eyed sockets and desolate ridges of bone.

Shepard shuddered as she lowered herself onto the edge of her chair, her gut twisting around the old fence post again. It all felt like a warning … all of it, provoking a baseless sort of floating panic that turned a legion of ants loose under her skin. Give her something real and simple to fill full of bullets, and forget the mysterious bullshit.

What the hell was she supposed to make of unarmed Reaper constructs spouting ancient turian folk tales instead of trying to kill her? She sank into the back of the chair and slumped forward, the heel of her hand pressing into her brow as her elbow impacted her thigh. The pointy joint hit one of her wounds sent a bracing, almost welcome jolt of pain sizzling along her nerves. She leaned into it, using the pain as a ground.
"How did it know to say that line?" she whispered. "What the hel … " She glanced over at Trea. ". . . eck is going on here? It's all just mind games and endless layers of weird crap piled on more weird crap."

Garrus sucked in a loud, noisy breath as if declaring the conversation decided, then blew it out. "We aren't going to find out here or from these Reapers. That's a question for live Reapers or hacked computers."

Shepard looked up, anchoring herself in the general's absolute decisiveness. The roles they'd fill during the coming war began to reveal themselves. Garrus definitely had the 'final decision, let's get the plans moving' hat firmly fixed upon his head.

"What do we do with these things?" Nihlus asked. He walked over to the closest one and nudged it with his toe. "We should take them back to Archangel." Crouching he opened his omnitool and swept it over the grotesque. "We didn't get a chance to even scan the asari husks. We could learn a lot from actual specimens."

Shepard let out a thin chuckle as she pulled her elbow out of her thigh and sank into her chair. "You saw Mordin's reaction to that little bug-drone thing. I thought he was having some sort of seizure. If we hand him a Reaper, he might just explode from excitement." Then, sobering, she nodded, but the corner of her mouth drew back in a grimace. "Yeah, we need to take these in for research, but the fact they didn't come in firing worries me. We need to check them over completely for any transmitters, bugs … anything that could prove a security risk."

Garrus crouched next to one of the bodies. "You're thinking they were supposed to be killed and taken back to base?" He looked up at Nihlus. "Go, take a shower and get dressed. I'll stay down here, lend our warriors what small support I can." As he said the last, he cocked a brow plate at his mari, and Shepard suspected that if he'd been human, he would have stuck out his tongue.

"Yeah, all right." Nihlus bent over Trea to touch brows then took her shoulders in a gentle, but solid, no-nonsense grip. "Next time, save me a couple."

Affectionate laughter accompanied a firm shove as Trea replied, "You know I won't. Get upstairs and shower." When he reached the bottom of the stairs, she glanced toward him. "And turn on some lights before you go, diume."

Nihlus gave her a jaunty salute. "Aye, aye, Major."

Trea let out a long-suffering sigh, but winked as she met Shepard's gaze. Appearing as vital and strong as she had frail an hour before, the tarin settled firmly and comfortably into Shepard's heart, taking residence there along with her sons.

"They're just one long, brutal nightmare," Garrus muttered.

Shepard turned to watch her general roll one of the Reapers over onto its back. Her wince matched Garrus's at the horrendous intertwining of flesh and metal, the perversion of the monster's original form even more grisly in the light. Shepard choked down the foul expletive that tried to sneak from between her lips and swallowed hard. Every single thing she saw of the Reapers and their creations just compounded her resolve to kill every last one of them. Beings so dedicated to horror and anguish deserved no mercy beyond a barrage of bullets culminating in a swift death. After seeing things like the banshees and these turian-things, how was she supposed to care about their existential angst. Oh poor Reapers, they don't have a soul. Big fucking whoop-dee-shit.

"I don't want these things stinking up my breakfast," Garrus said. He grabbed the monstrosity's arm
and hauled it out under the canopy. Once he'd lined up all four in the yard, he called Mordin to bring a squad and pick them up.

"They can check them for any security risks in the Passch's lab," he said when he turned back and saw her watching him. He opened his mouth again, but before he could say anything, Nihlus thumped down the stairs.

"I'll start making breakfast," the Spectre said, announcing his plan as if it deserved applause. He ducked his head a little when his eyes met Shepard's. "Sorry, but we brought pre-prepared for you rather than risk killing you."

She laughed. "You never have to apologize for not killing me." She looked up as Garrus stepped in front of her, his hand held out. Gazing into his eyes, she saw his need to discuss things over with her, so nodded and wrapped her fingers around his talons before addressing Nihlus again. "So long as it isn't eggs benedict," she said. "Pus-like drool all over my eggs . . . ." Punctuating the sentence with violent gagging, she felt pretty good about having gotten her point across as she let Garrus pull her from her chair.

Glancing back, she saw the Spectre eyeballing the container with her breakfast. "Pus? Humans eat that?" He set the container down, an exquisitely satisfying expression of revulsion on his face. Shoving it away with from him with the point of a talon, he muttered, "That's disgusting."

Trea caught Shepard's free hand in hers, squeezing the captain's fingers. "We've fought and killed side by side." The tarin's face glowed with an almost effervescent smile. "Family cemented through life and death and blood." She tugged on Shepard's hand, pulling her down to touch brows. "You're most joyously welcomed, diume."

Shepard swallowed a lump of grateful tears. "Thank you." An embarrassed flush burned up her neck, but she couldn't think of any way to articulate the depth of what she felt, so stayed with silence.

"Could I get my dilan back?" Garrus asked, smartass crackling through his tone.

Trea laughed and released Shepard's hand. "You may." She squeezed Garrus's hand, then nodded toward the stairs. "Go get cleaned up."

Garrus led Shepard to the stairs, tugging her up behind him and then into his old bedroom rather than releasing her hand. She lagged back a bit, savouring the connection and the way he coaxed her along.

"We shouldn't have left you and Mari alone even for a few minutes," Garrus said the moment she shut his bedroom door behind them. He spun and pulled her into an almost frantic embrace. "I just never imagined that the damned Reapers would come here."

Shepard wrapped her arms around him and turned her face into his neck. "Hey, hero, don't know if you noticed, but your women-folk took the invaders out handily, and would've even if they hadn't been unarmed." Wincing, she drew back when she kissed his throat and a piece of the soft moss-like turf from the yard stuck to the end of her tongue. "Oh, that is so gross." She plucked it out from between her lips. "Go shower, you muck monster. I'll still be here, and we can talk everything through once you're clean."

He glanced toward the door as if expecting legions of the enemy to burst through, and Shepard chuckled, love beating away all the dread and weird, creepy crap floating around in her head.
A loving hand caressed the length of his good mandible. "Go. You need to get clean. Your mari and Nihlus have the downstairs covered, and I'll stand guard at the bathroom door, make sure no monsters try to pull a peeping Reaper." She grinned wide at the closed dialect curse that he grumbled at her. "Why, General Vakarian … I know what you just said, sir, and I'm shocked! Shocked and dismayed, sir."

"You are a pain in my … ." Soft laughter rolled under his words as he swept her up and kissed her. "All right, I'll be out in a few minutes." After setting her down, he nodded toward the shelves. "Try not to break my stuff."

They strike from beneath the wings, puer.

They strike from beneath the wings.

And when their feet tread upon good, sweet ground,

The land shall crack, and heave, and burn.

They strike from beneath the wings, puer.

When the gods of Buratrum return.
"But if one day, you ask me to choose, I'll never forgive you for what it'll do to Nihlus. I'll love you always, but he doesn't deserve to have his heart broken again." She shook her head, a chill curl of fear twining through the chambers of her rapidly beating heart. "I don't know what it'll do to him. I don't even know if he'd survive it. His whole life has been loss and betrayal … being used by the people he loves. I won't do that to him."

Perir - Peririn plural. Male turian under the age of 15


42 Days ASR

Fifteen minutes passed before Garrus walked back through his bedroom door, entering so abruptly that he startled Shepard mid-battle as Tiny-Blue-Armour-Turian took on Tiny-Gold-Armour-Turian.

"I need to bring in Archangel guards for the house," he announced, leaving her no doubt as to what he'd been thinking about in the shower. "Maybe Melanis can suggest a couple of commandos for inside during the day when Pari and Sol are away."

Shepard looked over her shoulder at him, the action figures still clutched in her hands. "No! Blessed Enkindlers, love, no." A flush searing its way up her neck at being caught in the act, she set the little turian warriors back on the shelf, then turned. A single stride closed the distance, and she took Garrus's hands in hers. "You can't lock Trea up here behind a wall of guards, Garrus." The fear and confusion in his eyes pulled her in, her heart swelling inside her chest until her ribs strangled it. Releasing one hand, she reached up to press her palm against his mandible. "Guards, yes … on your whole family, but keep them as invisible as possible."

Garrus backed away from her until he ran into the side of his bed. She didn't follow, letting him gather his space. She'd suggested he place his ill mari at risk, that would take him some time and distance to wrap his head around.

Garrus's frown deepened until his eyes all but disappeared into the shadow of his brow plates. "What do we do to protect her during the day? Have Pari take her to work? Sol?"

How deeply he cared and how openly he loved filled her with both adoration and fear. How could he come through a war as brutal as they were facing without shattering into a thousand pieces? She swallowed the fear and gave her head a hard shake of denial. She wouldn't let that happen. If his role proved to be Final Decision Man, she could take up the mantle of Hard Decision / Sacrifice Woman. She could weather the hits and would do so gladly to prevent his suffering those wounds.

"No," he said, "she's not strong enough." Giving his head a violent shake, he spun and paced to the window, looking out into the rain. Heels of his hands pressed into the sill, he leaned toward the
"She's terminal barring any miracles." He sighed, the long, brittle sound painted across the window in silver fog. "I'll bring in squads from Omega—"

"No, Garrus." Shepard followed him, turning him to face her. "Love, did you see her down there?" The pain in his eyes—already mourning a mother he'd yet to lose—set her own prickling with tears. Still, she smiled, a tight press of lips, and cradled his face between her hands. "She was amazing down there, Garrus. Sure, she couldn't stand for long, but I was still staring at the thing when she just whipped a gun out of her chair cushions and blew it away. She's a fighter, Garrus, she can't just sit around and watch the world from a prison of blankets and tea."

Shepard sighed and stroked the arch of his neck with gentle, flat palms. "If you were in her position, Garrus, what would you want?"

He leaned down to press his brow to the top of her head. "It's not that easy, Kahr'i." He relaxed down into her a little more as she slipped her arms around his neck. "She has violent mood swings, and sometimes she has trouble remembering things. The last time we visited, I found her sorting a cupboard over and over, crying because she couldn't make herself stop." Pulling away, he slid his hands up her arms until he clasped her fingers in his talons. He tugged her over to the side of the bed and sat, gathering her in against him. "Yes, she's proud and determined to be independent, but she's just not able."

Shepard turned in the circle of his arms to sit in his lap and snuggled in against him, one hand stroking the plates on his chest. "What is she passionate about?" She met his gaze, pouring all the love and empathy she felt into hers.

"Helping people," he said after a moment. "She left external forces for a posting with internal because she couldn't stand the impersonal brutality of combat." A long sigh whistled through his nose. "She always wanted to be in shoulder-deep, fighting for civilians. She said that soldiers could take care of themselves, it was the bakers and the teachers who needed someone watching out for them."

Shepard nodded and tucked her head in under his chin, rubbing her cheek against the smooth hide at the base of his throat. "Sounds like someone we could use to help prepare the civilians for the war."

He hummed a soft agreement, but just tipped his head to rest against the top of hers for long moments. "You're right," he said at last, letting out a sigh so deeply rooted that it sounded as though it drew blood. "We'll lose her that much faster if we treat her like an invalid. She'll withdraw and wither faster than the disease takes her."

That time, Shepard just hummed her agreement, leaving it to him to decide what to do. As passionately as she might feel about Trea being allowed to live out her days according to her own wishes, it wasn't her place to interfere.

Garrus rumbled a little and rested his chin on her head. "Maybe, if she had an assistant to do the public work—she hates public speaking and politics … someone to run interference when she's not stable … she could help organize evacuation routes and shelters."

Shepard pulled away to meet his eyes, heart still feeling too big and held captive by her ribcage, but glad to see some of the pain in his stare replaced by purpose and hope. "That sounds like something she could pour all that caged passion and energy into, and if she's working with your pari, he'll be able to make sure she isn't wearing herself out." She leaned in and kissed him. "I know it won't be easy to let her go out there, Callor, but seeing her happy and productive will ease it a little, I hope."
Garrus kissed her back, then pulled her in tight. "She's always been so strong." He chuffed softly. "Strong, but never tough … never hard. She's always the one taking care of everybody else. I thought it would be decades before I had to start looking after her."

"It sounds like this apple didn't fall far from the tree," she replied, her voice soft. "We'll protect them the best we can, Garrus, and we'll … " She pulled away and smiled up into his eyes. "... yes … we'll, look after her." A soft sigh drifted between them. "But I think you've got the right idea. She needs to live strong and proud and happy for as long as she can. She sounds like she's spent her entire life earning that right."

He kissed her. "Go on, get up off my legs, impossible woman." Garrus laughed and lifted her off his lap, his hands gentle, his grip light and playful. "As if you didn't lead me down that path by the hand. Go play with my toys some more; I need to get dressed. Pari and Adrien should be arriving any minute."

Barely keeping a grip on a wicked, teasing grin, Shepard strolled over to his collection and held up the two action figures she'd been playing with. "These two are very cute." An exaggerated weighing gesture pushed one toward him and drew one back, then swapped places, back and forth. "Which one did little Garrus want to be when he grew up?" Laughter beat at the backs of her teeth, almost breaking loose when he glared at her.

He turned back to his duffel, sorting through until he pulled out a tunic and leggings. "A couple of those are collector's items." He tossed the clothing on the bed and crossed his arms. "They're going to be worth credits one day."

Shepard swallowed another wave of laughter, and narrowed her eyes into a sultry, come hither stare. "You're so sexy to me right now, you big, spikey nerd."

He tossed his tunic at her. "Stop. You didn't have toys when you were a child?" He shook the leggings out and slipped them on.

She set the figures back where she'd gotten them. "I did. My Johnny West horses were my favourite. Gorgeous, strangely marked horses whose ears and tails broke off if you looked at them wrong." She let out a soft sigh and threw him back his tunic. "And, hey, General, I wasn't just teasing. The more I discover about you, the sexier you get."

He finished dressing, rolling his shoulders to settle the cowl of his tunic, then sat on the side of the bed, facing her. "Come back and sit with me?" he asked, reaching out a hand.

Shepard closed her fingers around his talons just long enough to give them a squeeze, but then shook her head and turned back to his shelves. "I think better on my feet and without you trying to wear me down with your wiles."

"Wiles?" He chuffed, mandibles spreading and neck arching as he held out his arms out. "Why would I have to use wiles when I can just use my rakishly good looking sex appeal?"

"Is that what they're calling … " One hand gestured toward him, sizing him up. "... whatever that is?" A soft smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. Damn but she loved him. She lifted another turian soldier off the shelf, looking it over without really seeing it. All the things Trea had said tumbled around in her head. Damn them all for teasing her with the hope that it could work.

"How did your talk with Mari go?" he asked after a second.

Shepard let out a half-snort, half-cough. "Is that what you call that blatant set up?" She walked the
small, intricately detailed toy along the edge of the shelf. "And it went fine. She told me about her parents."

Garrus let out a breath loud enough to have been a sigh. She glanced back at him, but said nothing. "Do you love me?" he asked after a few seconds. He stood and walked a step toward her, a wall of gentle but solid demand. No teasing or lightness coloured his words, just the need for her to stop dancing around and denying the issue.

"You know I—" Shepard cut herself off and shook her head. Damn, she had to stop doing that. He didn't need the buck passed back to him. Not after everything. Meeting his ice-blue stare, she nodded. "Yes, I'm completely in love with you, Garrus. My heart is yours."

"And Nihlus?" A hand pushing her back into the wall, the pressure behind his stare grew heavier and heavier. "Do you love Nihlus?"

For a moment, the lie of continued denial sat on the end of her tongue. She even opened her mouth to turn it loose before she saw the slight slump through his shoulders, the minute dip in his mandibles. Damn. He deserved the truth, and so did Nihlus. She lifted a hand, but it stalled halfway to his chest.

"Yes." The word came out as a whisper that bordered on a sigh of relief. "Yes, I love him. I— I'm in love with him."

"Thank you." He closed on her until her hand pressed against his stomach. "He needs you." Garrus reached up to cover her hand in both of his. "I think you know how much. He looks good since you came back, but he's still drinking." He squeezed her hand. "He's fragile enough that the slightest thing could shatter him."

Shepard stared at Garrus for long moments, her eyes focused on where his throat flowed into his keel. Her heart raced fast and hard, pounding in the hollow between her clavicula. She didn't disagree with him about Nihlus. The Spectre needed her, and he needed Garrus as well. He needed something he could put complete faith in, faith that was never broken. The three of them, if it held—if the forces of human nature (or turian nature as the case might be) didn't shatter them all into a million pieces—could be that thing.

"If you do this," she said, speaking before she even realized she intended to, making a decision somewhere in her gut that the rest of her wasn't ready to accept. "If you open this door and lead us through, I want you to know something." She looked up, meeting his eyes, tears trickling from the corners of hers. "It's you, Garrus. Do you understand that? It will always be you." She waited to see that he understood before she continued. He nodded, and she drew a deep breath.

Damn, are you really considering the idea of two lovers, two mates ... husbands?

"But if one day, you ask me to choose, I'll never forgive you for what it'll do to Nihlus. I'll love you always, but he doesn't deserve to have his heart broken again." She shook her head, a chill curl of fear twining through the chambers of her rapidly beating heart. "I don't know what it'll do to him. I don't even know if he'd survive it. His whole life has been loss and betrayal ... being used by the people he loves. I won't do that to him."

Apparently, more than considering it.

Garrus met her stare for long seconds, each one stretching into eternity, as she tried to isolate and identify the emotions shining at her from the depths of his gaze. Love, definitely, but also something that looked too much like awe for her comfort, and ... joy. Yes, so much joy that she
couldn't help but match his smile as his mandibles spread and fluttered. And then he pulled her hard into his side, his mouth hungry and possessive against hers. His mandibles pulled in tight, allowing him enough suction to draw her bottom lip between his mouth plates, tongue caressing before nudging against it softly, backing off to ask rather than demand.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing into him hard enough that the edges of his plates hurt where they crossed her wounds. Mouth open, panting softly, she returned the kiss. Slow and passionate, it deepened until it felt as though they made love despite the clothes between them.

Pulling back just enough to untangle his tongue from hers, Garrus whispered. "You're the bravest person I've ever known." Brushing his nose against hers, he closed his eyes. "And you have the biggest heart." Then, as she pulled back just enough to focus on his face, he frowned a little, brow plates plunging toward his nose. "I love you, Kahri, and I love Nihlus. He's my fratrin, and I'll never ask you to hurt him." He leaned down, his brow brushing hers. "It's always you too, you know. I can't imagine trying to live without you again." Caressing her lips with his mouth, he let out a long sigh. "Before that day in that alley, I never really worried about losing you. Since you came back, this fear is a nightmare I can't wake up from."

Shepard turned her face into his neck, hating that she could say nothing to offer any solace. All those pretty promises amounted to a pile of lies. None of them could promise tomorrow let alone a lifetime. "We're all at risk," she said at last, "but I promise to fight like hell to come back to you, Garrus. Always." She clung to him for long moments, just savouring the safe harbour of his arms. But then voices drifted up from downstairs, easing her from his embrace. "Sounds like your pari is home."

Pulling away, she kissed him, then turned to walk to the door. "Come on, let's go make sure Nihlus isn't burning down the house." At the threshold, she turned back. "I mean it, Vakarian. It's always you."

He smiled, his eyes shining as he nodded. "And it's always you, Kahri."

The voices from downstairs ramped up to yelling. Shepard met Garrus's sudden, worried frown for a half second, then opened the door and hurried to the stairs.

"Get them out of here! I will not be held prisoner in my own domin, Herros!" All the serenity and joy in Trea's voice had vanished, replaced by a shrill, terrified rage.

"Diume, please," Herros replied, his voice set to 'calm the crazy tarin down', not patronizing, but gentle enough to be guaranteed to piss his bond-mate off. "You're … ."

Something smashed. It sounded like Trea's mug slamming into the tile floor. "Don't start with that tone, Herros." Something larger crashed, then something else. "Don't tell me what I am. I know what I am." Another something, that one wood, hit the floor. "I protected myself! I protected our home! I do not need babysitters."

"Mari, please," a female voice said, the tone firm but caring, "sit. You know that you could have a seizure if you get upset."

Shepard ran down the last few stairs, stopping at the bottom. Nihlus remained at the stove. Herros and a tarin—Solana, she assumed—stood to Trea's either side, their hands held out. Four uniformed soldiers stood back a couple of metres looking as though they couldn't decide whether to keep out of it or take Trea down.

Even though Shepard was sure Herros and Sol were just trying to ease Trea back into the chair
lying on its side behind her, their postures came off like they were trying to herd an angry cat into a cage. If it were her, approaching her like that would ensure they ended up sporting bruises that left them sitting funny for a couple of weeks.

She looked back at Garrus, leaving it to him as to how he wanted to handle the situation. Luckily, he seemed as upset by the drama playing out before them as Trea was. Stepping out where they could see him, he said, "I have no idea what flower that is, Kahri. That would be my mari's area of expertise." He glanced back, his stare begged Shepard to play along. He needn't have worried; she approved of his plan.

Looking to Trea, Shepard said, "I was telling Garrus about a scent that came in from the garden this morning." Ignoring the destruction and the turians ranged around the room, Shepard walked over to the tarin. "It's sweet, a little spicy, and well … frankly, it's just about the sexiest thing I've ever smelled."

Garrus shrugged. "I thought it might be the rylamia, but you know me, one flower is much the same as the next." He grinned and approached his mari as if nothing were going on, taking her hands. "Could you show Shepard around while we finish up breakfast?"

Shepard kept her face impassive. She knew Trea would smell the distraction a kilometre away, but she didn't have to add painful to the obvious. She slipped an arm around Garrus, every cell in her body adoring him so hard in the moment that she couldn't help but touch him. Now if only Trea hadn't gotten too wound up to allow him to distract her with something she loved. They needed to get her out of the line of fire and diffuse the situation so Garrus could deal with his father and sibling.

Trea looked back and forth between them for a moment, her eyes narrow and brow plates lowered with suspicion, but then she nodded. "That's the rylamia. It's blooming." She held out her arm. "I'd be honored to show you around my little obsession, diume. I have plants grown from clippings passed down through more than ten generations." A genuine smile fluttered over her face. "When you and Garrus settle down somewhere, we can take clippings from them and plant them in your garden."

Her own home and a garden filled with tradition and love … . Shepard glanced up at Garrus, seeing the same combination of astonished realization and longing painted across his face as had set her heart thumping. She looked over at Nihlus, suddenly able to see his dream alive and waiting for them, just an arm's reach into the future. A soft smile of wonder answered the Spectre's inquisitive frown.

Shepard slipped her hand through Trea's elbow, gripping the tarin's forearm to help support her as they started toward the door to the yard. Time enough to explore her life's strange turns once the family was calm.

"I came by my obsession with plants honestly," Trea said. She chuckled, her demeanor relaxing a little as they stepped through the glass door into the yard. "Both of my maris loved to garden. When they bonded, they retired from the military and opened a nursery. By the time Rhian retired a couple of cycles ago, it had grown to cover more than five sections of land." She squeezed Shepard's arm. "One day, we'll take you out there. It's beautiful. Walking its paths feels like treading upon some wonderful, unexplored planet where plants from all over the galaxy landed and made themselves at home."

The tarin led Shepard into the back section of the garden, stopping at long lines of a low shrub covered in spiky little leaves and tiny white, star-shaped blossoms. The glorious fragrance wafted with the clouds of mist, enveloping Shepard in olfactory heaven. "This is the rylamia." Trea bent
down and picked a petal off one of the flowers. "Chew on this, but don't swallow it, just in case."

Shepard lifted an eyebrow, but took the petal and did as she'd been told. A burst of sweet, flowery flavour exploded in her mouth. She'd never tasted anything like it, the closest being strong jasmine tea with a lot of honey. "Wow," she said removing the destroyed petal, "I can see how it's grown for sugar. It's gorgeous and super sweet." She moved to drop the petal, but then hesitated and stuck it in her pocket.

Trea led her toward the pond in the corner, the small body of water filled with colorful fish analogues, their heavily armoured scales gleamed, sleek rainbows slipping beneath the ripples. Huge plants surrounded the back side, draping over the water, while ground hugging ones populated the front.

"This is so beautifully designed and landscaped," Shepard said, searching for a natural progression for the conversation. "Did you do all this yourself?"

Trea smiled and nodded. "I did. It's been my third, now fourth, child. Evolving it over the cycles gave me respite from worrying about my work and my family." She took a long breath and leaned into Shepard's arm a little more heavily. "There is something in caring for the garden that just lets my brain relax into a wonderfully quiet place."

"I had a hobby like that once." Shepard let out a long breath as she realized that she hadn't even thought about her love of origami in years. Eden Prime had detonated a nuclear bomb in the middle of her old life, obliterating everything. Remembering her question to Nihlus about Cerberus hinting that she needed a hobby, she let out a thin snort. She used to leave little folded animals and flowers behind everywhere.

She shrugged as Trea turned a questioning gaze on her. "Seems like a lifetime ago, that's all." Chuffing low in her throat, she shook her head. "It was a lifetime ago." Softening the moment a little, she smiled. "Now, between your pahirs and saving the galaxy, my time is pretty much spoken for."

Trea nodded, but remained silent.

They walked along a stone pathway through the tall, silver-veined plants, Shepard glancing up at the canopy that covered both sections of the garden. "Why do you have a canopy over the garden?" she asked. "Wouldn't it be good for the plants to get natural water?"

Trea smiled brightly and shook her head. "The canopy is not for the plants, sorau dulca, it's for you." She laid her other hand over Shepard's, squeezing her fingers. "We didn't want you to have to remain inside or wear your armour out in the garden. The canopy is treated to block all solar radiation."

Shepard stopped, incredibly touched by that. She just stared into Trea's eyes, unable to form the words to say what she was feeling.

Trea smiled and patted Shepard's hand then gestured over at a couple of heavily padded loveseats tucked away in a corner near the doors into the house. "I was a young matrula, newly returned to Internal Forces when the Relay 314 Incident occurred." She settled into the generous embrace of the chair's cushions and pulled her blanket in snugly around her neck.

"Had Garrus been older, I might have volunteered to return to service," she continued, a small shrug punctuating her words. Her mandibles lifted, the effect almost bashful as she smiled. "Not because I wanted to fight your people, but because I was curious about them."
Animation and light began to glow through her expressions and actions once more, the jerky stiffness vanishing as the last of her tension and anger dissolved. "Who were these newcomers who could fight toe to toe with turians? Not because their technology matched ours, but because their tenacity and spirit did." Her smile widened. "I knew that humanity, with all their bold and unquenchable curiosity, would rise quickly within the galactic community."

"We certainly haven't wasted any time," Shepard agreed as she sat, "but to some, it still never seems fast enough, our reach not broad or long enough." She felt a faint burn along the back of her neck as she imagined the concern and debates her return must be causing back at the Citadel and on Arcturus.

Tucking her fingers under her thighs, the captain leaned forward, feeling awkward and vulnerable as she admitted, "I was supposed to be the next step forward, the chance for the Alliance to prove that we could serve as Spectres." She rocked forward a touch, fighting the urge to leap up and pace. "Now look at me, shouting into the wind trying to get the galaxy to listen, and still, ninety-nine point nine percent of the galaxy hasn't even heard of Reapers."

Trea sank a little lower into the cushions, a graceful shrug tilting across her shoulders. "You'd be surprised, I think. While people aren't talking about it on the street, behind closed doors they're asking, what if? And they're frightened." The tarin shook her head, a tremor so slight it could have been a palsy. "By denying it so vehemently, the council is actually helping you along." Shifting in her chair, Trea leaned back and closed her eyes.

"Should we head in?" Shepard asked. The tarin's weariness came on with unsettling swiftness, leaving Shepard to wonder if Trea hadn't suffered a small, focal seizure during her upset.

"No." Trea smiled and hunkered down into her blanket. "I'm comfortable here." The piercing blue of her stare shone from beneath heavily-lidded eyes. "Thank you for your intercession earlier. I know they love me and that they mean the very best. I also know that they can't help worrying, but neither can I help how angry it makes me to be treated like an invalid, coddled and placated." She tugged her blanket around herself and lifted her feet up onto the seat. "I can't even stand the word ... invalid. As if your illness negates your validity as a person ... deleting the person you were before you fell sick."

Trea took a long breath, easing down into the cushions as her eyes drifted closed again. "But, thank you. Solana was correct. When I get upset, my chances of having a seizure are greatly increased." Her eyes blinked open as a shudder raced down her slight frame, the terror the seizures evoked clearly showing even in that split second.

Shepard leaned forward, pulling her fingers from beneath her thighs to rest her elbows on her knees. "Have I done the right thing encouraging Garrus to get you out and active in the resistance?" she asked. "Have I coaxed him into accelerating your illness?"

The tarin shook her head, her eyes remaining closed that time. "It will progress regardless. Perhaps exercising my mind will help it stave off neural death. Perhaps it won't." She yawned. "The day will dawn, however, when I am unable to control my muscles, when I suffer multiple seizures a day, when paranoia and memory loss steal my personality and my family." Her eyelids squeezed tight, as if she fought to keep from opening them, meeting Shepard's gaze and revealing the extent to which her future terrified her.

"I watched it steal my mari far too soon," she said, her voice so soft that the raindrops spattering against the canopy nearly drowned it out. "I would stay myself as long as I can."

A few moments of silence followed, the tarin's breathing revealing that she slipped into sleep.
"Kahri," Garrus called, appearing in the doorway. "Adrien's here, and he brought a guest." He stepped over a flowerbed to crouch next to his mother's seat. "She's sleeping?"

Shepard nodded, but held up a hand when he moved to pick his mari up. "She said she was comfortable there. Maybe just get another blanket so she doesn't chill?" She stood, picked up the small cushion from her seat, and eased it under the tarin's head. "If she's comfortable, we might as well let her enjoy the nap."

Garrus nodded and headed back inside, returning a moment later with a gorgeous, thick, handwoven blanket in his talons. Shepard watched him tuck it around his mari's thin form, the tenderness in his movements wrapping a tight hand around her throat.

When he hesitated, clearly unsure about leaving Trea to sleep in the cool and damp, Shepard reached out to stroke his fringe. "We'll keep an eye on her, Callor." She stood and pulled him up, wrapping her arms around his waist when he straightened. "You're a wonderful son."

He hugged her tight. "I wasted so much time, Kahri."

She nodded and looked up, meeting his eyes. "I know, but you're here now and doing the best you can for her." A soft smile answered his grumble. "I wish the galaxy got to see this side of turians more often. The whole war nerd reputation does you such an injustice."

His chuckle snapped like brittle twigs. "We work very hard to keep them from seeing this side. Any perceived weakness is a front to attack."

Shepard pulled away. "Weakness." A sharp cough of disdain barked from her throat. She slapped his chest. "This is your strength." Pulling free of his arms, she stepped around him, moving to hop over the flower bed, her legs not quite long enough to just step over. Before she made good her escape, a hand gripped her shoulder.

Chuckling again, this time with warmth, Garrus pulled her back into his arms. "All right, warrior goddess, I'm sorry." He nuzzled the top of her head. "You've always been my strength."

Only partially placated, Shepard pulled out of his arms, but took his hand. "Come on, let's get the business done while she sleeps." They took the long route around the flower bed to the door.

Shepard stepped over the threshold and looked toward the front door, stopping so suddenly that her toe squeaked over the tile.

Sweet baby Jesus, it's the turian Odd Couple.

Just inside the domin's front door, two torins spoke to Herros. One stood just over a hand shorter than Garrus, slight and agile-looking in light, Phantom armour. Sweeping, cream-coloured familia notas covered a silver face, and a bright, amber gaze turned to regard her when she started forward again.

The other torin was the largest Shepard had ever seen. He towered a good head above Garrus, and was broad to match: a veritable wall of richly clothed turian. Dark green familia notas gleamed against obsidian plates, and when he turned to face her, violet-blue eyes regarded her with suspicion and more than a little disdain. Sizing him up, Shepard knew two things instantly: she was about to meet Palaven's primarch, and she needed to find the old Shepard to deal with him.

She cast Garrus a quick, apologetic glance, fairly sure he'd have enough kittens before the primarch's visit ended that they'd need to open an animal shelter.
Herros turned and held out a hand to introduce them, but Fedorian just stepped forward into Shepard's space, looking down on her like a stalking panther.

"There's no need for pleasantries, Vakarian," the primarch said. "I know who they are." That gaze of iron and shackles turned on Garrus. "General Garrus Vakarian." Disdain oozed over Garrus's rank, dripping from it like tar sludge. "What authority granted you so august a rank?"

Tension pulled the air taut as Garrus straightened, hardening enough to have been chiselled from marble. "The only authority I recognize as having the power to grant it, Primarch: my troops."

Shepard covered a wide grin with a swipe of her hand, but the movement closed the jaws of Fedorian's stare on her. Ouch, more like a bear trap than shackles. She cocked an eyebrow at him. If he thought he could intimidate her with a stare, this was going to be a lot more fun than she'd first anticipated.

*Bring it on, bad ass politician. Bring it on.*

"Jane Shepard," he said, his tone saying that she'd already been measured and found wanting. "Former Spectre, Alliance captain, and corpse according to public record." He clasped his hands behind his back and arched his neck a little as he stepped closer, an avalanche poised over her.

Shepard turned her head to show the massive scar across the bottom third of her head. "Former corpse is accurate. I died sixteen months or so ago. I've had a pulse and viable neural activity again for less than a year." Meeting his stare, she cocked her head a little, posing a challenge but keeping it subtle.

He chuffed, and tilted his head so that he looked down his nose at her. "And I'm supposed to believe you returned from the dead?" Although Shepard couldn't understand his subvocals directly, the fury that flared through both Garrus and Nihlus translated the primarch's derision well enough.

She sliced the air between them with a razor-sharp laugh. ""Believe whatever you like, Primarch. I don't really care. Your belief doesn't affect me in the slightest." Her shrug came off with an even keener edge than the laugh. She closed on him a little, but not enough to have to crane her neck. Damn, he was tall. "I'm not here to convince you of anything. In fact, I'm not here to convince anyone of anything. There simply isn't time, and my bones won't stand up to beating myself against the galaxy's determination to prove me wrong."

As if to prove her point, Shepard backed up a step. "I came here to visit my *dilan's* family and to meet with General Victus. If you're here, someone thinks you'll prove useful to me in the fight." She felt Garrus stiffen, but didn't acknowledge his discomfort. "If that's true, great, but this bus only has seats for useful people." She waggled her head a little. "If they possess a few points of open-minded IQ, that doesn't hurt either, but mostly I just need them to have a use."

She turned away and paced to the caman, staring into the glowing coals for a moment, not quite willing to push the envelope into backing up beeping sounds territory. She turned back, a little surprised to see that his aggression level hadn't risen in the slightest. Interesting. She'd thought he'd be easier to push. "If you want to believe that I faked my death, or that Reapers are just figments of my imagination, that's fine."

Fedorian seemed to grow, a shadow stretching up a wall, but at the same time some of the arrogance bled from his stare. "Only a great fool rejects anything out of hand," he said, his voice deep and stolid, tectonic plates ground alongside one another with less friction. "I am not a great fool, but neither will I allow wild, unsupported claims to terrify my people. If you have proof, offer it. If not … " He shrugged, the gesture feeling like a landslide. "... you'll find I have no tolerance
for ill-mannered grandstanding."

Damn, he's got your number, doesn't he?

Looking past the primarch, Shepard packed down the wide grin that struggled to spread across her face and strode over to the general standing in Fedorian's shadow. She cleared her throat before speaking. "General Victus, it's a pleasure to meet you." She reached out to grip his wrists. "I regretted that our paths didn't cross while you were on leave on Omega."

The general's mandibles flicked once, hard. He inclined his head, gracious but reserved. "As did I, Captain."

She tightened her grip for a second before releasing him and stepping back. "Thank you, so much for helping liberate my family and the other slaves. Are you recovering from the Collector ambush?"

He nodded, drawing himself taller and squaring his shoulders as if to deny any lingering weakness. Shepard nodded, understanding. Any weakness presented a front to attack. "Fit enough to ward off a squad of assassins that I'm certain were sent by either Collectors or the Reapers themselves."

Fedorian chuffed, but Shepard's gaze didn't leave Victus. She nodded toward the garden door. "Come have a look at what just broke in here." She led the way out into the garden, but kept back away from the turian husks. "Is that what came after you, General?" Despite speaking to Victus, Shepard kept her eyes fixed on Fedorian. Maybe, just maybe, she'd pinned down his game, and it wasn't one so different from her own. Come in, act the arrogant ass, get everyone's backs up and see what shook loose.

The expression of horror that ghosted across the primarch's face when he looked down at the turian husks gave her some hope that he might not prove completely impossible to convince of the threat. He covered it over almost immediately, but she could see him working the problem, his eyes narrow and shadowed, mandibles not held quite as high and tight.

"Yes," Victus answered. "Identical, and they were equipped with Phaestons." He turned to Shepard. "You faced asari husk constructs on Thessia?"

Shepard opened her omnitool and brought up the vid of the lowest chamber. "At least a hundred thousand strong—all held in stasis—and the machinery for performing the transformation. In a chamber above, we encountered another machine designed to break down and analyze lifeforms. The Collectors have spent the last fifty thousand years analyzing us and figuring out how best to turn us into nightmares." She played the vid of the possessed Collector, letting its words confirm that the Reapers were building armies to sweep over the homeworlds before a defense could be mounted.

Victus nodded, his expression telling her that she'd confirmed exactly what he'd been afraid of. "When I saw that the assassins had guns taken from our military . . . ." A fierce rumbled rolled from his throat. He clenched his jaw and turned his back to the husks, a bulwark built of resolution and challenge rather than denial. "What that creature said confirms that the Collectors and Reapers are doing the same thing on Palaven: they're stealing our people and turning them into monsters."

At Shepard's nod, the general turned on his primarch. "The evidence is spread out before you, Fedorian." Suddenly the smaller torin's presence and command dwarfed the primarch's. "It's not a matter of believing myself, General Vakarian, or Captain Shepard. Turians do not allow such malignancy to fester beneath their own skin. We hunt it down and excise it with both expediency
and prejudice."

Herros stepped forward, every bit the officer in charge. Shepard grinned. Damn she loved turians; walls of honourable stone, the entire lot of them.

The hierarch cleared his throat. "You and I have been friends since we were peririn, Fedorian. If nothing else, you know and trust me."

At the edge of her peripherals, Shepard saw Garrus stiffen, his hand lifting to his ear. Without saying anything, he turned and walked back into the domin, shutting the door behind him. Judging by the set of his shoulders and neck, she suspected that, whatever news he received was not good news. She turned back to the silent conversation taking place around her.

Fedorian's concern about the husks having appeared in two locations waged a subtle war across his face and through his posture, fighting with his obvious distaste for legitimizing the rabble rousing element. At last, he turned to Victus. "You believe these things are being created somewhere on Palaven?"

The turian general straightened to attention and nodded. "I do, Primarch."

"Then hunt them down and destroy them, General." He turned his back to Victus before he even finished speaking, as if to say that he still didn't believe a word that came out of their mouths, but he remained magnanimous enough to allow them to prove themselves.

Shepard pressed her lips tight to keep the smirk off her face, meeting his glare with one that sparked like a shorting power coupling.

_Primarch Fedorian, you're an asshole. But ... you're my kind of asshole._

A curt nod dismissed her before the primarch stepped around the flowerbed, moving over to crouch next to Trea, speaking to the tarin in hushed, gentle tones. Seeing that the Vakarians and Fedorian possessed a deep, long-lived friendship gave Shepard hope for their ability to negotiate what they needed from the primarch over time. And, as much as she hated to use it, Trea's illness would be a soft spot they could press to prepare the planet for invasion.

"Captain?" Victus stepped between Shepard and her contemplation of shamelessly exploiting the Vakarian's friendship with the primarch. "Any information you gathered on Thessia could prove invaluable in my search."

"Absolutely. If you find a likely candidate and want some backup that has already fallen into the traps you're facing, let me know." She sent him all the scans, vid files, and logs. "We were lucky we dropped the mountain on that place before they started waking up the banshees." She stepped around him and gestured to the husks on the ground. "These didn't appear to have any biotic abilities like the asari husks, but the fact they use weapons concerns me. In addition, two of these spoke to Trea and I, which shows at least some capacity for higher mental function."

"Command and control?" he asked, whispering as if holding the question up for his own scrutiny rather than asking her. His eyes narrowed. "They spoke? What did they say?" The general crouched down next to the ex-turian corpses, looking them over as she explained about their earlier encounter.

Garrus returned from inside, the set of his face as grim as she'd ever seen it. When he stepped up beside her, she raised her eyebrows in a silent question. He answered with a tilt of his head that said he'd update her once fewer ears listened in.
"The husk recited from a myth?" Victus asked, pushing off his knees. He rolled his shoulders and tugged at the collar of his armour as he turned to face her. "Residual knowledge blurted out by some random neural firing?"

Shepard met his skepticism with a nod. She understood it. "We're playing with a theory that the protheans embedded clues—help to fight the Reapers—in the stories of our early people." Her brow furrowed as she saw something register behind the turian general's eyes. "Sir? Something about that ring a bell?"

His mandibles fluttered and dropped a little as he chuckled, a low rumble that sounded more embarrassed than anything. "A tale my mari told me as a child about a group of adventurers who found a temple dedicated to an ancient goddess. I don't recall most of it, just that the goddess helped defeat a great darkness, so our people swore a vow to maintain her temple in case the darkness returned." Sardonic amusement changed to a grim sort of determination, and he let out a long, heavy breath. "Well, my mari has been asking me to visit more often."

"Temple Palaven," Nihlus said, stepping out through the door, Solana following close on his heels. "Saren never told me what happened there, but I know he dropped it on top of Desolas and a whole lot of nothing good."

Solana stepped into their circle. Compared to the torins, Garrus's sister seemed small and slight, even in her armour, but she still towered over Shepard by a good thirty centimetres. "Those ruins are sealed off. It would take a mountain of paperwork for even the Hierarchy's most trusted to gain access to the exterior, and even then, they'd never get clearance to excavate." Her stormy sea-blue eyes pinned Shepard. "The likes of you four? Never happen. They'd arrest you for looking at the site from space."

The corner of Shepard's mouth drew back in a crooked grin as she nodded. "Probably just for thinking about it." She frowned and jutted her chin at Victus, seeing a thought pass across his face, an illuminating ray of light. "General?"

He cleared his throat, his brow plates angling toward his nose. "Temple Palaven is too recent for what I'm thinking. We're looking for something a great deal older." The general shifted to stand at ease despite there being nothing easy or relaxed about him. He looked to Nihlus. "You likely know more than I do about what happened, but judging by what I know, Desolas Arterius chose Temple Palaven because it was at the eye of a population center. Whatever he did there, it drew in thousands of people within hours. That's generally the sort of mistake made by the badly informed or over-eager."

Garrus chuffed. "That makes a sort of sense. Saren was indoctrinated slowly, completely." He looked down at Shepard a half shrug rolling across his shoulders, dropping in time with a rumbled sigh. "We've seen indoctrination take a lot of different turns. Maybe whatever started the process on Saren hit his brother with a much stronger dose and sent Desolas off on a campaign outside of the Reapers' timetable."

Shepard opened her mouth to agree, but didn't get a chance as Nihlus rumbled: low, dangerous, and deep in his throat. The sound raked talons down her back and sent a queasy sort of shudder through her guts as she heard the fragility Garrus had talked about creeping beneath it.

The Spectre stepped away from their little circle as he crossed his arms and leaned back on one hip. "I need to track the last couple of cycles of Saren's life. There have to be records or clues as to what happened during those years. He was far too methodical and regimented to leave nothing behind." He looked from one to the other, ending with Shepard. "I was headed to Illium anyway. It's time to pack up my apartment and move everything to Omega." He nodded as if that were decided. "No
"Sounds like your path is decided for the next few days," Shepard agreed, despite not liking the thought of him out dealing with his past and Saren on his own. She needed to send someone with him, maybe a couple of someones. She could squeeze the protection detail in under the 'none of us should be doing anything on our own with the Collectors gunning for us' clause.

"We also have ours set out for us," Garrus said. He tipped his head toward the domin, reminding her of his earlier call. "Wrex received a call for help from a krogan warlord. The Collectors are attacking his base on Korlus." He shrugged. "Wrex will meet us at the spaceport in the morning."

Shepard just nodded. They could discuss the rest of the details later. She'd send word to Miranda, have the operative bring the Ypres to Korlus after dropping Thane off on Illium. Her jaw muscles clenched in a rictus as Shepard imagined Garrus's reaction to working with Miranda, but she wanted to keep an eye on as much of Cerberus as she could. Miranda was a tight link to the Illusive Man, one she couldn't afford to throw away in a temper tantrum, control chip or no. She'd deal with both of them eventually.

Victus smiled. "I'll make my dear old mari's week and go visit her. Not much makes her happier than telling her stories." The grin faded to a thoughtful frown, revealing the wheels whirring inside his skull. "I'll drag my eldest pahir along with me, just in case. None of us can afford to be overly open with information, but neither can we keep too tight a grip on it." She saw the reality of the battle against Collectors and Reapers appear, written in the shadows shuttering his stare.

Shepard looked up at Garrus, smiling as those ice-chip eyes met hers. He'd been her backup from the first. "Yes, we all need to make sure that whatever we discover makes it back to the group."

"And what about me?" Solana asked, spine rigid, talons clenched in preparation for a fight. Shepard neither blamed nor envied her. Team Overprotective proved a daunting foe. The tarin shook her head even as Garrus opened his mouth. "No! You told me I could come and work with Archangel weeks ago." A thin, furious pike, she leaned forward, digging in and setting herself to drive deep if refused. Glancing over at Nihlus, she threw her hands up. "Well? Say something. He listens to you."

"None of us should go anywhere alone," Shepard said, throwing herself into the path of the burgeoning family drama and praying she didn't get mowed down. "I'm going to have Thane meet Nihlus on Illium, but it certainly couldn't hurt to have another set of eyes watching his back." She speared the Spectre with a glare, warning him that he was in for a fight if he tried to go out alone. When Nihlus nodded, accepting his squad, Shepard turned her attention to Garrus.

Her love's entire body telegraphed his unease with the amount of risk his family faced. Her fingers twitched, itching to wrap around his talons, but theirs was hardly the audience for public displays of affection. After a moment, Garrus nodded, his neck moving like rusted iron.

"General Victus," Fedorian called as he strode past, heading for the door, "I'm prepared to leave."

Victus chuckled softly. "Good hunting to you all. I'll check in with Archangel as soon as I have any leads." He spun on his talons and followed after the primarch, but without any undue hurry.

Shepard slipped her hand into Garrus's once the front door closed behind their guests. "I suppose a family meeting is in order? Get all our ducks lined up before tomorrow morning?"

Garrus pulled her in tight against his side and wrapped his arm around her. "The universe seems determined to ensure that we never catch our breath." A long, grumbling sigh ruffled her hair as he...
bent down to nuzzle the top of her head. "It feels as though the last few flakes are landing on the edge of the avalanche, and it's about to let go of the mountainside."

Shepard shook her head, regret drifting through the grey morning, a slow, misty melancholy. "We're in it, now, Callor. It's all about skiing fast enough to keep ahead of disaster until the war's over. Then, we'll all retire to a private island somewhere and tell absolutely no one where we live."

That thought brightened the gloom a little. Long mornings spent curled in bed, no one banging at their door. A little adventuring here and there, as the spirit and stir-craziness moved them. All the time in the galaxy to just be together.

She wrapped both arms around Garrus's waist and looked over at Nihlus. In the end, all that mattered was defeating the Reapers, putting the war behind them, and coming through with her torins at her side.

Solana clapped her hands together, a single, sharp sound that broke through Shepard's thoughts. A wide, cocky grin set her elegant mandibles fluttering as she looked to each of them, then nudged Nihlus in the ribs hard enough that he grunted. "Well, what are we waiting for, senux? Let's get this war started."

(A-N: The last snowflakes have fallen, the mountainside shudders, a low roar echoes through the silence. :) The villagers begin to shriek and run around, arms flailing! Ahhhhh! We're all going to diiiiiiiiii!

Thanks as always for reading. You lovely, amazing crazies who weigh in on the chapters … can't even express how much it means to me to hear from you. To the silent readers … so glad you're still there, still reading. Hopefully, still enjoying. All the love and hugs.)
Future Continuous Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

She relaxed back into him. "The city is beautiful … the lights look like strings of jewels up the cliffs and along the walls." A soft chuckle bounced from her throat, hollow and soft. "Nothing about your people has been what I expected."

Garrus's mouth plates pressed against the overheated and excited skin of her neck, his breath wrapping around around her, the slow, warm waters of an August stream. "If you build a wall, it tells the enemy that you intend to keep them out," he whispered. "If you make it beautiful, it tells them that you expect it to stand forever."

Mahir - daughter
Filiam - sister
Dilan - fiancee

42 Days ASR

Shepard clung to Garrus's side as Herros returned from seeing the primarch to his car. The hierarch laid a hand on their shoulders as he passed by them, striding over to where Trea sat on the loveseat, her blankets askew. The elder Vakarian gathered the blankets, then sat beside his bond-mate, wrapping one around Trea's shoulders, the other over both their laps.

Tears prickled the inner corner of Shepard's eyes as Herros gathered his wife in against his side, his mouth pressed against her temple. She couldn't even imagine facing the nightmare he lived with each day, watching his love of over forty cycles slip away a little at a time.

"Come on, let's get some food into us before Mordin gets here to pick up the husks," Garrus said, his voice rough with emotion. His arm tightened around her as he nuzzled the top of her head. "Wrex will be here at 0400, and I want to ship out as soon as we can get him aboard." Drawing her along with him, he took a step toward the door.

Shepard squeezed his waist, a gentle hug of understanding, but pulled away. "I'll be there in a minute. I need to call Miranda, have her drop Thane off and then head to Korlus." As she predicted, he twisted back to face her, poised to argue. She didn't give him a chance. "EDI can run scans and send them to the Passch so we're ready to deal with whatever the hell Wrex is getting us into." Stepping up against him, she reached up and pressed her palm against his cheek. "Trust me, please. I know Cerberus has a part to play in this war, and I'm terrified that it's as enemies, not allies. I need to keep an eye on them, and Miranda is the best way to do that."

The sound that came from his throat sounded a little like a tiger grunting and pulled a smile onto her lips. "You'll be with me the entire time. It'll be fine." She stabbed her chin toward the door. "Go ahead, I'll be five minutes."

He snagged her hand and pulled her into him, wrapping both arms around her. "Fine, I'm all for keeping your enemies close," he said, leaning down to rest his brow against hers, "but, if I feel
they're a threat, I'll do whatever I have to, Kahri. This war … this general … needs you." He nuzzled her forehead, then released her and headed inside.

Shepard watched him go, then turned away from Herros and Trea, giving them their privacy. Wandering toward the back of the garden, she opened a channel to the *Ypres*, routing it to Kelly.

"Captain," the yeoman said, her voice containing enough edge to know that things had been tense aboard the *Ypres* since her departure. "I'm glad to hear from you. Are you all right? Miranda returned to the ship saying that the crew was no longer welcome at the Archangel base, and she didn't know if you'd be returning to the ship."

"I'm fine, Yeoman Chambers. I haven't abandoned the *Ypres* or her crew. Do I have any urgent messages?" Shepard scuffled her toes through the thick, mossy lawn, making her way between the beds of plants to crouch next to the rylamia bushes.

"No, ma'am. No messages," Kelly reported, the professional distance back in her voice. "However, the crew is concerned about you, and they're feeling really unsure about things right now." The yeoman cleared her throat, her discomfort with the subject transmitting clearly over the comms. "This crew is prepared to take on the Collectors and the Reapers, but we need our captain present and accounted for. Otherwise, we're rudderless and unfocused and that makes everyone nervous, Shepard, not just Miranda."

Shepard reached out, brushing her fingers over the bunches of silky petals. "Patch me through to Miranda, please, Yeoman Chambers."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Shepard," Miranda said, her tone clipped tighter than a newly shorn sheep.

"I need you to take the *Ypres* to Illium where you'll drop Thane Krios off and pick up any supplies you need before proceeding to Korlus in the Imir System." She paused, running the map in her head. Was that right? Yeah, that was right. "That's in the Eagle Nebula."

"I know where it is, Captain." The operative let out a slightly noisy breath. "When we still had a plan for fighting the Collectors as your crew, a krogan warlord, Okeer, was one of the dossiers we assembled for recruitment."

Shepard hummed, that information taking her by surprise. "Well then, that would be the krogan warlord we're on our way to rescue. He sent a message to Wrex asking for assistance. She stood and paced along the stone path without really seeing where she was going. "His base is under attack by the Collectors."

"The reason we considered recruiting him was his reputation for dealing with the Collectors," Miranda confirmed. "He's obsessed with what he calls, 'rendering the genophage impotent', and was rumoured to trade tank bred krogan to the Collectors in exchange for the means to do that."

Shepard winced, suddenly not at all sure Okeer was someone she wanted to save. "Send me the dossier," she ordered. "I want to know what we're walking into there." She glanced down as her omnitool signalled that the file had been received. Efficiency, its name was Miranda. "When you arrive at Korlus, go in with stealth systems active. Keep a weather eye for those Collector cruisers. If they're on scene, retreat and contact me. If they are not, have EDI run detailed scans of the area around the base. The entire planet is a nightmare of junk and mud. I want two routes mapped through that graveyard. We'll insert in two teams to provide cover for one another."
"Understood, Captain." Miranda went silent for a second. "May I ask why we're dropping off Sere Krios?"

"I need him for a personal mission and will send his orders directly to him," she replied, her tone coming off less neutral than she'd been aiming for. Of course, maybe that was for the best. Too little snark, Miranda would know something was off.

"Shepard! Your breakfast is turning into a fossil in here!" Nihlus hollered from the door.

She grinned and shook her head. "Let me know when you reach Illium, Operative Lawson. I'll be available via comms if any situations arise. Shepard, out." She closed the channel without waiting to see if Miranda had anything else to say. As she returned to the house, she prepared a message to send to Thane. She needed him to have his orders before Miranda went looking to rake him over the coals.

Solana met Shepard at the door, opening the portal to let her through. "Those two would probably never realize that they neglected to introduce us, so … Hello, I'm Solana, Garrus and Nihlus's younger, better looking, smarter, and more talented filiam." She held out her hands, long elegant talons covered in gloves of finely woven polymer underlayer. "Thanks for earlier."

Shepard gripped the tarin's wrists. "I'm very pleased to finally meet you, Solana." She ducked her head a little. "As for earlier … within our first couple of weeks, Garrus chucked me over his shoulder like a sack of flour no fewer than four times. I know what you're up against."

"I only chucked you over my shoulder twice," the general called across the caman. "The other two times, I carried you … other ways."

Solana grinned and jerked her head toward the table. "Come eat, then after breakfast, you can try to beat me at a game of Armiliteria. There's no better way to get to know someone."

Following the tarin to the table, Shepard raised her eyebrows. "Armiliteria?" She caressed a hand down the inside of Garrus's arm as he pulled out a chair, seating her between he and Nihlus. She cast a teasing glare up at him. Incorrigible.

"It's a game of military strategy," Herros spoke up. The grin he levelled on his mahir snapped with both teasing and a sort of warning. "All turians learn to play very young. It's used to ascertain command style when considering cadets for officer training."

Shepard's eyebrows climbed even higher as she watched Sol sit across the table. "And what was your command style?"

"Opportunistic cheat," Herros supplied. "She was suspended for two weeks and recruited by Grey Division the minute she got back."

Garrus set Shepard's breakfast in front of her. "Grey Division is in charge of all the projects no one admits to."

Sol laughed, sharp but merry. "He's so dramatic. I teach hacking and espionage."

As everyone settled down to eat, the conversation turned to Trea's new position and their impending missions. After breakfast, Shepard and Sol sat down to play a game that ended up taking most of the day despite—or perhaps because of—a great deal of unwanted and unsolicited advice from the peanut gallery. In the end, over the course of battling Sol to a stalemate, Shepard spent the day filled with enough laughter and love that she almost forgot that the war waited outside the door, and at 0400 the next morning it would swallow her whole once more.
One of Palaven’s moons hung heavy and bright, gleaming silver across the small, second-storey garden. Shepard leaned against the low wall and looked out over the city. Terraces of light marched down hundreds of metres of cliff face toward the business section that sprawled across the canyon floor.

She heard Garrus walk up behind her, his stare heating the back of her neck, his approach provocative, slow and deliberate. A smile bolted across her face, trapped as her teeth closed on her bottom lip. Footsteps too soft to be anything but bare talons whispered through the turf, and not a single sound of gritting ceramic or rustling fabric accompanied his movement.

"Which one is that?" she asked, jutting her chin toward the glowing orb hanging above the city. A flush burned up her neck at the breathiness of her voice and the tingle of excitement in her gut. It prompted reactions between her thighs she knew he wouldn't miss. He always knew what was going on with her body before she did. Her heart thumped hard and fast, beating what she thought might be a salsa beat against the inside of her ribs.

"Nanus." Damn, if his voice didn't sound as breathless as her own, "Menae won't rise for a couple of hours yet." His arms slipped around her, pulling her back against him. "It's almost as bright as daylight when they're both up and both full."

She relaxed back into him. "The city is beautiful … the lights look like strings of jewels up the cliffs and along the walls." A soft chuckle bounced from her throat, hollow and soft. "Nothing about your people has been what I expected."

Garrus’s mouth plates pressed against the overheated and excited skin of her neck, his breath wrapping around her, the slow, warm waters of an August stream. "If you build a wall, it tells the enemy that you intend to keep them out," he whispered. "If you make it beautiful, it tells them that you expect it to stand forever."

She smiled, her eyes rolling back a little as they closed. Reaching behind her, she ran her palm down the outside of his thigh, her skin slipping easily over the taut lines of naked muscle and smooth hide. "Why, General Vakarian, you're not wearing any clothes, sir. If I didn't know better, I might think you had untoward intentions."

He leaned in, nuzzling behind her ear and down her neck. "I have a hypothesis," he said, his voice deepening and taking on a throaty rumble she recognized. Oh, he had untoward intentions all right. Her teeth caught her bottom lip again as the talons of his right hand tugged at the hem of her shirt, freeing it from the waistband of her trousers.

"Oh? And what is that?" She laid her hands over his, her fingers lacing with his talons as he slipped them beneath her shirt. Her stomach muscles jumped and shuddered under his rough, calloused palms, the need in his touch sending every nerve into FTL.

"That your skin will glow nearly as silver as mine in this light." He nipped the curve of her neck, the points of his teeth teasing her skin into gooseflesh. "Care to find out?" Without waiting for an answer, he pushed her shirt up, exposing her trembling flesh to the cool air, the breeze still damp from the earlier storms.

"Do you think your family and neighbours want to be included in this experiment of yours?" She grinned, heat flaring over her skin and up her thighs even as her gut flipped at the thought of someone happening to look out.

His hands caressed her ribcage, thumbs teasing the underside of her breasts. "My family is all
asleep, except for Nihlus who is in his room, watching something that involves a great many explosions." He nuzzled beneath her ear, the hard tip of his tongue flicking at her earlobe. "As for our neighbours, none of them can see up here." Gentle, but insistent, he raked the points of his front teeth along her jaw, pulling a soft moan from her lips. "One of the perks to all the houses being built into the cliff: front facing windows only."

"Well then … ." Taking a deep breath, Shepard slid her hands off his and grasped the hem of her t-shirt, pulling it up until his arms got in the way. He released his grip on her to lay his hands over hers, helping ease the cotton up and over her head. Gentle talons stroked over her shoulders and down her back as she pulled the shirt off her arms.

A gust of breeze twisted between the plants and curled around Shepard's limbs. She shivered a little and backed in against Garrus, absorbing his heat. Reaching around herself, she grasped his hands and wrapped his arms back around her. "So, how are those observations going?" she asked, twisting a little to look up into his eyes.

"Results so far seem to be supporting my theory, but further testing will be necessary to arrive at a solid conclusion." He took a single step back and turned her to face him. Reaching up, he traced the lines of her collar bones with his thumbs. "You are always the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Each day reveals a new aspect to that beauty. Watching you with my mari and Sol today … ."

His breath caught, and he shook his head as if to clear it. His talons slipped along the underside of her arms, raising them out away from her sides. "In this light … ." His subvocals thrummed. "Just look at you. My tiny praela."

Eyes prickling with warmth, she reached up to take his face between her hands. "You're a hopeless romantic, Callor." Easing him down to kiss her, she wrapped her arms around his neck. "And I love that about you," she whispered against his mouth plates.

"I never was," he replied, brushing the rim of her lips with a feather-light touch. "I don't know what happened when you walked into Chloe Michel's clinic, but whatever it was, it rearranged every cell … every neuron." He pulled her in, light caresses turning into a heated, hungry kiss that lifted her off her feet.

When his one arm slid down to support her backside, Shepard wrapped her legs around his waist, his pelvis cradling her thighs. Their mouths speaking oaths of love and devotion that required no words, they clung to one another, two spots of light and warmth desperate to find solid, safe harbour in the darkness. He carried her to a long, low chaise against the back wall, breaking the kiss with a soft grumble of reluctance.

Shepard moaned soft and low, protesting as her lips followed him, soft, moist kisses tugging at the upper plate of his mouth.

"We'll never get you out of those trousers in this position, and I won't be able to conclude my observations," he whispered, his mouth wandering across her cheek to her ear. A long sigh whistled from his nostrils, tickling through the short, fine hair at the nape of her neck. It resonated heavily enough to send shivers down her spine. Tightening his grip on her, he sat on the edge of the chaise. "I want you to go talk to Nihlus," he whispered, his tone confessional. "I want you two to settle what you are and what you want to be before he goes to Illium."

Shepard drew back, releasing her grip on his neck and waist as she leaned back, confusion meeting the love and devotion staring back at her. "Garrus?"

He brushed a kiss against her lips. "Do you want him to head out there, to start dredging up all that
Shepard sighed and relaxed into his embrace, melting against him. "No, of course I don't." She burrowed her face in against his neck, head cradled by his cowl. "This scares me, Callor. It scares the living hell out of me. I'm a screw up. Haven't you noticed that, yet? One wrong move and I could end up losing you both."

Those big, rough hands caressed her back, gentle over the healing wounds. "We swore an oath, Kahri." He cleared his throat. "Didn't we?"

"We never walk away," she whispered, kissing the spot where his pulse beat hard and fast, the arteries exposed just under the skin. She pressed her eyes closed, savouring the strong, gorgeous … aliveness … of him.

He nodded, his chin bumping her, his mandible sweeping through her hair. "We never walk away." Drawing back, he extricated himself from her embrace, gentle and loving. "That's what this is about." His mandibles swept a wide arc, his gaze faltering a little with bashfulness. "Right now … it's about making a promise." Looking up and meeting her gaze, he shrugged, a slight dip of his head. "Stand up, so I can get your clothes off?" The tips of his talons raked her neck then followed the hollow above her collarbone out to her shoulder, their edges sending a fiery, electric tickle arcing over her skin. "We have far too much material between us."

Shepard wriggled her way off his lap to stand between his thighs. Letting out a long breath, she placed her hands just inside his cowl, on either side of his keel. She stared into his eyes, her hands wandering a little, teasing the inside border of his cowl until a steady, almost purr-like rumble rolled in his throat. "A promise?" she asked at last, a tiny, crooked smile meeting his chorus of contentment and pleasure.

His hands wrapped around the balls of her shoulders, guiding her a step closer before they slipped down her arms to wrap her fingers in his. "Each night of the turian bonding ceremony the bonding couple perform a private, ritual bonding." A smile fluttered over his mandibles when her eyebrows raised at the words 'each night', the warmth and hope in it setting her heart fluttering as well. "Yes, a really good bonding party can run three or four days."

Another long sigh caressed her neck as he lifted her hands to his chest, pressing them against the warmth of his plates. "The daytime is about the clan, about bringing two families together to support the new couple and the family they're creating." His talons moved to the fasteners on her trousers, unsnapping and zipping, then laying the sides open, exposing the soft expanse of her lower belly. "The nighttime, however, is about the bond-mates sealing a promise between them. A promise sealed with words and oil, hands … " The backs of his talons brushed her belly with the softest of touches. "... and bodies."

Shepard leaned close, pressing her breasts against his chest as her arms snaked around his neck to tease the underside of his fringe. Thumbs slipping inside the waistband, he eased her trousers and panties off her hips. Talons spread, he cupped her backside, pulling her in tighter, pressing her against his body as if trying to meld her into his plates. The trousers slid down her thighs, his touch so warm on the backs of her legs that it almost burned. Then the material let go, falling to pool around her feet. She stepped clear, giving them a little kick behind her.

Garrus disentangled himself from her arms and turned, settling himself on the chaise with his back pressed against the arm, his legs crossed in front of him on the long seat. Shepard watched him, admiring the surety in his movement, the beauty of his form. The air licked along the line of her spine, its tongue all the icier for the want of being pressed into the envelope of his warmth. And then he held out his hand.
"Do you trust me?" he asked without even the smallest trace of humour.

She nodded and wrapped her fingers around his talons. "With everything."

Nodding as if he'd known, but wanted to hear the words, he patted his thigh. "Climb on up here then."

He helped steady her as she stepped up onto the chaise and lowered herself to sit in the cradle of his legs, her calves wrapped around his waist. A smile tinted in shades of silver and blue greeted her subtle wriggling as she made herself more comfortable, nestling in until they fit together, two parts of an unusual, but wonderful, whole.

Arms and body enveloping her, he formed a perfect haven, a shelter of safety and love. His cheek and mandible brushed hers as he drew her in. "If this is uncomfortable for you, tell me," he whispered, nuzzling just behind her ear. "I don't want to hurt you."

Shepard curled into him, her hand sliding up the long, smooth plates of his chest. "I promise, I'll say something, but I think we'll be fine." Loving fingers traced the lines and shadowed planes of his face. She leaned in and pressed soft kisses to his chin, mouth, nose, and brow. "So, tell me about these promises."

He cleared his throat. "You might have noticed that turians are deeply entrenched in their traditions." A soft chuckle greeted her nod, and he tipped his head to touch his brow to hers. "Things like the bonding ceremony haven't changed all that much since we lived in caves along these cliffs." His hands covered her back, talons spread, thumbs sweeping back and forth across unmarred skin. She tucked her head under his chin, cuddling in against him.

He nuzzled her hair, then continued, "Back then, bonds were made for practical reasons—political and economic alliances or genetic diversity—as often as they were made for love, so the intimate part of the ceremony was about promising to take care of one another and offspring regardless of what came along. It was about developing trust." Chuffing softly, he pulled back, a knuckle under her chin tilting her face up until their eyes met. "It probably doesn't make sense in a human context, but when you have these … " He held up his talons so she could see the veritable knives that tipped them. "... touch becomes so much more than hide on hide."

Shepard nodded and reached up, lacing her fingers with his talons. "Like the touch without gloves showing willingness for a deeper relationship."

"Yes." Freeing his talons from her grip, he ran the pad of his thumb down the groove of her throat and between her clavicles. "Just as this touch is a promise that you are safe with me, that you never have to guard yourself in my presence."

Shepard slipped her thumb down the long curve of his throat and over the steady thump of his pulsing arteries at his keel. "The oil and massage you did before we left Omega, that's a part of it, too?"

"A big part of it, yes." His hands returned to her back, spreading out over her shoulder blades. "Lie back and just let yourself soften. I've got you."

Despite trusting Garrus implicitly, the moment she leaned back, her arms lifted, determined to ward her tender, exposed front. He merely smiled, his gaze locked onto hers. "It's all right, Kahri. Hold onto my arms if it helps."

She laid her palms against the taut lines of his biceps, the muscles coiled and alive beneath her
touch. They trembled slightly, as if the weight they bore far outstripped her forty-five kilos, and suddenly, the picture snapped into focus. What he offered solidified in her mind, but more importantly, in her heart. Garrus wasn't just holding her body. Those arms, so strong and steady, held her: everything she'd ever been, everything she'd ever become, her heart and her mind … her soul … all held just as safely and just as reverently as he cradled her form.

That was the promise. He had her, and he always would.

A long breath escaped as she surrendered into his embrace, the ice melting from the muscles in her neck and down her back, allowing her head to loll back, hanging bonelessly from her shoulders. Slowly, her grip on his arms eased and her hands slid free, arms hanging down and to the side. Her calves released their grip on his hips, the last holdout of tension spiriting into the ether, riding a gentle moan that uttered her promise in return.

I am yours, my trust and faith absolute.

He shifted her so that one arm held her. The other hand pressed against her throat, talons spread. She could feel the echo of her pulse thumping hard and quick against the pad of his thumb. Eyes slipping closed, she focused on where their bodies met: the hard length of his legs folded beneath her, the solid weight of his plates pressed against her sex, his one arm holding her while the other caressed the length of her torso. The tips of those talons traced lines of intense sensation that coalesced into a mass of pleasure and need aching across the expanse of her pelvis and down into her thighs.

Pressing his hand against her lower belly, Garrus said, "Everything you are and everything that flows from you, I accept as part of me. Everything that I am and everything that flows from me, I place in your care, if you accept it."

Shepard sat up, wriggling her hips closer to him. Heart pounding so hard it made the world pulse with its beat, she took his face between her hands. Bright, golden ingots of sunshine flared into being within her as his words and his touch resonated. Feeling blessed beyond measure, she offered him a smile of devotion and nodded. "I accept it. Of course I accept it." Leaning in, she pressed a soft kiss against the upper plate of his mouth, then whispered, "Do I say it back?"

"Yes." His voice came out strained and flat, as if the word had to squeeze through a pinhole.

She kissed him again. Despite having thought it, and even sang the idea out loud in her duet with Jenkins, she found herself amazed and humbled anew by the fact that the powers that be thought she deserved someone so remarkable.

Despite her sad talons offering no threat—she didn't even let her fingernails get past the thinnest moon of white at the ends—Shepard pressed her spread fingers just beneath his jaw, then raked them down his throat and over his keel to his belly. "Everything you are and everything that flows from you, I accept as part of me. Everything that I am and everything that flows from me, I place in your care, if you accept it." She stroked her thumb across the top of his plates, biting her lip as they moved easily.

"I accept it." He slipped his other arm around behind her, adjust his grip so that his talons curled around her shoulders. His eyes searched hers, asking without words if she also accepted his making love to her in the traditional way.

She nodded and tipped her pelvis, a soft smile greeting the moan of need that rolled from him as he felt how ready she was for him. They'd spent far too long finding their way to that place, so long that he never had to wonder if she wanted to feel his hands and mouth on her … to feel him inside
her. Of course, she knew he would always ask.

He eased free of his plates, slipping directly into her as he pulled her into him. She laid back on his arms, eyes closed, her entire body soft and accepting, focusing on the myriad of sensations playing her senses like a complex instrument. Streams of his breath seared hot where they made contact, chilling as they fanned out, teasing the fine hairs on her skin until gooseflesh covered every inch of her. An intense pressure followed the delicious slide of skin against skin—god the amazing ache of that pressure—as he seated himself inside her, filling her more and more tightly as the seconds passed. The rasp of his palms, the moist brand of his tongue teasing her flesh … it all tossed her back and forth until it drew a thin, whining moan of combined bliss and torment from her throat.

Giving back as good as she got, her nimble fingers sought out all the places that made him rumble, his muscles shuddering with a pleasure that built until he drew her in, arms wrapped so tight around her that pain joined the exquisite chorus.

"Kahri," he said, his voice strained through the heavy rumble of subvocals, "I want to do something, but … ." He cleared his throat and loosened his hold on her a little.

She smiled at the long breaths he drew in, his struggle to pull back tying an unbreakable, gossamer thread between her heart and his. Her hands lifted to cradle his face, thumbs caressing the hard lines. "It's okay, Callor. Just tell me, I'm not afraid."

"It's another tradition." His mandibles did the small, helpless flail of bashfulness. "A vestige of a by-gone era." He nuzzled her lips, his breath more sweet than metallic on her tongue. "It's fallen out of favour. People say it's too close to our 'barbaric' past, but I think its declining popularity has to do with bond-mates becoming more and more … transitory … disposable."

His discomfort, his struggle to find the words twined around her heart, squeezing it until it begged her to intercede. "So it's a beautiful wall, but inconvenient because it's meant to stand forever?" She kissed him, lips tugging at his mouth a little as she leaned back into the cradle of his arms.

He nodded, mandibles fluttering ever so slightly. His eyes shone, bright in the moonlight, gleaming with emotion. Blessed Enkindlers, he was beautiful. Sucking in a long breath that whistled a little, he continued, "When a torin has decided on a mate … um, when emotional and physical elements come together, he … he secretes cells into his … saliva."

Shepard smiled and nipped the edge of his mandible. "Scent marking," she said, sparing him. "He digs a tooth into some soft, fleshy part and claims her." She slipped her arms around his neck and squeezed all the muscles through her pelvis tight around him, pulsing them until a soft keen rode the underside of his every breath. "I'm yours, Garrus, and you don't have to prove anything to me." She pulled him down until their brows touched and closed her eyes, breathing him in. "But, I love the idea of building that beautiful wall around us."

"Spirits," he whispered, drawing her in, his face pressed to the curve of her neck. "I love you."

One hand slipped between them, his talon-pads teasing her most sensitive spots until she clung to him, sweat pouring over her skin, her belly aching with a pressure she couldn't ease. Then a small, vivid pain pinched the skin at the base of her neck, just above her clavicle, tipping her over the edge.

Orgasm gripped them both. Heavy waves crashed through Shepard's body, her muscles clenching so hard they threatened to spasm, wringing her out until she collapsed, limp weight in her dilan's arms.
Holding her tight, Garrus shifted until they lay side by side on the chaise, his warmth stretched out along hers. He kissed her, then caressed the small spot of blood on her neck.

Smiling at the wonder in his expression, she laid her hand over his. "Are you still sure about everything … with Nihlus?" she whispered, squeezing his talons.

"Yes," he replied between kisses. "Go to him." Pulling back, he looked into her eyes, his hand caressing her cheek. "Talk to him, and if you choose to honour what you feel for him, you can, knowing that we’re forever." He kissed her. "And as soon as we get even the smallest break, I’m going to fasten my coillasi around your wrists."

She returned his kisses, the most amazing peace settling through her as the furious grip of pleasure eased. "Does this mean that we’re engaged?"

He nodded. "It does, and within the month, I intend for you to be my wife."

Shepheard's knuckles rapped loud and hollow against the carved wood of Nihlus's door, the sound echoing down the hall. She winced and glanced behind her, ears straining to hear any sign that she'd awakened the house. Despite the fact that they all supported it, the sting of human moral judgement hung over her, a heavy weight of shame and embarrassment. She didn't want witnesses to her surrender.

For a moment, she hesitated on the cusp of turning and running back to Garrus's bed to burrow in next to him. If being with both torins felt so wrong to her, why was she even considering talking to Nihlus about it? She tried to turn and walk away, but the promises she and Garrus had woven between them held her in place. Damn it! Her Callor knew her altogether too well. He'd known that she'd never risk going after what she wanted without the solid anchor he'd provided, and that once he had, she wouldn't be able to do anything but.

"Do you really want this?" she whispered despite having asked herself the same question at least ten times while she showered. "Is this cold feet, or a warning you should be listening to?" She lifted a hand, pressing it to the warm, smooth wood. "Everything else aside, do you love them both enough to jump off this cliff?"

Footsteps approached the door, quickly rendering any decision to leave moot. "Decide, damn it. Do you want this?"

Don’t be stupid, Janey. You know the answer is yes. Everything else aside, if you let go of all the worries about what the rest of the universe will think and all the insecurities about screwing it up, you know you want them both.

The door opened. Nihlus scowled through the crack at her, the shuttered distance in his eyes smashing apart her doubts, replacing them with fear. Something had changed since dinner. The three of them cooked for the family, joking and rough housing. It had been fun. Right then, the stare coming through the narrow space could have belonged to someone else entirely.

"May I come in?" she asked. He stiffened, and the door closed a little. Shepard's hand jumped up, slapping softly against the wood. Of all the nights for him to decide to shut her out. Damn. His good, steady heart had been through so much pain, so she couldn't blame him for protecting it. And yes, she'd been adamant in her refusal to consider a poly relationship, but he just needed to hang onto hope for another five minutes.

"Shouldn’t you be sleeping?" he asked, the chill in his voice raising the hair on her arms. He glared
at her hand and held the door almost closed, barricaded against her.

Shepard nodded, the defensiveness in his stare, the rigid set to his mandibles dropping her heart down into her guts. Had he seen she and Garrus out in the garden? A sick sort of panic reached down her throat. "Yeah, it's late, but I want to talk to you for a few minutes before we head in two different directions tomorrow." When he hesitated, his face hardening, she stepped closer the door, terrified that he'd shut it in her face. "Please, Nihlus."

He stared at her for long seconds, a war going on in the shadowed green gaze. As much as she wanted to protest everything she saw there, to beg him to not shut her out, she stayed quiet, letting him decide how much risk he could tolerate.

"Yeah, sure," he said at last. A soft, almost sob of relief trickled between her lips, but she bit it off. He stepped back and held the door open. "Come on in." When she stepped through, he closed it behind her then turned, his arms folded over his chest. Damn, he'd never felt so closed off. He had to have seen them in the garden, and believed it meant the end to his hope. She glanced around the warm, comfortable space before turning to face him.

Nihlus's room had obviously been a guest room before Garrus brought him home. It didn't have much to identify it as his space other than his armour hung neatly from a rack in the corner and his gun cases leaning against the wall. Of course, she supposed he didn't spend enough time there to worry about claiming it. In the end, rooms didn't matter. It was his home because the people within loved him.

"What do you want to talk about, Shepard?" He stepped around her to the bed and picked up the remote for the vid screen, muting the air car chase exploding across its expanse. "If it's just to give me bad news, that could've waited until we all got back to Omega."

She winced at the use of her surname, his formality striking a heavy blow straight to her gut. "You saw Garrus and I out in the garden, didn't you?" she asked, following him. When he didn't answer, looking away to the vid screen instead, she nodded. "I'll take that as a yes." She stepped between him and the vid. "After you left me to talk to Trea this morning, Garrus and I had a talk about our future."

The Spectre stiffened and nodded. "Yeah, I saw what you decided." He glanced at her neck for a split second before looking back at the screen. "Congratulations. Thank you for letting me know."

Shepard stepped toward him, reaching out for his hand. He flinched away from her touch, landing another solid hit. "Nihlus—"

He shook his head. "I appreciate your concern, but I'll be fine. Just … just don't touch me. Please. Respect that it's going to take me some time to be okay with … all of it."

"Nihlus—"

He stepped around her, ducking the hand that she kept extended toward him. "My vid is just about over, and I need to get some sleep." Without sparing her another glance, he strode to the door and opened it.

"Nihlus, you big idiot," she said, frustration exploding before she lowered her voice into a soft growl that didn't carry out the door. She angled toward him, all threat and spines and barbs. "Stow the Spectre Kryik pity party. Just shut the damned door, come here, sit down, and fucking listen to me for three seconds." A sharp, exasperated huff of air cut the air between them, demanding as much as her words. When he dared meet her eyes, she locked onto him, glaring until he did as she'd
said, closing the door and returning to sit on the end of the bed.

"Thank you." A pointed exhalation drained the sudden burst of fury, and she raked both hands through her still wet hair. "Holy blessed Enkindlers, when you get something stuck in your head, it just binds up the gears, doesn't it?" Casting off the quick flare of frustration, she closed on him a step. "Yes, you saw Garrus and I out in the garden, but you've got what it meant all jammed in there sideways and upside down."

"You made promises tonight," Nihlus replied, his voice low, each word measured.

She nodded. "Yeah, we did." She waggled her head. "Well, we'd already made the promises before, but we set them in flesh and blood tonight, yeah." Closing the rest of the distance between them, she reached out and pressed a hand against his mandible, turning his face until his eyes stared into hers. "But Garrus initiated it so that I'd have a foundation I trusted in order to come in here tonight and tell you that I love you."

She smiled at the sudden hope in his eyes, a match blazing for the briefest of seconds before being blown out. Caressing the upper edge of his mandible with her thumb, she said, "I'm in love with you, Nihlus, and despite all the time and effort I've put into trying to talk myself out of it, it's not something that I want to give up." A small murmur of surrender rode the leading edge of a deep shrug. "It's not something I can give up, and if the two of you can live with sharing my heart, my body, and my time, then all right. It's a dream worth pursuing."

She laughed, the sound a soft, sweet sigh of relief as he reached up, laying his hand over hers. His expression remained shuttered, as if afraid that he was hearing her wrong, so she leaned and pressed her lips against his mouth, a chaste kiss. "I've tried," she said, her lips a finger's width from his mouth. "Heaven knows I've tried to shake it, but I can't. I want that future we saw on Thessia."

Mouth opening, he inhaled, the starving gasp of a diver surfacing from depths so fathomless and dark that he'd believed himself lost. "Haksaya kubenar." The endearment whispered out on the last of that breath, then his arms slipped around her, pulling her in tight against the right side of his chest.

She relaxed into him, arms wrapped around his neck, her cheek pressed to his, giving him time to process their new status. "I'm going to marry him," Shepard said after a long moment, breaking through the quick thump of their pulses. Leaning back, she gazed into Nihlus's eyes, loving what she saw there. She smiled and caressed his face, her fingers following the beautiful sweeping lines of white, admiring how they deepened the reds in his chocolate-coloured hide. "I'm going to marry you, too, if you'll have me, but he … no … you both deserve to know where you stand, always."

Nihlus pulled her back into his arms and nuzzled along her shoulder. Turning his face into her, he breathed deep and slow, his exhalations tickling the fine hairs at the nape of her neck. "He comes first, Jane," he said at last.

She nodded, grateful, but not surprised, that he understood. A warm, silken ribbon of affection, respect, and devotion wound through her. Allowing that to spool out through her voice, she said, "He does, but not because he's a better torin, nor because I love him more." She could say that honestly. The way that Nihlus had taken care of her after she arrived at Archangel and then again on Thessia had erased all of the stupid and hurtful things he'd done, anchoring himself solidly inside her heart.

"He's the glue that makes it all work." The Spectre chuckled, warm and throaty. The timbre of it rumbled through her, easing her deeper into his embrace. "Even the war will come down to him getting you and the rest of us through it. He deserves to have that security … to know that when we
Shepard kissed him, then smiled against the rigid plates. "You've come a very long way since that day on the Normandy, Spectre Kryik. I'm in awe." She nudged his thighs together so she could sit astride them, then wrapped her arms around his neck. Breathing in the warm, desert and spice scent of him, she closed her eyes and relaxed into his arms. He rubbed her back, careful of the web of wounds, but not too careful. She loved that he didn't slap caution tape up around her… that he saw nothing fragile in her.

He slid his hands beneath the hem of her t-shirt, the touch easing a small, nagging whisper in the back of her head about the complications of being intimately involved with both he and Garrus. Despite the familiar, calloused warmth of the palms that wrapped around her waist, the energy behind that touch could never be confused with Garrus's. They were two very different torins, and despite the ferocity of her love for each, her love for both was unique.

Gentle nips teased the skin of her neck. "I don't want to backslide at all, Jane, but I really want to be invasive of your personal space." The talons of one hand slipped beneath the elastic waistband clinging to her hips, and his tongue slid along the underside of her jaw. "And your person."

Grinning, she pulled back to look into his eyes. "You're okay with all this? I mean, really okay? Not, I'll say I'm okay, but every minute she spends with him is going to kill me a little more?"

He nuzzled her lips. "I'm really okay with it." He ducked his head a little, smiling, but the flutter of his mandibles could only be called bashful. "You know that I've loved you in some form or another for a decade. As long as what time I have with you is mine, as long as when you're with me, you're completely with me, I'm fine." Reaching up, he wrapped the talons of one hand around her wrist, drawing it down between them. He stroked the soft, sensitive skin on the inside of her wrist with the pad of his thumb, then raised it to his mouth and nuzzled it. "I never dared dream that one day I'd wrap my coillasi around your wrists… wear yours… that I'd call you mine."

She pressed her hand against his mandible, caressing along his cheekbone. Smiling as he closed his eyes and leaned into her, she let out a long breath. "I am yours, Nihlus. I'm as much yours as I am his. I could never have imagined the situation we're in, but choosing one of you means cutting half of my heart out." Leaning in, she kissed him, softly at first, but then he loosened the shackles holding the fire at bay.

"If you want to shut this down, do it now," he gasped against her mouth, his breath sweet and hot and metallic on her tongue. His hands tightened on her, pulling her into him even as he waited for her answer.

Replying with a kiss, Shepard let the flames leap the barriers and whispered. "I want you, Cikabekni. We have some foundations to lay and some dating to do before we hit any home runs, but I want you." She grinned. "I've had a pretty great day, I'm sober, not the least bit terrified of what I feel for someone else, and I have absolutely no washroom floor on my face." She flicked the edge of his mouth plate with her tongue. "And I really want you to kiss me until my toes curl." When he responded in kind, she trapped his tongue between her teeth, nipping lightly.

All the breathless ardour of the kiss on Illium returned, but instead of terrifying her, the Spectre's passion seared through her, taking root. His hands caressed and kneaded, drawing her in tighter, forming her to his body.

Then he stood, cradling her in his arms, and carried her around the bed. "Are you staying?" he asked, a breathy whisper that caressed the heated skin of her neck.
"I am, but … ." She hesitated, not wanting to shut him down, but her thighs and the region between warned her that she was going to be forced into a very awkward conversation with the doc—not to mention possible transplant surgery—the next day if she attempted intercourse a second time that night. Well, and they needed time to lay foundations of their own, to develop a trust as solid as she’d built with Garrus.

The Spectre chuckled and nodded. "It’s okay Jane. It’s too early for that," he said, reassuring her. "I just want to wrap myself around you for as long as I can before morning steals you away." He let out a deep rumble with enough form to be words rather than subvocals alone, then turned his face into her neck.

After a moment, she braced a hand against his cowl and pushed back, feeling the cool tracks of tears on her skin. "Nihlus?"

He stared down at her without meeting her eyes. "I’m fine, Jane. I just … ." His mandible flailed a little. "Thank you."

She nodded and laid her hand alongside his cheek, turning his face into her kisses. "Come on," she said, "let’s get into bed, dilan."

He sucked in a long, shaky gasp and smiled. "Dilan?" A talon touched the small scab on her neck. She shrugged then pressed her brow against his cheek. "Well, eventually you’re going to have to do a hell of a job making it official, but yes, you’re stuck with me, Spectre."
"So, seriously," Sol asked, cutting a glance across at him, "why did you live here? This place is so ... asari in sleek dresses." Her mandibles dropped. "Oh, no, please tell me that's not why."

A sharp laugh cut through his chuff. "Yes, it's my love of asari and sleek dresses. They both make me feel so pretty." A long, growling breath followed. "If you fight evil for a living, where better to live than in the midst of it?" Of course, that wasn't the whole truth. Saren had always maintained a residence on Illium. His love of asari in sleek dresses had been well documented over the cycles.

Inluvis - The second gestational period in turian pregnancy. Between 8 and 16 weeks. Slang: Little one, in the sense of being young and underdeveloped.


Obluvis - One who is senile or absent-minded.

Maraquil - Sea birds of prey. Large white and blue-green raptors that nest in seaside cliffs on Palaven.

Fragrutis - A cactus native to Palaven that grows short, tough, and spiny but succulent leaves. The leaves are crushed, chopped and used as a spice in turian cooking. Very hot and spicy, adding a tart, savoury flavour.

Teirati paste - the turian answer to sriracha sauce.

Acuta Eus - a chip made from a combination of grains, vegetables, and spices. Turian Doritos.

44 Days ASR

Eyes watched from somewhere in the crowd. The further they ventured through Nos Astra's spaceport, the heavier that stare pressed down on him. Nihlus cast a glance at the drell walking at his side, looking for any sign that the ex-assassin saw the same tell-tale signs he did. Thane nodded without returning the glance.

A slippery sort of dread had oozed between the Spectre's vertebrae to set up residence along his spinal cord about the same time he and Solana had stepped away from Shepard and Garrus at the Cipritine spaceport. As much as expediency required it, the three of them shouldn't split up; as a unit, they stood so much stronger. He'd seen that after they'd pulled Shepard out of that pit-fighting club. Somehow, all three of them had been headed toward each other their entire lives. Yes, sometimes he allowed doubt to whisper its lies in his aural canal, but he knew their connection to be true.

His mandibles gave a tiny flutter as he recalled the way Shepard clung to him when she said
goodbye, her kiss open, passionate, and full of joy and promise. It tasted so much better than he'd ever hoped, especially when he'd expected her arrival at his door two nights before to herald the death of all his hopes. He cleared his throat and rolled his shoulders as his plates loosened at the memory of her tongue sliding along his.

"Don't be so damned obvious," Sol grumbled from his other side, her sub-vocals rolling enough that he knew she didn't just mean about looking for their tail. She hitched her kit further up her shoulder. "We're supposed to be professionals." The tarin let out a long breath and looked up, craning her neck a little as she gawked at the city. "So this is Illium, huh?" Meeting Nihlus's eyes, she made a face. "I don't like it. Too uppy and snotty." She paused, sending up a flare to alert him to incoming fire. "Your living here makes so much more sense now."

"I thought you taught espionage," he said, subvocals teasing. She dropped and flicked her mandibles at him. He sighed. "Sometimes it's good to be obvious, inluvis. If they know you're watching them watch you, it can throw them off, make them move too soon. Surely, you know this."

Sol just rumbled in reply—no doubt because her bait had caught a lecture rather than a more entertaining reaction—and cut through the crowd to the cab stand.

Once they soared through the heavy lanes of traffic, Nihlus let the car do the driving and leaned back, his gaze wandering the horizon. Nos Astra lived in perpetual twilight, a gorgeous and disarming backdrop that he couldn't help think had been purposeful. How better to lull the galaxy into a false sense of security than to surround the darkness with beauty.

"So, seriously," Sol asked, cutting a glance across at him, "why did you live here? This place is so… asari in sleek dresses." Her mandibles dropped. "Oh, no, please tell me that's not why."

A sharp laugh cut through his chuff. "Yes, it's my love of asari and sleek dresses. They both make me feel so pretty." A long, growling breath followed. "If you fight evil for a living, where better to live than in the midst of it?" Of course, that wasn't the whole truth. Saren had always maintained a residence on Illium. His love of asari in sleek dresses had been well documented over the cycles. Nihlus leaned back, using the headrest. He'd never known why Saren had been with him. He'd asked several times, but his mentor never answered. Perhaps Saren hadn't known either or perhaps some part of him had been ashamed of the answer.

Everything before Saren tried to shoot him, that entire life, seemed like a faraway dream. Or nightmare. Passion had never been a problem in their relationship, but it grew out of a deep, well-cultivated bed of anger. Despite the unpredictable excitement of those cycles, they'd been tumultuous and painful. He doubted he could even count how often he'd felt used, his adoration manipulated.

Familiar landmarks outside the windows pulled him from his thoughts; they were close, the car dropping past Saren's favourite place to eat, then his. The two bore no similarities. Saren made a great many credits as a Spectre, and enjoyed spending them. Nihlus had never been as comfortable with bribes, gifts, and gratuities, and his income suffered for it. Not that his income level had ever bothered him. He worked all the time, and he made enough to spend his infinitesimal time off comfortably.

"Wow, this is getting weirder and weirder, senux." Sol lifted up in her seat to look out the window. "This is a really upscale part of the city. Look at these places." Another quick, glance seared the side of his head. "Tell the truth: you didn't live here. We're going to be breaking and entering, aren't we?"
He laughed and took over piloting once more. "I moved in with Saren. He liked living the good life. At least, he did once." He brought the car down into a parking space on the roof of the penthouse atop one of the archologies.

"The penthouse?" She jumped a little when Thane ducked out of the car, as if she'd forgotten the drell had accompanied them. The reprieve lasted only a second before her maraquil stare fixed on him once more. "Who the hell are you?"

Nihlus got out, grabbed his kit, then walked past her to the elevator. "The torin who lives in a single room on Omega, same as I was yesterday." He glanced over his shoulder at her and scowled. "This was never me. This was Saren. That's why we're here." He shrugged. "Well … and I left my favourite pillow and Aurin Plavidus here."

As he entered his code into the lock, Nihlus felt the eyes, heavy and scalding on the back of his neck once more. Following a hunch, he called up the access log for the elevator. Once a week, his cleaning service had entered their code. Twice over the months, his landlord … and then, ten days before, someone had entered, but using a slicer code. Damn.

"Spectre Kryik?" the drell said, his voice pitched low. "Is there a problem?"

He tipped his head in a single nod. "Slicer code, ten days ago. It's a private elevator with one destination." The whine-click of all three sidearms played in concert. He called the elevator, and when the doors opened, scanned the interior and mechanisms for traps or explosives. Nothing.

"Clear," he said, the word dropping with little surprise. He hadn't really thought anyone would bother blowing it up or rigging it to fall. Bombs were messy and notoriously imprecise, and a fall of two storeys would hardly prove fatal. Solana pushed past him, entering first, sharp eyes looking everything over before she stepped out of the way. He chuffed a little as he followed. "You're not my bodyguard, Sol."

A sharp bark of sound and breath, her chuff shattered his and rebounded inside the elevator. "I'm whatever I say I am, senux obluvis." Her grin leered at him in reflection from the control panel. "Garrus's new dilan took down a Reaper; I'm not about to find out what happens if I let you get yourself killed."

"Four fleets and … well, I had a little to do with taking that thing down, too." However, Sol had a point in that Shepard would not react well to him getting himself or his tiny squad killed. Time to decide some division of labour. As much as she worked for Grey Division, Sol eschewed covert tactics, preferring a more direct, brutal approach. Sere Krios on the other hand, was known for getting in and out of places without a trace.

"Can you see about locating and identifying our tail?" he asked the drell. "There's no need to interfere; in fact, I'd rather they get a chance to show their intentions. I'd just like to have some intel on who, how many … whatever you can discover."

A single nod answered him, a pleasant relief after Sol's fairly constant chatter. As keen as his filiam's intellect could be, and as much as he adored her, the twenty cycles difference in their ages meant that half the time, he didn't have the slightest clue what she was talking about.

When the elevator stopped, he nodded to Sol. If she wanted to go in first, play bodyguard, it didn't really hurt him to let her go for it. She could shoot the ears off a preteril without a scope, her pari's influence, just as it had been with Garrus. He left his kit in the corner of the elevator and took cover opposite Sol's position. Despite doubting that anyone awaited them, it never hurt to err to the side of caution.
Sol swung out, the muzzle of her sidearm cutting an arc through the open foyer. Nihlus followed on her heels without waiting for her to call clear. The apartment had belonged to Spectres, the furnishings and sightlines designed to provide no cover for ambush and very little for incoming attackers. The stairs to the master bedroom provided the only cover in the central living space.

The three of them moved quickly through the apartment, the assassin reading their body language with such precision that Nihlus didn't have to gesture a single command. He hadn't been certain about Shepard's choice of chaperone, but an hour into working with the drell, he knew she couldn't have chosen better.

"Sol … Thane … " Nihlus gestured to two doors off the sitting room. "... you can decide which room you want. I'll be upstairs." He returned to the elevator for his kit, and ran it upstairs. Setting it next to the bed, he saw that everything remained the way he'd left it when he'd packed up and headed off to meet the Normandy. After Eden Prime, so much changed he hadn't even thought about coming back.

He bent over the nightstand on his side of the bed. Aurin stood watch next to the lamp and a single holo sat in the back corner. He and Saren stood with arms slung around one another's shoulders, looking sharp in formal uniforms. They'd received a commendation for bringing down a terminus slaving ring. A soft, hollow wind blew through the empty space that waited for answers. It had been a great night. Saren and he truly felt like partners and lovers that night.

A soft, polite cough alerted Nihlus to the drell's presence. He straightened, but didn't turn. "You found a room all right?" he asked. "Make yourself comfortable. There's a datapad with a list of markets that deliver next to the fridge. Whatever you need, just put it on my account."

"Thank you. The accommodations are far more luxurious than I've grown accustomed to." Thane crossed to the window and looked out over the city. "More than a single set of eyes watches us. I believe both sets are asari, but only the first concerns me. I believe the second group are Eclipse mercenaries. No doubt they're simply hoping you'll lead them to Shepard or General Vakarian."

A scalding flush crawled up Nihlus's throat. He'd been thinking of far too much other than their security if he'd so completely failed to identify their tail. "The first?" Turning, to face the window and the black silhouette of the assassin, the Spectre narrowed his eyes, honing in on the way Thane's eyes never stopped moving, but not darting from target to target. Instead, his gaze swept slowly over the entire field of view like a scanner.

"Is a hunter. Maybe an assassin, but definitely someone with an instinct for and an intimate knowledge of the hunt." Thane turned from the window enough that the outside light caught the ridges of his facial features. His hands remained locked together behind his back. "She let me catch a glimpse or two, but nothing more than suspicious movement." He closed two, precise steps. "She's locked on you, so if I go out alone, I might be able to get a good look at her."

Nihlus just nodded. "I'm going to go through the camera feeds for the day the elevator was sliced, then reset all the codes."

Bowing his head in a deep, sharp nod, Thane strode to the stairs, but stopped before descending. "I apologize for intruding. I didn't realize that the second floor was your bed chamber." He cleared his throat. "Since I'll be out, would you like me to bring back food?"

Chuckling, Nihlus shrugged. "That'd be great. Sol gets impossible to live with when she's hungry. There's a little place across the 100th floor bridge that has both levo and dextro. If you could grab two number fives and a half dozen bottles of puala nectar, that would do nicely, thank you."
"I'll call in every thirty minutes." The drell appeared to float down the stairs, his steps silent and fluid.

Nihlus turned back to the bed, throwing his kit up on the mattress. Might as well unpack. Unless all the eyes watching them had the same root, it wouldn't be a mystery quickly solved.

He pulled his single suit from the bag and held it up, giving it a firm shake to remove some of the wrinkles. Why did he even bring it? He had ten suits in the closet that would have been kept laundered. The housekeeper liked to err to the side of thorough.

He held it open, then hung it over one arm, the other hand reaching up to brush a few grains of powder fine sand from the lining. He hadn't had a reason to wear it since that night on the beach. Spirits, three lifetimes had passed since he sat beside Jane and bared his most shameful secrets. Luckily, each lifetime had seen him grow in wisdom if not intelligence. Holding the tunic up to his face, he inhaled, hoping for some lingering trace of either the woman or that night.

"So, I've covered pretty much the entire floor, and I wouldn't know, but nothing looks messed with down here," Sol shouted up the stairs. He heard her talons rasping on the railings, and one foot thump down on the bottom step, but that's where she stopped. "I noticed there's a datapad next to the fridge with a list of stores. Anywhere in particular you prefer? Any idea how many days I should plan to stock for?"

Lowering the tunic, smelling nothing but his own scent on the material, he chuckled then strode over to the closet. "Three for now. We'll see what happens. And I don't care where, just get a case of those *fragrutis* noodles, a couple containers of *teirati* paste, and two cases of the big bottles of soda: *asperi* and … um … *ritinop* flavours."

The harsh ring of her laugh echoed up the stairs. "Junk food? That's all you want?"

"*Amarceru*, of course … oh and a couple bags of *Acuta Eus*." He waited for the hiss of disgust, chuckling when she didn't disappoint. "Don't forget the sundries."

"Yeah, whatever. I'll have a construction and clean up team ready for whatever all that spicy crap does to your digestive tract." Her voice faded along with her footsteps. "Thank the sweet spirits we don't have to share a bathroom."

Nihlus finished unpacking, casually checking to see if anything had been stolen. He suspected that the intruder had been interested in only one room in the apartment, so wasn't surprised when everything remained precisely where he'd left it. He took a shower then returned to his closet, deciding to shake things up a little and wear something he hadn't in a couple of cycles.

The first suit that caught his eye was a deep, blood red, piped with black, the center panel, collar, and cuffs gleaming with a simple vine pattern embroidered in black. Saren bought that one for the party after Nihlus's Spectre induction. Spirits … ancient history. Still, it had been his favourite, and he put it on before heading downstairs.

"Wow, shame Shepard isn't here to admire the view," Sol said, cackling softly. "Take that one back to Omega for sure."

He elbowed her and headed toward the back hallway and Saren's office. Nihlus had never used an office, his paperwork and mission detritus spread all over the dining and coffee tables, much to Saren's disgust. Saren, however, not only used an office, he kept it locked, the code scrambled. In hindsight, that probably should have been a major hint that he was up to no good.
Nihlus entered the code, but hesitated before pressing his palm to the control. How many ugly secrets hid within the file boxes and data pads in that room?

"Okay, last call," Sol said, poking her head around the doorway. "Anything else?"

He straightened. "Oh, yeah. Call the third number down, see if they have 500 grams of a soft, emerald green yarn. Something fluffy. I have a feeling we're going to be spending some time surveilling." He scowled, trying to remember what remained in the apartment and where. "Maybe get me a set of yarn hooks as well. I don't remember if I have any here."

She shook her head, "Junk food and yarn hooking supplies. You are so weird."

His attention returned to the door before he heard her talons pivot on the carpet and walk away.

"Come on, Kryik. Standing out here isn't doing you any good." Letting out a long breath, he rolled his shoulders, then his neck, and palmed the control. The door whispered open like any other door, no ghosts flew out at him, tattered cobwebs trailing like flags from their outstretched arms. No bombs went off, his heart continued to beat slow and steady in his chest, no pain lingered to rear its ugly head. What stood before him was just a slightly dusty room and a pile of boxes.

Except … .

Holes in the dust on the tops and at the handles of several boxes pulled him over the threshold. So, their intruder had been after something in Saren's files. Only … . A thick, leather bound book and a small stack of datapads sat on one corner of the desk in a neat pile. What? He hadn't left those there. The desk had been bare when he locked the room.

He stepped up to the desk and lifted the journal, opening it to the first page. Small, neat writing covered the page. He recognized it as Saren's. In their last cycle together, the other Spectre grew increasingly paranoid, convinced that even datapads not connected to another device could be hacked, and began communicating through notes and letters handwritten on paper.

"He has told me that none of my communications are safe from monitoring. They have agents everywhere and means of controlling minds that are older and more sinister than anything I could have dreamed of. Desolas saw the entirety of the universe behind the dark curtain of time and amnesia, but he did not move carefully. I must move with great care or lose myself."

Nihlus closed the journal and picked up the first datapad. A hefty list of financial institutions, addresses, contact information, and account numbers scrolled down the screen. Cocking his head, he glanced back at the journal. How sensitive must the information in the journal be if Saren had his finances on an unsecured piece of equipment? Spirits. He closed his eyes and tilted his head, cracking his neck to relieve the sudden tension.

"Is this well going to have a bottom?" he whispered to the air and dust, suddenly pretty damned sure that he'd been wrong about the room being ghost-free; they just hadn't been visible. "Or am I going to be swallowed up by whatever madness killed you?"

"You spend too much time alone," Sol said from the doorway. She tilted a little, falling loosely into the jamb. "Anything missing?"

Nihlus shrugged, setting his back to her as he picked up the tiny pile of information, hunching around it a little as he held it close to his keel. "I haven't looked in the boxes, but a very selective few were gone through." He jabbed a thumb toward the pile. "And someone took these out of the boxes and piled them here."
Turning to face her at last, he pulled out the datapad with the financials, holding it out to her. "I think this break in was about leaving a trail."

Shoving her shoulder off the doorway, she took the pad, eyeing it as if she expected it to explode. "That means all this stuff could be a trap."

"It could." He pushed past her and out the door. "Go through that pad, contact those institutions, use my Spectre clearances if you need to, but find out if they have any current or relevant information."

"While you do … what?" She followed him out into the sitting room, close enough that her presence felt aggressive, as if she was challenging him.

"I'm going to check the cameras and see who came in and did this work for us." Snatching the computer terminal off the sideboard in the sitting room, he sat on the couch, placing the other datapads and journal on the floor between his feet. "I suspect I already know who it is, but I want to be sure."

It took him less than five minutes to locate the footage from the time in question. Using a slicer code and making it that obvious … the intruder wanted Nihlus to know he'd been there, so he didn't bother to disable the cameras or delete the footage. The Spectre stared at the screen for a couple of seconds before activating his omnitool and routing a call through to Shepard.

Shepard appeared on the screen, her entire upper body dripping in muck and things he didn't even want to look at too closely, her chest heaving with each breath as if she'd been running. Still, the moment she saw him, her face brightened into a beaming smile. "Hey there, handsome." She squinted at her tool as if she couldn't see clearly. "Wow, you are intensely clean. Look at that." She held the omnitool out toward Garrus, his fratrin's equally filthy face appearing. "Garrus, look how clean he is. That's disgusting."

Garrus merely growled a little and pushed her arm away.

Chuckling, she brought Nihlus back around so he was looking at her. "Forgive the general, he's got mud ground into every seam, orifice, and pore. We all do."

In the background Wrex said something about it being an invigorating place to fight, earning himself a growl from Garrus.

"So, what can we do for you, oh disgustingly clean one?" Shepard asked, shifting a little, and then glancing over her shoulder when gunfire erupted somewhere close.

"Are you being shot at?" he asked, preparing to hang up the call. Adrenaline surging through his veins, he searched the picture for any sign of bullets impacting her shields or surroundings.

She shook her head and looked back. "Not currently. We've only been on the ground for about fifteen minutes." She grinned. "Long story, and about … four factions all trying to kill each other. So … to what do I owe the intense pleasure of your face, cikabeknai?"

"I think I already know the answer … " He transferred the security footage to his omnitool and played it for her. "... but is this Subject Alpha?" The turian on the screen hid his face inside a deep hood, but as the cloth moved with his slight limp, mechanical parts gleamed in the light. Nihlus pulled his mandibles in tight, his heart sinking into his gut. Damn it, limp or no limp, he knew. He just knew.

"Yeah, that looks like Al, all right." Her tone lowered, roughening. "Are you okay? There weren't
any surprises waiting for you?"

He shut off the vid. "I'm fine. He broke into Saren's office in the apartment, went through the boxes, and set out a few things for me."

Her face turned to stone, her lips pressing together so hard that mud squeezed out between them. "Nihlus, about Al …." She hesitated, taking a deep breath. "He's—"

The Spectre nodded, his gut wrapping itself into an intricate knot. "Yeah, I think I just figured it out." His shoulders lifted and dropped in a helpless, automatic sort of shrug. "How, Jane? How could it be?"

Gunfire erupted on the other end once more, but that time Shepard ducked down, taking cover. "Same way I'm here, love. Be careful," she called over the roar of returning gunfire. "I don't think he's a danger, but who knows." She kissed at the screen. "Love you, talk later."

"And I love you, haksaya kubenar." The screen went blank, her muddy, beautiful face vanishing back into battle. Damn, he should be there. He knew Garrus had her back, but she was crazy ... the sort of crazy that required a full time platoon of eyes watching her back. The back of his neck warmed, his face relaxing into a tiny smile as her last words replayed inside his head. Calling him love had rolled off her tongue as easily as it did with Garrus.

Pulling his head out of the clouds, as sunny and beautiful as they were, he turned back to the security footage, watching Subject Alpha move through the apartment. The torin stopped here and there, running his talons along the edge of a table or a piece of art. He paused at the bottom of the stairs, both hands on the railings, his hands bare. For a moment, he seemed to think about climbing, but then he let his foot drop and turned toward the office.

"What have you become?" Nihlus whispered at the computer screen. "What do you want?"

Without taking his eyes off the computer, he reached down between his feet and picked up the journal, opening it to a page with a particularly worn and folded set of corners.

"He showed me what lies behind the curtain tonight. Afterwards, I wandered the city for hours, trying to walk off the nightmares beating at the inside of my head, but it didn't help.

There have been thousands, even millions before me. Each one finds something, each one becomes intrigued and then obsessed, each one believes that they are in control. They are all wrong. So, he showed me what lies out there, what it is that calls to me … the whispers that scrape at the inside of my skull, talons carving messages in the bone.

He showed me the Vanguard.

He said it needs me, that I have been chosen.

I don't understand why it would choose me. I don't want to help them, I've been trying to find a way to stop this madness before the curtain falls.

I returned to the apartment, showered. I got into bed, wrapped myself in Nihlus's heat, but there is no sleep left to me in this universe. I've got to find a way to stop them, a way to answer the question.

It promises that my mind will remain free. He warns me that it lies, but what else can I do?"

Nihlus. The darkness would take him just to use him against me. He warns it may have already happened, but I don't believe it. Not Nihlus. He's the only pure thing in my life.
I need to leave. I've got to go before the darkness decides to use him.

I need to leave."

Nihlus stared at the last few lines, then looked up at the last frame of the security video, the picture frozen on a grey cloak getting out of the elevator on the roof. He didn't doubt that Saren left him for more reasons than anyone could fathom. The voices in his head betrayed the level of indoctrination infecting the Spectre even then. However, one tiny, private part of Saren's mind had walked out the door in order to protect Nihlus.

He shut the book and set it on the table next to the computer. He'd read it all, but not right then. Right then, he needed to give that part of his life the respect and closure it demanded. For all of Saren's flaws and faults, some part of him had loved Nihlus.

Nihlus. The darkness would take him just to use him against me.

The darkness? What did that mean?

The Haestrom shipyard slithered into his guts, a pool of pitch, cold and sluggish, but warming with every beat of his heart. The tar crept up his spine, splashing from vertebrae to vertebrae and pulling itself toward his brain. Once it got there, he knew what came next. The darkness.

Did Saren mean the orbs … the second indoctrination signal? He must have. Hadn't Dr. Chakwas and Lawson just established that the orb signal had fought off and protected Shepard from the Reaper signal? Two factions of Reapers trying to wipe one another out? He needed to read the rest of the journal. Finding out who was behind the orbs had become priority one.

The door rang, yanking Nihlus out of the endless loop of questions and complete lack of answers. He let out a quick, rough sigh when he saw Thane's face on the monitor. Damn, he'd forgotten to set new codes for the doors and send one to the drell. He got up and quickly crossed to the door.

"Thane," he said when it slid open, "apologies, I got distracted. I'll do the door codes now."

The drell shrugged and chuckled. "And I missed my last call in due to a very impressive line at the restaurant." He held up three bags. "My missions did both meet with success, however."

Nihlus caught a whiff of steam off the bags, and his stomach let out an impressive growl. His gut had been tied in too many knots, and his head full of too many warring thoughts to acknowledge something as base as hunger. He tipped his head toward the kitchen table where Sol was working. "Let's eat and we can fill one another in on what we've discovered."

Nihlus used setting the table and laying out the food as an opportunity to order and focus his mind. They sat down and ate in silence for long moments before Thane sat back, took a long drink, wiped his mouth on his napkin, then looked to Nihlus.

"I identified all of the factions following us. There are four. Three are physically surveilling you, the fourth is monitoring your security feed." He nodded when Nihlus glanced up at the cameras. "I discovered a remote intercept on the exterior upstairs window. I scrambled it temporarily. Anyone with talent in electronics will have eyes back inside this apartment within a couple of hours."

"Thank you for not disabling it just yet," Nihlus replied, feeling remarkably calm for having just heard that four groups of people were following him. "I might be able to trace the signal back to its source." He wagged his head a little and ate a couple of fried tubers. "Although, I'm pretty certain I know who those eyes belong to. How about the others?"
Thane ate a few mouthfuls before he answered. "One is the Eclipse, as I thought. I managed to separate one of their rear guards. He said that the organization has a standing order to keep eyes on you whenever you're on Illium. They've been on retainer for several cycles now. Their orders are not to interfere unless you're attacked."

Nihlus nearly choked on his mouthful of burger. He set the food down and thumped on the side of his chest for a moment. "They're protecting me?" When the drell answered by way of a serene nod, the Spectre sighed. "This just gets more and more odd."

"The third party is an asari, but she merely watched the front room windows for a while, then left, heading for a bar in the lower part of the city. She seemed to be in her late maiden or early matron period and was dressed as a civilian. I noted nothing descript about her at all." He shifted in his seat, appearing more discomfited by failing to discover what, if any, threat the asari posed than anything else so far.

"At the bar, she ordered a drink and headed for the dance floor. I watched her for a few more minutes, but she simply danced."

"And the fourth set?" Nihlus's gut rolled into a knot that tightened a little more as the seconds dragged past. Something told him that Thane had saved the worst news for last.

"Is the one that worries me," the drell said, the deepening of his tone and the slight tension in his muscles betraying the truth behind the words. "I believe she is a Justicar, and she fully intends to kill you."

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(A-N: So, at last, another chapter. Been too long, and I apologize for that. I'd say, be glad you aren't reading Machinations, but some of you are … so to quote The Doctor … "No … that's more guilt!"

Oddly enough, a new story trying to beat its way out of my head has given me back my focus. I started a story that is all maqqy96's fault. It is the story of Kat Shepard, who is already a Spectre and married to Nihlus when Eden Prime comes along. It's also an AU, and going to be a very different sort of war.

Anywhoo … off to Korlus to play in the mud next. Am aiming to get back on Monday and Thursdays again. *fingers crossed* Love to all. *hugs* and thanks thanks thanks, as always.)
She opened her eyes, wincing at the bright light pouring in through the holes in the shuttle's hull. Distant gunfire and the tick of cooling metal rang loud in the vacuum left when Garrus shut the shuttle's systems down. Gunfire. They'd landed in the middle of the Blue Suns' forward line. Prying her fingers off her harness, she shook off the morbid shadow.

"Come on, people," she whispered just loud enough for the rest of the occupants to hear her. "Anyone hurt?" She unbuckled her harness and got up. "Sound off. Anyone hurt?"

44 Days ASR

The shuttle slewed hard to port, tossing Shepard into her safety harness, then the dampeners caught up and slammed her back the other way. "Five minutes until we landed safe and sound," she grumbled to herself. "Five bloody minutes." She leaned over to look through the door into the pilot compartment, waiting for Garrus to fill her in.

"Taking fire!" Garrus called back, glancing over his shoulder. The frustrated strain that flattened out his subvocals told Shepard that their situation looked sticky, but not yet hopeless. Not the best news, but she'd take it. The general turned back to his controls. "Wrex, concentrate fire on the line thirty degrees starboard."

Wrex's answering bellow coincided with another hard slam to port. "Got a bead on their heavies now. Quit busting my hump."

Another blast, that one kicking the shuttle right in the backside, threw Shepard up into her harness, then slammed her down into her seat hard enough that her tailbone and the backs of her thighs started singing a three-part harmony. Even before Garrus managed to correct the little vessel's flight, it began to shake. Not a slight tremor, either, but a 'large dog just getting out of the bath, jowls flying everywhere' sort of shaking.

"Stabilizers are down," the general shouted back, his subvocals completely flat, edging into what she liked to call 'we'll be lucky to survive' mode. "Everyone get your helmets on, this isn't going to be subtle."

Putting on a helmet in a crashing ship amounted to no mean feat, a fact Shepard proved as she cracked herself right across the bridge of her nose in the process. Pain seared up her nose and into her sinuses, virulent enough that her eyes rained tears so thick that she could barely see. Mopping her face with her gloves, and cussing up a storm under her breath, she managed to wrangle the menace onto her head and seal it.

She hit her medigel when she felt a tickle under her nose. At least she didn't think she'd broken it.

"Try not to crash us right in front of the enemy," Wrex bellowed.
"I'm trying to steer us away from them," Garrus said, his voice low and snarling. The shuttle half rolled to port, then overcorrected the other way. "It's like trying to fly a drunken krogan."

Shepard glanced across the shuttle's passenger compartment at the other occupants. The Marines sat, tense but judging by the glares levelled on the three krogan opposite them, it wasn't because of crashing. Two of the krogan didn't appear the slightest bit phased by the shuttle's bathing Saint Bernard maneuvers. However, the expression on the third krogan's face had Shepard searching under his seat for a puddle.

To Shepard's far left, Jack just reclined in her seat, arms crossed over her chest, her body swinging loosely with every jolt and weave. And, at Shepard's right elbow, Urdnot Bakara sat almost unnaturally still, as if she defied the laws of physics.

To say that the krogan shaman's attendance on their little adventure had been a surprise would amount to a pretty monumental understatement. Shepard had kissed Nihlus goodbye and headed over to the Passch expecting to meet up with Wrex. Garrus hadn't mentioned anyone else accompanying the krogan on the mission. What awaited them was the clan leader, the shaman, and six battlemasters.

According to Wrex, the warlord, Okeer, was one of the most hated krogan in their history, and Wrex had faced an overwhelming number of volunteers to make sure O'Keer never left Korlus alive. Bakara had insisted on coming along to be sure that revenge didn't destroy anything that might lead to a genophage cure.

"There's nowhere to crash this thing that won't get us all killed," Garrus called back, effort fracturing his words, "other than where the Blue Suns have their line set."

Shepard activated her omnitool and brought up the scans of the area. He was right about the terrain. They were thick in the midst of wrecked ships. The Blue Suns had set themselves up a long open deck. "How stable do you think that deck they're on is?" she shouted back. "Strong enough to support a crashing shuttle?"

"No! Shepard!" Wrex looked back. "Tell me you're not thinking thresher maw!"

She drew her idea over the scan to help Garrus guide the shuttle in along the path that would take out the maximum number of mercs. At least, she hoped it would. "That's exactly what I'm thinking, Brother Wrex." She sent the information to the console. "We're crashing anyway. If we're going to trash our ride, might as well send her through the belly of the beast."

Garrus grunted when the console lit up with her plan. "If it wasn't our best chance to avoid death … ." His hands flew over the controls. "I'll do my best. Everyone hang on."

Shepard tightened her restraints and closed her eyes. After a second, she opened them again and looked around.

Something's wrong.

Looking forward into the cockpit, she saw that both Garrus and Wrex worked calmly, focused on the task at hand. Other than the christmas tree of console warning lights, there was no other sign of imminent death. No smoke or flame.

Something's missing.

The rest of the passengers remained calm. Even the terrified krogan sat quietly, eyes closed, his lips moving behind his faceplate as if praying to his gods or ancestors. Still, the nagging sensation
pricked the back of her neck. She'd crashed more than a few times, and something was completely absent from that moment. But ….

She closed her eyes once again, listening to the ambient sounds, the engines and thrusters … the creak and groan of tortured metal as the shuttle torqued first one way then the other. Her heartbeat … quick and ….

Except it wasn't quick. Her heart thumped slow and steady in her chest. Sitting up, she held her hand out, fingers spread, and stared at it with a combination of wonder and dread. Absolutely still.

_Fear is what's missing, Janey. Somewhere along the line, you've lost your fear of dying._

She scowled and glanced back at the cockpit as the engines changed pitch, Garrus dropping them down and levelling out so that they skated across the platform rather than tumbling end for end. Watching the readouts without really seeing them, Shepard ran back through the last month of her life. Over that expanse of time, a great many things had terrified her, but dying … she couldn't think of a single instance.

"Impact in ten … nine … ."

Shepard crossed her arms over her chest and grasped the handles on the harness, then tucked her chin into her chest. There was nothing to fear beyond death. Life … life was the thing to fear.

"... three … two … one." The impact flung Shepard into her harness and drove the air from her lungs, friction and momentum making her their bitch. Auditory insanity wrapped her skull in crushing, skeletal fingers: metal screamed, engines roared, and rockets pounded the hull with gigantic, fiery fists. For what seemed like a good half hour, the shuttle slid along the rusted out metal deck plating, but then the right front corner caught on something, spinning the entire vehicle around twice … three times before it slammed to a deafeningly silent, rocking halt.

_The only beings that don't fear death are the dead._

She opened her eyes, wincing at the bright light pouring in through the holes in the shuttle's hull. Distant gunfire and the tick of cooling metal rang loud in the vacuum left when Garrus shut the shuttle's systems down. _Gunfire._ They'd landed in the middle of the Blue Suns' forward line. Prying her fingers off her harness, she shook off the morbid shadow.

"Come on, people," she whispered just loud enough for the rest of the occupants to hear her. "Anyone hurt?" She unbuckled her harness and got up. "Sound off. Anyone hurt?"

"Vakarian, okay."

"Wrex, okay."

The rest of them spoke up, nothing worse than bruises to report.

Shepard met Garrus's eyes, admiration tweaking one corner of her mouth. "Nice landing, General." She winked, then focused on the mercs outside the shuttle.

Voices crept into the silence. First groans, then calls for help and then the unmistakable sound of an officer rallying the remainder of her troops.

"Okay," Shepard whispered, "everyone up on your feet, weapons in hand. Stay quiet, we want them to think we're incapacitated as long as we can." First order of business: see how fucked they were. "Garrus, the sensors still work?" When he grunted affirmation, she crept over to a long gash torn in
the side of the shuttle, just above the floor. No doubt where the object responsible for their spin
snagged.

Lowering herself onto her belly, she peered out the hole. A whole load of bodies lay strewn and
sprawled. The deck hadn’t been wide enough for the mercs to get out of the shuttle’s path. She
didn’t see anyone moving, and popped back up onto her feet. "Anything?" she asked, sticking her
head through into the cockpit.

"A dozen but they must have all jumped down, they're all on the ground," Garrus replied. "The
deck isn't solid, they're going to be able to shoot up at us."

Shepard's mind started whirling, and she waved for them to join everyone in the back. "You know
where we need to go once we're out there, so you and Wrex take point. Move fast and low. How far
are we going to have to drop?"

Garrus shrugged his assault rifle into his hand. "Seven metres."

Shepard winced. "Two storeys." She moved to the hatch and popped the seal. "Wrex, battlemasters
… when you get to the end, hit the deck. You'll lower Jack, myself, Bakara, and Woo as far as you
can before letting go. Garrus, grab as good a sniper perch as you can and try to force the Suns into
cover." She looked from face to face then leaned down and lifted the hatch. "Let's go fuck shit up,
people."

Any doubts Shepard harboured regarding bringing Bakara along disappeared the moment they hit
the deck running. The shaman moved with the easy, badass grace of a seasoned warrior. As
Shepard ran alongside the krogan and the young biotic, she pulled in deep, ecstatic breaths, an
exhilarated grin burning across her face. The sun warmed their heads, a bright fall morning dawned
on Korlus, and battle awaited.

"It's a good day," she said to no one in particular.

The deck ran for nearly eighty metres before ending in an abrupt tear of jagged, twisted metal. As
smooth as clockwork, Garrus took cover against the railing, sniper rifle in hand, and set the mercs
running for cover. Wrex and the three battlemasters hit the deck, twisting to reach up for the hands
of the few too squishy to jump. Shepard grabbed hold of Wrex's wrists, his giant hands locking
around hers, and then jumped, the clan leader swinging her around with the ease of a parent
twirling their four-year-old in the park.

Explosive giggles set in as she sailed through the air. "Higher, Wrex, swing me higher!" she called,
giggles bursting into laughter when he cursed and let her drop. Then mud. Her feet hit the ground,
legs sinking knee high into greasy slop before hitting anything remotely solid. For about a second,
she congratulated herself on sticking the landing, the next, she landed flat on her back, feet in the
air.

Her entire universe turned a sickly gray-brown as her head snapped back, muck pouring over her.
She flailed, panicking for a half second before she realized she'd left her helmet on, and she could
still breathe. Pulling her arms into her sides, she pressed down, trying to heave herself up, but the
muck proved just thick enough that she'd created a suction pocket.

When sitting up didn't work, she tried to roll over, managing to roll about ten degrees before
flopping back. Her next attempt, rocking like a stuck Mako, just ended up digging her in deeper.
Finally, she gave up and tipped her ear to her shoulder to activate her comms.

"Hey, people," she called, helpless, giddy laughter setting in. "I know most of you are probably
shooting the bad guys and the rest are laughing your asses off, but when you get a second, could someone lift me onto my feet." It took a good five minutes before the sound of biotics and gunfire ceased.

"Wrex," Garrus's voice came through on the radio, "are you filming this? We're going to want a record for posterity. Our kids and grandkids are going to want to see this."

"Been taking vid since the moment she landed," the krogan confirmed.

"Stop making fun of your commanding officer and get me out of the mud," she hollered, slamming a petulant fist down into the slop.

"Hey!" Garrus said, his voice oscillating between annoyance and humour. "I'm not covered in muck and would like to stay that way." She heard slow, sucking footsteps walk around her. "Stop flailing, or I'll leave you here."

Jack laughed. "That's the fucking saddest thing I've ever seen, Shepard."

Shepard flashed her middle finger, earning another laugh from the biotic. "Fuck you very much, Jack. Thank you."

Strong hands hooked through her armpits. As Garrus pulled, Shepard felt her front side ripping away to leave her entire back side buried in the mud forever.

"Sweet spirits, Shepard, how did you get this stuck?" He heaved, nearly pulling her shoulders out of joint. A heavy sigh and grumble came through the comms, then he worked his arms further around her, clasping hands in the center of her chest. "Okay, this too is not going to be subtle." He adjusted his grip a little. "Wrex, spot me. If she just pops loose, I don't want to end up on my ass, needing rescue."

Shepard tried to help, but then Garrus's helmet thumped gently against hers. "Hold still. I've got you." He took a deep breath. "Okay, on three. One ...." A sharp jerk knocked the wind out of her, but after a second of painfully intense pressure, the mud let out a truly grotesque sucking sound and released its hold on her.

Garrus staggered back far enough that she thought for sure the krogan would be trying to pull them both loose, but then he stabilized and set her on her feet. When he let go of her, she scraped at the visor of her helmet, trying to clear it. No good.

"Someone pour some water over my hands, please?" she asked, holding her hands out. She felt the pressure and then the slight chill of water glugging from a bottle to sluice over her gloves.

"You're good to go," Garrus said a minute later. "Do you want me to do your helmet as well?"

"No, I'm going to take it off." She reached up and snapped the seals. "Can't stand the thing at the best of times." Hitting the retract control, she let out a long sigh of relief and eased it off her head. "Much better. Damn thing's claustrophobic when I can see out." She clipped it to her belt in the back, then sorted herself, shrugging her armour higher on her shoulders and cracking her neck.

That done, she looked up at the general. She supposed she should feel embarrassed, maybe even annoyed that she'd needed to be rescued. Instead, she just felt warm and content, despite the mud dripping off every, single body part. It was all right for her fiance to rescue her from the occasional mud puddle. She grinned at Garrus and reached up, grabbing hold of his cowl. She pulled him down to her eye level. "Thanks. You're gorgeous covered in mud. It really highlights your eyes."
He chuffed. "It does nothing for you." She pressed an enthusiastic kiss against his mouth, then released him. Remaining bent over for a half second, he said. "A little more so now, maybe."

"Okay, kissing part over, behaving like professionals and fucking shit up commencing." Shepard waved toward the road that led further into the labyrinth of junked ships, the elation she'd felt earlier not waning for her wallow in the mud. "Move out. Vakarian and Wrex back on point." She pointed to Woo and one of the krogans … Barl? That sounded right. "You two are walking drag. Take it slow, save your strength, and keep your eyes open, people."

Shepard shrugged her Mattock into her hand, grimacing at the mud clogging it up. "Oh, damn, look at you." She grabbed a bottle of water and rinsed it off. "We're going to need to find a solid, defensible rest area and hose down once we're clear of this." She glanced up at the sun, its rays already good and damned hot for 0800 in the morning. They'd be glad of their suits' climate control well before noon.

She headed over to the first of the bodies, then turned back, giving Jack a nod. "Grab their water bottles. We're going to need them, I think." She dove into the corpses' packs, pulling out bottles and distributing. When she threw one to Bakara, she held the shaman's gaze. "You doing all right?"

"Hells yes, you are," Jack crowed. "They were all gawking at her, and she just walked right up. Bam! Shotgun to the gut, then shotgun to the head." The biotic threw Garrus and Wrex each a bottle. "Pure badass."

Shepard grinned and raised her eyebrows. "Very good, then. Glad to have you on the team, Shaman."

"Glad to be here." The krogan chuckled and took position on the flank behind Wrex.

Once they all had a couple of extra bottles, she gave Garrus the signal to move out. They had a long day ahead of them, far too much of it wallowing in mud up to their knees. She glanced around. All right, up to her knees.

They hiked for ten minutes before she brought them to a halt and had them spread out to rest. Her thighs burned with enough vigor that she knew that someone would need to put her in a wheelbarrow and push her around if she slept for longer than a couple of hours. Garrus and one of the krogans took positions on the leading and trailing flanks to watch for enemy, but she wasn't expecting anything for a hundred metres or so yet. They'd broken through the Blue Suns' outer line, but the mercs had staggered lines around a nearly kilometre wide radius.

Shepard crouched next to Garrus and opened the map they'd created from EDI's scans. "Okay, so we've got Blue Suns spread out around three quarters of this circle." She traced a fingertip around the arc. "Their lines range from a hundred metres out from Okeer's lab to a kilometre. And the Collectors are moving in from the north, a straight wedge driving in along one flank." She paused and looked up, searching the ice blue of his stare for any sign of the connection that eluded her.

"So what's fighting out from the center?" he asked. He snapped the seal on his helmet and peeled it off, setting it next to him. "I don't know. For someone who called for help days ago, Okeer seems to be doing a hell of a job keeping everyone out of his base."

"Yeah." She opened her comm to the Ypres. "EDI, can you send me updated scans with troop placement, please?"
"Sending now, Shepard," the AI's even, pleasant tone replied. "The Collector lines have not changed. They appear to have bunkered down rather than pushing toward the base."

Shepard winced and clicked her tongue against the side of her mouth. "That's not good news. What are they waiting for?" She lifted her hand to her ear, her mind whirring through the different reasons they might bunker down. Most of them sat like lumps of cold mud in her belly. "And there is no sign of their cruisers?"

"None, Captain," Steve replied. "We're monitoring the area around the relay in case they jump in, but it's all quiet up here."

"Okay, keep sharp. The Collectors aren't sitting out because it's time for their tea. I'll be in touch. Shepard, out." She closed the channel then opened another. "Beta Team, you out there? Sparky, you breathin?" Shifting a little to rest one leg, Shepard leaned back against the cover. "My legs are going to fall off from heaving through this muck," she muttered.

Jack laughed. "Yeah, but you'll have thighs like redwoods." The biotic flopped down on a concrete pad and stretched her legs out, not seeming to mind the mud in the least.

"Great, just what I needed. Skinny leetle body, great beeg legs." Shepard frowned. Where was Beta Team? They hadn't reported taking fire. "Beta Team, report your status. If you can't reply, squawk." She shook her head when Garrus looked down at her, brow plates raised, questioning. "Beta Team. Sparky, respond damn it."

The frequency crackled a couple of times, then cleared. "Beta Team here, Shepard. Just landed. Didn't take any fire on the way in," Kaidan said, his voice pulling a relieved sigh from all the way down in Shepard's boots. "We saw what was left of your shuttle. Strange, but I didn't know there wereresher maws on Korlus."

"Smart-mouthed people live short, tormented lives, Sparky," Shepard replied, a broad grin cracking the drying mud on her face. "We took fire coming in, but all hands present and accounted for. You're welcome, by the way, for distracting them." She switched legs. "How long until you've got us covered?"

"We're just about there, now. A couple of krogan ran out of the wrecks at us, slowed us down a couple of minutes."

Her grin folded into a scowl. "Krogan? What the hell is going on here?" She pressed that question aside for a second. "All right. Squawk when you're in position, Sparky. We'll move out once you're ready."

"Aye, aye, ma'am. Beta Team, out." The channel closed.

"Krogan?" Garrus asked, his face looking as confused as Shepard felt. "What about krogan?"

Finally giving in to her legs' complaints, Shepard sat cross-legged in the mud. "Beta Team were attacked by a couple that charged out of the wrecks. " She shook her head and reached up to scratch her temple. "If Okeer has an army of them, that might explain why his base is still clear." She opened the new scans from EDI.

"The Blue Suns are losing ground, being driven back," Garrus said, pointing to a spot in the west. "That might be Okeer's krogan." He let out a hard, noisy sigh and shrugged. "We need better traction on whatever is going on here."

A soft rumble of agreement rolled from Shepard's throat, but before she could reply, her omnitool
She jumped a little, startled, then chuckled. "Getting jumpy in my old age." She glanced toward the Suns' lines to see if anything closed on them. Gunfire echoed from further into the jungle of wrecks, but nothing that indicated movement toward their position.

She hit the button to answer the call before the tool dinged again. A wide grin greeted Nihlus's appearance. "Hey there, handsome." Her fingers lifted, longing to reach through the image and brush the length of his mandible.

She squinted against the lighting, the windows behind him turned him into a silhouette, only his familia notas showing up clearly. He looked amazing, clean and smart in a fancy suit. "Wow, you are intensely clean. Look at that." She held the omnitool out toward Garrus, unable to hide a teasing chuckle at the sheer amount of muck clinging to her general. "Garrus, look how clean he is. That's disgusting."

Garrus's growl just made her cackle harder as he pushed her arm away.

When she looked into Nihlus's eyes once more, she shrugged and said, "Forgive the general, he's got mud ground into every seam, orifice, and pore. We all do." She wriggled, some of that mud gritting between her inner thigh and the elastic around the leg of her panties. Fifteen minutes. Good lord, what was it going to be like after a day?

"Are you kidding me?" Wrex said, his voice a low rumble of joy. "This planet challenges you, stalks you like a pack of varren, death waiting one mistake away."

"Shut up, Wrex," Garrus grumbled. "You not allowed to speak until we've all evac'd this buratrum, taken showers, and are clean and dry."

Shepard waited, watching them with one eyebrow raised until they stopped grousing and turned back to keeping watch. "So, what can we do for you, oh disgustingly clean one?" she asked. A burst of gunfire echoed through the wreck from maybe five levels above her. She pushed up into a crouch and twisted, glancing over her shoulder and the cover, watching for unwelcome guests.

"Alenko," Garrus said into his comms, "you got eyes on this firefight?" He listened for a moment, then nodded. "Roger that. Vakarian, out." Turning to meet Shepard's eyes, the general shook his head. "Seven levels up," he said.

Nihlus meanwhile nearly jumped through the screen. "Are you being shot at?" he asked, worry dropping his brow plates and mandibles.

She shook her head. "Not currently. We've only been on the ground for about fifteen minutes." She grinned. "Long story, and about … four factions all trying to kill each other. So … to what do I owe the intense pleasure of your face, cikabeknai?" He really did look good: worried about her and something else, but happy. He and his squad must have had a decent trip.

"I think I already know the answer … " His face disappeared in favour of a view of a modern, austere sort of apartment and a figure dressed in a ragged, gray cloak. "... but is this Subject Alpha?"

There was no mistaking that limp, nor the way he held himself. "Yeah, that looks like Al, all right." Now she knew what he was worried about. The grin dissolved as she watched the cloaked form touching objects with a familiar sort of longing. Damn. She hadn't been sure what Al would do when it came to Nihlus, so she'd kept silent on the subject. She figured there was no point in unearthing old ghosts for Nihlus if Al planned to fly below the radar. Lowering her voice and angling herself away from the others to keep the conversation just between them, she asked, "Are
you okay? There weren't any surprises waiting for you?"

The apartment disappeared, Nihlus's face replacing it. The Spectre shook his head and shrugged as if to say none of it mattered, but the set to his mandibles gave away how disconcerted he felt. "I'm fine. He broke into Saren's office in the apartment, went through the boxes, and set out a few things for me."

Damn it. Why was Al messing with Nihlus? If he wanted to turn over information about Sovereign and the Reapers, he should have given it to her. She pressed her lips into a tight frown, then spat a little mud. It tasted like rotting rat carcasses and vomit. Damn. Damn. Damn. Was it kinder to tell Nihlus? Smarter not to? No, she needed to tell him. "Nihlus, about Al … ." She hesitated, bracing to deliver the blow. "He's—"

"Yeah," Nihlus said, cutting her off, "I think I just figured it out." His shoulders lifted and dropped in a helpless, automatic sort of shrug that tugged at her heart. She needed to be there with him. That was it. After the three of them completed their missions, they didn't split up again, not if the universe was going to keep taking the cheap shots at them. "How, Jane? How could it be?"

Gunfire erupted once more, but that time she heard rounds thumping into her cover. The others opened fire, the roar of eight guns nearly deafening. She focused back on Nihlus, keeping her head down. "Same way I'm here, love. Be careful." A round tore a chunk out of the rusting metal next to her head. Fuck, as much as she wanted to comfort him, she needed to start dispensing bullets. "I don't think he's a danger, but who knows," she said and kissed at him, trying to put enough into her words to get him through until they could talk properly. "Love you, talk later."

"And I love you, haksaya kubenar."

She hit the omnitool to close the message and grabbed her Mattock. "What have we got?" she called, leaning up enough to peer over the cover and locate the enemy.

"Blue Suns," Jack yelled over her shoulder as she sent a shockwave thundering across the open area. "These ones seem to be on the run from something."

Spotting good cover about twenty metres closer to the Blue Suns' line, she crept around Bakara and Garrus to crouch at the end of the low wall. "We need to catch ourselves a Blue Sun, find out what the hell is going on." She scanned the enemy. They were disorganized, firing in two directions. That confirmed Jack's theory.

A young man staggered out of cover and limped a little closer to Shepard's position before throwing himself behind a crate. A cold smile splintered across her face, a fracture through thin ice. "That's my target, people. Leave him alive." She braced to run. "Moving up," she called. "Give me some cover." She leaned out and launched her drone in behind the Suns, then bolted.

Crouched low, she ran flat-footed, her rifle spitting rounds toward anything wearing blue armour. Ducking in behind a piece of machinery around a corner from the kid's position, she concentrated on taking out the rest of the merc squad. "Jack, move up and send some shockwaves down this deck. Just avoid the kid." She leaned out to make sure her quarry wasn't trying to escape, then put two rounds into the crate, either side of his head. Chuckling at his shrill bleat of terror, she turned her attention to a centurion. A strong overload tore down the turian's shields and staggered him enough to finish him off. For just over five minutes the pulse of battle pounded out its rhythm, a tune so well known that she could dance to it in her sleep. Overload, fire. Overload, fire. Then silence.

Well, except for the whispered litany from behind the crate ahead and to her left. "Shit," the kid
muttered. "Shit. Won't stop bleeding. Gunna … I'm gunna …." He collapsed onto one hip, holding himself up on a shaky arm. "Son of a bitch."

Shepard switched her Mattock for her sidearm and strode over, the pistol aimed at his head. Despite all his moaning, his wounds didn't look that bad. "Just hit the medigel, kid. You're far from dead." She chuckled, lacing it with ice shards and metal spikes. "For now."

"I knew it wasn't berserkers," he said, spitting the words at her. "Your mercs, or Alliance. Go screw yourselves. I won't tell you shit."

Shepard laughed, bright and merry. "Your bravado really is adorable, but yeah, you're going to sing like a canary, sweetheart, and you're going to do it quick-like, see?" She pressed her lips tight as Garrus greeted her hard-boiled detective voice with a choice curse. Crouching down, she held her hand out for the kid's gun. "So …" She took the weapon and laid her arm across her thigh. "... what in the name of holy fuck is going on here?"
Tearing his thoughts away from the craving hanging from the back of his tongue, a thirst that ached all the way down to his knees, he focused on the business at hand. And that amounted to nothing more than another dead end. He cracked his neck and glanced up at the bank. An entire day wasted. Wrapping an arm around his rolling, angry belly, he headed across the street to the car. He reached for the cab's door control, a flash of grey cloak and silver face plates in his peripherals freezing him in place, hand reaching out. Shattering the ice that held him, Nihlus spun around, searching the crowd for any sign of Specimen Alpha.

**Inluvis** - The second gestational period in turian pregnancy. Between 8 and 16 weeks. Slang: Little one, in the sense of being young and underdeveloped.


**Obluvis** - One who is senile or absent-minded.


**Cisera**: A non-alcoholic, fizzy cider made from the juice of more than twenty varieties of edible cactus analogues.

**Maribellas** - Beautiful female … a term of endearment aimed more toward a younger female or one with a greater social distance from the speaker.

**Puercuna** - Cradle or a bed for a child.

**45 Days ASR**

Emerging from bright, institutional lighting into the deep mauves and patchy, brilliant neon and streetlights of evening, Nihlus paused, blinking a little as his vision adjusted. Sol ran up his heels, then cussed and gave him a shove that rattled every nerve in his already frustrated, twitchy body.

The Spectre took a deep breath and rubbed his hands against the outsides of his thighs, his one pausing over his flask before he clenched them both into fists.

Tearing his thoughts away from the craving hanging from the back of his tongue, a thirst that ached all the way down to his knees, he focused on the business at hand. And that amounted to nothing more than another dead end. He cracked his neck and glanced up at the bank. An entire day wasted. Wrapping an arm around his rolling, angry belly, he headed across the street to the car. He reached for the cab's door control, a flash of grey cloak and silver face plates in his peripherals freezing him in place, hand reaching out. Shattering the ice that held him, Nihlus spun around, searching the crowd for any sign of Specimen Alpha.
Gaze darting over the crowd, he saw only a painting in shades of blue and purple, the odd variant
sketched here and there as turians, humans, and salarians pushed through, making their way down
the busy street. Not a hint of grey cloak or a turian face he recognized.

"Senux?" Sol called from the other side of the car. "What's going on? I thought we were done for
the day?"

Feeling a snarky whinge building on the horizon, he abandoned his search and opened the cab.
Sol's muttering about being starved to death had started about the time they opened their fifth
empty safety deposit box of the day, and after two more, the racket coming from her guts was
reaching a truly disturbing pitch. So when she opened her mouth, mandibles already flexing, he
nodded. "Sure, getting something to eat sounds good." Cocking his head, he flicked his mandibles
at her, then looked to Thane. "The asari who went into the bar, did she look at home there?"

The drell nodded once, then ducked into the car. "She did. While she appears to have fixated on
you for the moment, she is out of her element stalking her prey. She is a spider." He sat back,
disappearing into the deep shadows of dusk. "She spins her web, casts her glamour, and waits."

Nihlus ducked into the car, sliding deftly onto the leather seat, his mind already flicking through
calculations. If she was a spider, what about him pulled her out of her web? Would he send her
scrambling for a hole if he pinged some of its threads? Or might he get a chance to put a face to at
least one of the naisa hunting him? No one had interfered with him that day, not even coming close
enough to set off any alarms, but the fact he was the center of so much attention tied an ugly knot
in his gut. Well, a non-alcohol related knot, anyway.

"Spiders tend to stick to one web until the insects stop getting caught in it." He met and held
Thane's stare in the mirror. "How badly will we stick out in the bar she went to last evening?"

The assassin's expression didn't show the slightest trace of emotion when he said, "You, badly.
Solana and myself, not at all."

Sol let out a guffaw that settled into cackling. When he turned his glare on her, she shrugged one
shoulder, her grin spreading. "Sorry, senux, what can I say, you practically have tight-ass cop
tattooed across your forehead in neon."

"I can use that to my advantage." He set the destination for the block across from his building and
relaxed into his seat. Closing his eyes, he cracked his neck first one way and then the other. Seven
empty banks amounted to nearly twelve hours wasted. Well, mostly wasted. All of the deposits,
whether cash or boxes, had been withdrawn by the same asari. He'd set his omnitool to the task of
discovering her identity after the second bank.

Saren had left a trail of pebbles behind, Nihlus felt sure of that, but someone else was sweeping it
up before he could get to them. His day would have been better spent back at the apartment reading
the journal, but sending Thane and Sol out on their felt too risky. Besides the banks might not have
told them anything regardless of the paperwork they carried.

He could pull the Spectre card. The council had left his Spectre status intact in order to track his
business. If he used it, they knew his exact location and what information he wanted. Not that he
cared. Let them track him. He didn't rely on their good graces or on stealth. The chances of being
able to do anything related to Archangel without the entire galaxy knowing was slim to none
anyway.

Maybe he would let Thane and Sol go out on their own the next day and spend time with the
journal. What he'd read the night before mostly covered the time around the occupation of Shanxi,
long before he and Saren met, and provoked more questions than it answered.

If the Alliance had known what was going on under their noses, they wouldn't have retreated. They would have fought to the last soul to make sure Desolas didn't retrieve the artefact. What they might have done with it … he shuddered to think. Some objects just needed to be sent directly into the center of the sun.

More mysteries clouded the artefact General Desolas Arterius called the Arca Monolith than anyone should have been comfortable with. Who found it? Why and how had the Hierarchy come into its possession for its ship to crash on Shanxi? Desolas didn't just stumble upon it there; he'd been ordered to retrieve it and make sure that it made it back to Palaven.

Desolas wanted to elevate turians above the rest of the races, a goal he made no secret of. He believed that the turian empire needed to spread across the stars, to display a might that would bring all the races together under one rule. Saren shared his brother's goals even though he'd held his aspirations close to his chest rather than making the hierarchy privy to them. They were goals that Nihlus recognized from the fifty thousand cycle old memories in his head.

Somewhere in the back of his head, he felt a pattern forming. He just needed to—

"Hey, senux obluvis, are you just going to sit in the car, staring at the console?"

Nihlus looked up, blinking in the storm of neon flashing the entire spectrum of color in his face. He glanced at Sol, who sat in the next seat, one reaching for the handle to get out, a genuinely concerned scowl making her mandibles twitch. The Spectre shook his head and waved her hand back inside, embarrassment heating his plates. *Senux obluvis* indeed. He was starting to wander.

He checked to make sure Thane was still inside, then hit the control to close the top. Who knew was listening in the crowds milling along the street. "Sorry, I was trying to figure out what I read in Saren's journal last night, and why all the accounts and safety deposit boxes have been empty." He nodded toward the club's brightly lit door. "You two go ahead, get seats in a booth as far out of the way as you can get. I'll go in and spend some time at the bar before I join you."

His belly grumbled, but not for food, and he rubbed his hands on his thighs again. Soon he wouldn't be able to hide the tremors. Sliding his hand down to the pouch on his thigh, he sighed. No, he'd been doing so well since Shepard came to him and called him *dilan*. He could quit.

"Sere Krios," Sol said, "go ahead. I'll be with you in a second." She waited while Thane got out of the car, then closed the top before she turned to face Nihlus. Silence dragged on long enough that he wondered if she was trying some sort of interrogation technique on him before she said, "Take a drink, Nihlus." Letting out a deep, sad sounding breath, she turned to look out the side window. "I know you're trying, and I respect the hell out of that, but I can see your hands shaking. I know the nausea is getting bad." She looked back, meeting his stare, the sea-blue sparkling like jewels in the light. "And I'm pretty sure you had some sort of hallucination earlier."

Nihlus held the painfully compassionate stare for another second, then nodded and looked away. Damn, Herros Vakarian had raised his offspring to be far too observant. The love in her stare shamed him, the heat beneath his plates building until it writhed like maggots.

"You can't just quit, not now," Sol continued, reaching out to wrap her talons around his. "You're going to be sick for days when you do. So, sit here for the next ten minutes, sip at that damned flask, and then come in." She popped the top, but held it closed. "If there are assassins in there, you need to be functional and as alert as possible."
He turned his hand over to squeeze hers and nodded again, relieved as hell when she got out and closed the cab up behind her. Still, it took five minutes before he gave in and removed the flask from his pouch. As he held it to his mouth, he needed to fight down the urge to throw up. He was a weak fool who threw his pride and honour down the neck of a bottle every time life challenged him to rise above pain and difficulty.

As the sweet burn hit his tongue, a single thick, choking sob belched up from the pit of self-loathing in his gut, spewing half of it across the console. Fuck! Gagging, he fought back the legion of sobs trying to boil up his throat to follow the first. No! No! His self-pity could fall straight into the pits of buratrum. Finally wresting down his gag reflex and walling up his emotions, he wiped his face and laid his head back against the seat. Closing his eyes, he focused on drawing in long, searing breaths. Sol was right. He didn't have the time to flush it out of his system. Functional needed to outweigh his old, destructive companions for the time being.

Gagging on another drink, he forced himself to think about something else. Why would Specimen Alpha leave out the bank information if someone was just going to run ahead of Nihlus, emptying everything out? Was someone trying to keep him from discovering what Alpha wanted him to find? Was the turian just messing with him? Playing with his head for kicks or who knew what other reasons?

The second page of the journal had only a few lines, Saren's usual handwriting jagged and broken … large and ungainly, like that of a child. When Nihlus read them, it felt as if something branded them into his mind, and for the first time since Eden Prime … maybe even long before, Nihlus had felt sympathy for his old friend and one-time lover.

*Your time is at an end. It is the way of things. It is inevitable. You can't fight it. You can't avoid it. You have only two choices. You can hide. Or you can accept your fate. We are your destiny.* (1)

That message, the discovery of what Sovereign was and what it intended to do had prompted Saren to do neither. He'd taken the wrong path, but nonetheless, the Spectre heard the message and said, 'No, I won't hide, and I won't accept that nothing can be done.' As much as Nihlus hated what Saren had done, he needed to respect that much.

"And he protected me from both the Reapers and the ones behind the black orbs." The sound of his voice echoing back off the window alerted Nihlus to the burn in his belly and his steady grip on the flask. He choked down one last small drink, then shoved the bottle back in its pouch. Taking a couple of long breaths, he opened the car and climbed out, the noise and glaring lights beating at his head.

He winced against the onslaught and pushed forward. The bar wouldn't prove much better than the street—he could already hear the music booming inside—but it would dull as the alcohol kicked in. Numb had its advantages.

The sheer noise level when he entered the bar knocked him back a step, and he made a mental note to get aural implants that allowed him to adjust the ambient volume. Still, exposure deafness set in, and he continued to the bar. Thane couldn't have been more correct about his ability to fit in. Other than a small squad of very tipsy asari police officers at one booth, he couldn't have discovered a more ill-fitting demographic if he tried.

Oh well, like he'd said, he could use it. Pushing up to the bar, he nodded to the bartender. "$\textit{Puala}\ nectar, please. In the bottle.}"

The $\textit{nais}$ chuckled and slid one down the counter. "$\textit{In the bottle, how very badass of you, officer.}"
He just winked and flicked his mandibles. When she flushed, he grinned. Oh yeah, he still had it. He'd finished off one bottle and just started another when he felt eyes heating the back of his neck. Making a point of ignoring whomever it was, he turned to watch the gyrating taking place on the dance floor, and let out a long breath. Spirits, he was getting old.

"That's not what I'd expect a torin like you to be drinking," a soft, smoky voice said from behind his left shoulder. The sound brushed over him like warm, gentle fingertips down the arch of his neck.

Nihlus chuckled and glanced back but not far enough to see the speaker. Even though she left a metre or so buffer between them, the energy she gave off felt like silk and leather grappling hooks trying to snag him and draw him in. Without a good long career of dealing with seductive killers of all stripes, he might have fallen for it. "Oh," he answered after a pause long enough to make his lack of interest clear, "I'm a Spectre in a bar, which to my mind makes fruit nectar the ideal drink."

The asari finished closing and leaned against the bar a reasonable distance away. "Most cops I meet in bars can barely stand." She tilted her lovely, sculpted face up a little, creating the perfect angle to showcase her long neck clad in commando leathers before she tipped it toward the asari cops. "Those beauties couldn't be a better example. They see so much ugliness, that they come to places like this looking to forget."

Nihlus took a long drink. "And do you help them forget?" He turned just so he could see her from the corner of his eye and raised one brow plate.

Her turn to laugh. It practically sparkled, effervescent and lilting, music that whispered in his aural canal and twined around his will. 'Just relax' it sighed. 'Let down your guard.' Not in a million cycles.

"Oh, not while they can't stand on their own," she replied, nodding to the bartender in a way that confirmed what Thane had said about her being comfortable there. The bartender knew her order even amidst a teeming crowd. Drawing slow circles on the counter with a single, elegant finger, the nais stared—sapphire eyes warm and curious on the side of his head—but didn't speak until the asari behind the bar slid a shot glass of something purple in front of her. Lifting it with two fingers, she tossed it back. "I prefer my quarry to have their senses intact. They enjoy themselves far more that way."

Nihlus didn't rise to her bait. Quarry had been used very deliberately, as she tried to shake something loose. She wanted to know something about him ... probably why one of his other shadows was following him. If his instincts proved him out, and she was a predator and a murderer like he believed, it was his connection to the Justicar she wanted to know about. Would he prove to be an enemy or an ally? He didn't even twitch in her direction while she ordered and downed another of the purple drinks.

"Pleasure talking with you, Spectre," she said and turned away, hips swinging seductively. She walked a slow circle of the dance floor before approaching a young turian. The nais spoke to the tarin for a moment, then began to dance next to her. Swaying, a sultry midsummer breeze blowing over the tusssat fields, her every move amounted to poetry ... poetry meant to ensorcel his mind and inspire another part of him altogether.

Nihlus made a point of watching, his mandibles lifted a little, a clear signal that he knew she was trying to toy with him, but he didn't mind watching the show. Everything about her toyed with people, an ungentira batting about a preteril.
He turned away and smiled at the bartender as he set his bottle on the counter. "Another, please." When she set the juice down in front of him, he tipped his head in the direction of the seductive asari. "She's here a lot, I take it?"

The *nais* nodded, but glanced toward the dance floor and back. "She is. Not to be rude, but you're hardly her type. Too old. She prefers them young and filled with all that misunderstood angst." She slammed her lips together, looking terrified to have said too much, a quick glance darting toward the dance floor. "Apologies, shooting off my mouth. Your meal is being served to your table, sir." Her hand lifted from wiping the counter, flipping the cloth toward where Sol and Thane were accepting the food.

He chuckled, curious, brow plates lifting. "How did you know I was with them?"

She smiled. "Been doing this a long time. I've learned how to read people and situations. They've been keeping an eye on you, but trying to look like they aren't." She had a good face, broad and pleasant, kind brown eyes. It surprised him, but mostly because he hadn't noticed. At one time, he would have scanned her like a security checkpoint and not only filed her appearance, but decided her potential threat level and psych profile as well. A cool blush spread across the bridge of her nose. "Have a good evening, sir."

"Thank you." Nihlus lifted his drink from the bar and started toward the booth.

"Sir?" the bartender whispered. Nihlus turned, the fear in her eyes drawing him back to the counter. He waited for her to speak, but after a minute, decided maybe she wasn't going to, except she remained standing there. Finally, she winced and busied herself wiping the bar top. "You said you're a Spectre?"

Nihlus answered with almost imperceptible nod.

"That one is bad," the bartender whispered without lifting her head. "As I said, I've learned to read people." When Nihlus nodded again, the bartender shrugged. "She smiles and acts sweet and charming, but it never touches her eyes. There's something broken there."

He took a long drink, then set the bottle down. As much as he didn't want the asari in commando leathers to be suspicious of him, he couldn't just dismiss the bartender's gut reaction. He placed far too much faith in his own. "She done anything suspicious? Leave here with anyone you should have seen again, but didn't?"

"No." Nervous glances darted between his face and her cleaning. She shrugged, one shoulder rolling ever so subtly. "Can't say she's put a finger wrong."

"I can't do anything unless she tries to hurt someone, but thank you for telling me." Turning on his heel, he skirted the busy dance floor, sliding into the booth next to Sol.

Thane nodded, a wry smile lifting one corner of his mouth. "You used it to your advantage most effectively. She's trying to pique your interest, but she is just baiting you until you give something away."

The Spectre nodded, but then turned his attention to the food. "What did you order me?"

Sol grinned and pushed a large cup in front of him. "The quarian vegetable and grain smoothie with extra vegetables and sterilization." She closed her eyes, her expression one of complete bliss. "So gray and tasteless. You'll love it."

Levelling her with a suspicious glare, he looked into the cup, and let out an undisguised sigh of
relief. Cisera.

A cackle far too filled with obnoxious self-congratulations rolling from her, Sol pushed a plate of skewers and spiced tubers in front of him. "The look on your face." She bumped her shoulder against his. 'I wish I'd taken a holo. Priceless.'

Breathing a sigh laced with both affection and resignation, he picked up a tuber and stuck it into her open mouth. "Eat. I'm tired, and I want to get some sleep." Exhaustion truly did hang from him, heavy and thick, as he started eating. He wanted to stretch out, prop his head up on far too many pillows, and read until he passed out.

She drew his attention as she plucked the long, fried root from her mouth and chomped it in half. "You want to go home, get into bed, and obsess over that journal." When she finished the first, she stole a second tuber off his plate, then turned to her own meal.

They ate in relative peace for five minutes, Nihlus and Thane grunting now and again to acknowledge Sol as she filled the silence with editorial. The Spectre actually found her voice comforting, a little like the white noise of rolling waves or the steady rumble of thunder in the distance.

"Your asari acquaintance just gave the turian child drugs," Thane reported in a low whisper, interrupting Sol's diatribe against bankers, the ease with which the anonymous asari cleared out Saren's assets, and banking in general.

Nihlus kept his focus on his meal. "Let me know if it looks like they're leaving together, or if the turian leaves and the asari follows her."

"Kid looks fifteen at the most," Sol mumbled around a mouthful of food. "She should be home studying for her placement exams or out playing turram, not hanging around with an asari a good four hundred cycles older than her."

Nihlus turned to her, a grin and a raised brow plate greeting her pronouncement. "You never cease to amaze me, maribellas." He wrapped an arm around her back and gave her a quick squeeze. "You've got the best heart under all that smart ass and bluster."

She punched him and dug back into her food. "Eat, we need to be ready if that puercuna raiding psychopath tries to take the kid out of here."

He bent to bump his brow against her temple. "As you command."

An elbow buried itself in his side. "I said eat, you sentimental idiot." Still, when she looked up, her mandibles flicked in a tiny smile. He flicked his back and dug in. How different would his childhood have been with a baby sister to look after and pour all his affection and attention into? He grinned as he nudged her and then started eating as fast as he could. Despite letting out an indignant chuff as if she were too good for an eating contest, she sped up, and soon tubers and skewers vanished at a rate that begged a choking fit and possible death.

As he finished, victorious, he bumped her with his shoulder. Little sister? Better late than never.

As they guessed, they'd barely finished their meals when the asari wrapped an arm around the young tarin and headed for the door. The nais leaned into the turian's aural canal, whispering constantly. The way the young tarin stared up at her companion, enraptured, almost enamoured, set Nihlus's blood boiling through his veins, sickened rage locking his teeth together. Whatever this asari was up to, he wasn't going to allow her to shove that child's death in his face or the Justicar's.
Letting his fury simmer, escaping through his expression and posture, Nihlus leaped up and stormed after the pair, catching up with them just outside the front doors of the bar. Grabbing hold of the young *tarin* with a bruisingly tight grip, he yanked her away from the asari.

"Spectre," the *nais* said, her voice full of barely disguised need. "It's all actually for you,' it whispered. 'I don't really want this little thing.'

Letting his rage build up a thick layer of armour, he met the asari's eyes, challenging her in no uncertain terms. "Leave, now, and don't think about trying this again in my sight. I'm a Spectre; I can shoot you without needing any reason at all."

The asari stared him in the eye for a long moment, her stare oddly hypnotic. Nihlus's internal alarm began to shriek, but for the life of him, he couldn't look away. The pale sapphire turned black, his fury fading into a cold and dank layer of shame. That stare opened a door to an eternal hell where a lonely little *peur* huddled behind his door and wet himself in terror when his mother beat him.

"I can burn all that away, Nihlus," the asari's voice pitched low as she leaned in next to his aural canal. "I can set you free."

Then, in those memories, Shepard stepped up and held out her hand, warm fingers closing around his talons, and he smiled. "I don't need to be free. My past doesn't hold me prisoner any longer. Try again."

Surprise just registered, the *nais*'s eyes snapping back to blue, when her stare broke away, snapping toward a blur of movement to Nihlus's left. The *nais* froze, her eyes locked over the heads of the crowd for a second, and then her hand jerked away from the turian child. She looked back at Nihlus. Fear and contempt and a white-hot, molten rage stared into his soul for the barest of seconds before the *nais* turned and bolted into the crowd.

He stumbled, reeling for the space of a couple heartbeats, but careful not to let the young turian get away. What in the name of all the sweet spirits had happened?

After a couple more seconds, Nihlus shook his head, a sharp tug on his hand orienting him. Looking down on the *tarin*, he drew his face into the most stern scowl he could. "How old are you?" he demanded.

She tilted her chin up, defiant, and opened her mouth, but as he slid one brow plate up and rumbled a low warning through his second larynx, she grumbled and dissolved into petulant submission. "Fourteen."

Equal amounts of anger, disgust, and relief sloshed around, the urge to vomit getting stronger by the second. Spirits, he needed to get back to the apartment and equalize. Focusing on the child, he managed to wrestle everything into a sort of relieved indignation. "You shouldn't even be in bars. You should be home studying." Keeping a tight grip on her arm, he led her over to a pair of Illium police officers standing about halfway down the block.

"Sir, is there something I can help you with?" one asked, stiffening and stepping forward, her hand moving toward her sidearm as he approached, her eyes flitting toward his shackle-like grip on the reluctant child dragging behind him.

"Spectre Nihlus Kryik." Without releasing the young turian, he activated his omnitool and sent them his credentials. "This *inluvis* needs to be taken home and her parents told that she very nearly went home with an asari who supplied her with Hallex. Not softening a millimetre, he looked down at the *petri*. "Nolin stultentes puer. Tuesin incepents abir fetrix."
The little one's eyes sprang wide. "I didn't know. She seemed so nice. We were just going for skewers."

"And when you never came home? What of your family? What of your duty to them?" He pushed her toward the officers. "Be more careful."

She wilted as one of the asari took her by the arm and led her toward their car. "She seemed nice."

Nihlus felt rather than saw Thane and Solana walk up, taking positions to his either side. "You did a fine thing, Spectre Kryik," Thane said, "but we should get out of this crowd. She knows you consider her a criminal, she may come after you."

Nihlus shook his head. "No." He turned, eyes searching the crowd for whatever had terrified the asari. Nothing stood out, other than the sensation of eyes watching him. "She ran, and not from me. She wasn't the least bit afraid of me. In fact, she stared at me, and there was something … ."

Shaking his head, Nihlus tried to shake off that strange, seductive magnet that still tugged at him, telling him that he needed to just listen and let her love him. "It was like she tried to climb inside my head, to control me, and for a second, I think I wanted her to."

A massive shudder shook him from talons to crest.

"Control you?" Sol prompted. She stepped in front of him and laid her talons on his arm. "Nihlus? You're acting stranger than usual, senux." The talons shifted to his cheek, slapping him slightly. "What? Spirits, snap out of whatever the hell it is."

Nihlus shook his head. "It was just like she was hypnotizing me or something." He nodded toward the bridge to his building, the last legs turning to jelly as the last dregs of his energy burned to ash. "Let's get back to the apartment. Tomorrow is a whole new day of crazy."


1. Mass Effec: Evolution #1, Mac Walters, Dark Horse Comics, Jan 2011.
"The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned."

"What?" Wrex grunted, looking back over his shoulder.

"The lines are from a poem by Yeats back at the dawn of the twentieth century." The threads of connection continued to weave their elusive pattern inside her head.

"Something Garrus tried to tell me an hour ago." She swiped at the trickles of sweat rolling down her face. "He told me that we were headed for a brutal war. I thought he meant the death toll, but he was talking about another death entirely.

45 Days ASR

Wrex bellowed loud enough for the Collectors to hear him two kilometers away. "He did what?"
Setting the mud trembling under his feet, he stormed up next to Shepard and grabbed the young merc by the collar.

The kid shrank into his armor until he hung from Wrex's hand, quailing in the face of krogan rage. "Okeer turned all his tank-grown krogan—his failures—loose. They've gone berserk." A frantic, begging gaze flitted from Wrex to Shepard and back. "One minute we were setting lines against the bugs, the next … krogan berserkers came charging out of his lab. They overwhelmed the inside lines in minutes. It was a rout, so we pulled back, set new lines."

"Wrex." Shepard laid her hand over the large one gripping the kid's collar. "Put him down." She looked up into the krogan's carmine eyes, stretching a veneer of empathy over a solid floor of command. "He's cooperating, and he isn't responsible for what's going on." She stabbed the kid with a dagger-sharp, iron stare. "Complicit absolutely, but not responsible."

Wrex dropped the merc, who stayed half-slumped in the mud, and pushed in to loom over Shepard. "There's a reason Okeer is hated, Shepard. The things he's done to my people in the name of saving them from the genophage are barbaric." A low growl finished the sentence. He jabbed a thumb toward Bakara and the battlemasters. "Are we supposed to follow you as we shoot our way through a hundred innocent krogan to get to him? Help me out here, Shepard."

Shifting to blockade the kid, Shepard held Wrex's stare, refusing to back down from his fury. "Haven't I always?" She waited for him to take a breath, then lunged into him a little, brows raised. "Stop forgetting that everyone here is on your damned side, Wrex, before they do. Of course we're not going to just mow our way through them, not if we can help it." She slapped a hand against his shoulder.

Shepard nodded toward the way ahead. "Or better yet, not if you can help it. If they attack us, try to talk them down. You'll have better luck than the Suns or the rest of us." Watching him, Shepard waited for the fury to calm enough that the knot in her stomach untied. Suddenly, getting the krogan past their paranoia and 'us against the galaxy' mentality seemed next to impossible if she couldn't even convince Wrex to set it aside for longer than two minutes at a time.
When he nodded and stalked back to keep an eye on the path ahead, Shepard turned to the kid. "And we can't just kill all of you, either." Looking to Garrus, she shrugged, making light of the weight that draped itself over her shoulders at the thought of mowing down a couple hundred more mercs. "I've committed more than enough atrocities in the last few weeks without my adding another to my tally." When the general nodded, she held out a hand to the kid, helping him back to his feet.

"Thanks," he muttered, staring at the ground. "For not killing me, I mean."

Shepard gave him a push toward the krogan rear guard. "Barl?" When the largest of the three nodded, she continued, "Make sure he's not packing, and then keep an eye on him. If he puts a foot out of place, shoot him."

The krogan bared his giant, chiclet teeth in a grin that waxed the kid ten shades of alabaster. "My pleasure." One huge hand thumped down on the merc's shoulder, squeezing a yelp from the kid that sounded a lot like the bleat of a squeaky toy.

Shepard snapped her wrist, gesturing toward the path forward with two fingers. "Let's keep moving. We've got a long slow trip until we're out of this mud."

Garrus dropped back next to her, the expression on his face matching the tone of the whispers in the back of her head. "We're not going to be able to handle many prisoners before they become a serious security risk, Shepard."

Nodding, she set herself to concentrating on her feet, following the trail of bigger footsteps as much as she could. "If more surrender than we can safely handle, I'll bring Team Two in, and they can take custody of prisoners."

A silence so pregnant that it bordered on needing a midwife fell between them, but she left it to the general to say what he needed to in his own time. It took nearly five minutes before he cleared his throat and said, "It's going to be a brutal war, Shepard."

His hand gripped her shoulder as he continued, "We'll do what we can, but if you try to save them all, you'll drive yourself crazy."

Shepard nodded for him to retake his position on point. They could debate the intricacies of war crimes another day and far away from Korlus. When he squeezed her shoulder and returned to his position, she let out a long sigh and set in for the slog to the next rest point just their side of the closest Blue Suns line.

When they hunkered down behind cover nearly thirty hard minutes later, Shepard turned to Garrus. "We're moving too slowly." She checked the updated scans from EDI, the fact that the Collectors hadn't moved tying another knot in her gut. "And the Collectors aren't moving at all. That means they're either waiting until we've cleared a path for them through the Suns and the krogan, or they intend to pull us in then vaporize the lab from orbit."

Garrus shook his head. "According to Wrex, Okeer said that the Collectors had come to claim his research. They won't strike from orbit."
"Unless they would rather no one had it," she said, staring straight into his eyes until he looked away. The feeling of being herded into a trap burned at the base of her skull, an itch buried too deeply to scratch. Complicating things by taking prisoners and trying to save the tank-grown krogan just poked it until she couldn't remain still. She guzzled a bottle of water, choked down a dried fruit bar in three bites, and turned up the cooling system in her armour before looking to the path ahead. The Suns had set up a staggered line along the next hundred metres or so of path. An effective ploy that would slow her squad down even more.

Before she signaled for her people to move out, she opened a channel to Kaidan. "Alenko, how's it going up there?"

"We've got our eyes on you from high left," the LT reported. "The Suns are focused on you, so we're not meeting any resistance. Ready to provide cover and suppressing—"

Gunfire erupted from the furthest positions in, cutting him off. "More of the tank-grown are attacking the Suns from the rear," Kaidan reported a moment later. "The krogan have two of the merc lines engaged. You aren't going to get a better shot to move up, Captain."

"Roger that, Sparky. We'll give you a minute's head start so you can cover our approach."

"Roger that. Team two out."

"We move out in sixty, people. Focus on the Blue Suns when we engage." Shepard nodded toward the krogan clan chief. "Wrex wants to see if he can get the krogan berserkers to stand down, so let's give him a shot."

When the clock in her head counted down sixty seconds, Shepard pushed herself up into a shaky crouch. "Come on, people. Let's move." Shepard stood, lifting her Mattock into high ready, and took point. "Wrex, Garrus, on my four and eight. Jack on my six. The rest of you maintain a four metre spread. They've got heavies, so don't bunch up."

Keeping low, she ran forward, the mud growing more shallow as they ascended up toward the mountain of wrecked ships. Here and there, it had even dried into large, cracked sheets. Thank the Enkindlers' glowing backsides. If the ground kept improving, her boots might even get down to weighing five or six kilos each.

She paused to glance back, ensure her people were ready before she turned the last corner. When they all nodded their confirmation, she took a deep breath and popped her head around the wall to check for cover. Steel knee-walls and crates provided excellent cover, but the squad faced an uncomfortably long run to get to them. She ducked back.

"Decent cover fifteen metres up," she said, tossing the words over her shoulder.

Another long breath and she slipped around the corner, bolting for a line of crates halfway across the open area. As soon as she appeared, a storm of bullets rained down on her from an elevated walkway opposite. The mercs were dug in good and solid, but then Sparky's team opened fire from above, pinning them down. Shepard waved her squad into cover, keeping back far enough to help negate the Suns' elevated advantage. A rocket slammed into the top of Shepard's cover in the same moment she dove behind it, the blast flipping her ass over tea kettle.

"Shepard?" Garrus called from behind and to her right. "You all right?"

The captain dragged herself in behind the crates, sitting with her back pressed to them for a couple of seconds as she waited for her vision to focus and her ears to stop ringing. "Yeah, I'm fine. It
didn't hit me … just gave me a good shove." She scrambled up, trading her Mattock out in favour of Ingrid. Looking through the scope, she spotted six inches of helmet peeking above the metal railing. A long breath out, a slight squeeze of her finger, and the helmet shattered like a dropped melon.

The heavy popped up, sending another rocket sizzling through the air toward Shepard, but then a sharp crack from behind her sent the heavy spinning and toppling to the deck. Thank god for turians with impeccable aim. With the enemy entrenched so far above the squad, the krogan proved useless, the limited range on their shotguns leaving the work to Shepard and Garrus.

Even so, they'd thinned the mercs down to three when the first krogan appeared, charging doggedly from around the corner.

"Concentrate fire on the mercs," Shepard said, shouting into her radio. "Let's give Wrex a chance to take control of the tank-grown." She sighted down another heavy, taking it out with two shots. "But Wrex, if you can't talk them down before they become a problem, we have to take them out. I can't risk the mission."

"I hear you, Shepard. Just take care of yours and let me take care of mine." The clan leader thundered up next to her, his footsteps shaking the sludgy ground as he slammed into her cover hard enough to knock the crates over."

Anger and frustration reached their boiling point as Shepard landed on her ass in the mud again, the chill, stinking slime splashing up the back of her neck. Cursing a streak that would have once resulted in a week of washing her mouth out with soap, Shepard clambered back into cover on all fours. Resting Ingrid on the crate, she set up her shot, enjoying the fantasy of lining up Wrex's backside in her sights far too much for comfort. The second last trooper fell.

When Wrex stood and strode out of cover, the one remaining Sun popped up and unloaded a heat sink worth of shots. The battlemaster just ignored those that penetrated his barrier, calling out, "Krogan!"

Shepard sighted down the solitary merc, missing what Wrex called to the tank-grown as Ingrid's hard, sharp bark sent a bullet straight through the unfortunate bastard's faceplate. As she lowered her weapon she saw the tank-grown turn their shot guns on Wrex. "Wrex, get behind cover!" she screamed over the comms, knowing his chances of hearing her over the weapon fire was slight.

Wrex opened fire on the closest of the tank-grown, aiming low, trying to disable by the look of it. Still, the krogan bulled forward, Wrex's words drowned in gunfire. The tank-grown didn't even hesitate to turn on one of their own. It looked as though the kid was right: Okeer's failures had been set loose, mindless except for the kill.

"Okay, Wrex," Shepard called over the comms, "you tried. I'm not going to let you kill yourself over this." She swapped guns and brought the Mattock to bear on the first krogan. With no mercs to distract them, they'd all moved in on Wrex, and the fool wasn't pulling back.

"Enough!" The shout startled Shepard, mostly because it was Bakara's voice. The female strode out into the line of fire her hands held out. "Krogan, listen to me! We are not your enemy!"

"Hold your fire!" Shepard called into the radio. "Everyone hold your fire. Garrus, keep an eye on her vitals." Bracing herself, Shepard readied to race out and throw herself between the shaman and the hail of bullets.

Note to self: Get yourself a damned visor and then wear it everywhere except bed.
Shepard's breath froze in her lungs as the gunfire hesitated. Maybe it was going to work. She crossed her fingers. "Shout if she shows the slightest sign of taking too much damage," she whispered to Garrus. "Wrex, you'll have to get her into cover while everyone else takes them out."

Her concentration riveted on the shaman, Shepard barely heard the squad's affirmations. The krogan female's presence transformed the field of mud into a sacred space, the sheer power of her freezing everyone in their tracks. For one, pure, breathless moment, Shepard thought the shaman had broken through, but then whatever shock had stopped the bullets dissipated, releasing hell once more.

"She's taking too much fire, Shepard," Garrus called, but the first bloom of blood on the shaman's robes had already shoved Shepard out into the fray.

Hitting her Garrus-overclocked shields, Shepard threw herself in front of the shaman, pushing the female krogan back toward cover as she opened fire. Her eyes flicked toward the clan chief then back. Stubborn ass. Even though nearly half of the tank-grown lay dead in the mud, wide swaths of orange flowed, garish against Wrex's red armour. "Come on, Wrex. It's not working. Pull back."

The shaman let out a gasp of pain and stumbled, going down onto one knee, dragging Shepard's gut along with her. Tearing herself away from Wrex's little melodrama, Shepard hung up her Mattock and called out, "Garrus, Jack, keep them off us." Wrapping an arm around the krogan female's back, Shepard helped heave her out of the mud, supporting her as they half hobbled, half ran to the nearest cover. Shepard eased the shaman down behind the crates, then took a knee next to her. "Are you okay?"

The shaman looked into Shepard's eyes. "I have endured and recovered from far worse, Captain. I'll be fit to continue in a moment."

Shepard dove into her belt pouches and pulled out a bottle of water, passing it over before she drew her assault rifle and leaped over the crates, wading back in. She thrust herself between Wrex and the krogan he was trying to save, refusing to move even when Wrex tried to ram her out of the way. Thus, her shield alarm was flashing by the time the last tank-grown went down, three of her rounds punching a hole the size of a fist through his headplate.

The clan lord stood over the corpses, his entire body vibrating with what felt very much like rage. Spinning toward her, Wrex loomed, an avalanche needing only one snowflake to send it crashing down the mountain, destroying everything in its path, namely her. His face scrunched into a vicious scowl, his mouth opening and closing as his battle against his rage left him beached. After a moment, his shoulders dropped, and he reached up to scrub his jaw with the back of his wrist.

"You've got to fight smarter than that." Shepard said, keeping her voice low. She reached out to grip his arm and hit his medigel a couple of times. Even Wrex's impressive regeneration ability could use a kick start. "You can't sacrifice yourself, and you certainly can't sacrifice the shaman to this. As painful and sharp as killing these krogan is … they are a handful of krogan bred and turned insane by a renegade warlord on a mudball in the middle of fucking nowhere, Wrex."

She lifted a hand to the rest of the squad and waved for them to go ahead even as she continued. "There are millions of krogan back on Tuchanka who are relying on you to show uncommon intelligence and foresight. Are you willing to trade the future of all those females and babies for your righteous anger?"

As she said the last, a bright spark of understanding flared behind her eyes. When she spoke again, the words came out absent, her focus staring into that spark, trying to draw out the meaning it illuminated. "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is
"What?" Wrex grunted, looking back over his shoulder.

"The lines are from a poem by Yeats back at the dawn of the twentieth century." The threads of connection continued to weave their elusive pattern inside her head. "Something Garrus tried to tell me an hour ago." She swiped at the trickles of sweat rolling down her face. "He told me that we were headed for a brutal war. I thought he meant the death toll, but he was talking about another death entirely.

She looked up, meeting Wrex's stare. "We're both going to have to suffer a few deaths, Wrex." A sigh trembled along the edge of tears. "As much as we've seen and done and suffered, we both hold onto what Yeats called ceremonies of innocence … ideals that worked wonderfully before the Reapers." Walking over to him, she nodded to the path ahead. They couldn't afford to be left too far behind.

Wrex grunted and brought his shotgun up into high ready. "You're not making sense, Shepard."

Shepard lifted her Mattock and nodded, a soft, self-effacing laugh turning over and burrowing deep into her throat. "The picture is still forming in my head, but we both want to save everyone, and the hard cold truth is that we're going to have to let our saviour complexes die. We are responsible for a fuckton of lives, and that means we're going to have to sacrifice pieces of ourselves so our people don't need to." She waggled her head.

"Still don't know what you're talking about." The krogan bulldozed ahead, moving fast enough that Shepard needed to run to keep up with him.

"Okay," she said, "I'll be blunt. As much as I hate having to kill all these krogan, I will sacrifice them and the chunk of my soul that slaughtering them will carve out of me. And I'll do it because you and the shaman are more important on a galactic scale. A few more fighters won't tip the balance, but the two of you are invaluable in this war." She slapped the back of his upper arm. "Hate me if you need to." Running ahead, she relieved Garrus on point and pushed into the wreckage.

As they made the last turn, Shepard spotted a single tank-grown krogan standing in the center of yet another muddy clearing firing up at yet another small squad of Blue Suns. Ducking into cover, she pulled Ingrid, and with two headshots, dropped half of them while Garrus took out the others. The tank-grown just stood in the center of the space, gun held cradled in his hand.

Shepard signalled the rest of the squad to keep back, then crooked a finger for Wrex and the shaman to follow her forward. Holding her hands out from her body, she stepped sideways, circling around the krogan as she closed the distance.

The tank-grown krogan stepped toward her, the familiar music of a squad's worth of guns cocking greeting the movement. She held up a hand and let him close until he leaned into her, his helmet bumping gently off the top of her head.

"Seven night cycles," the krogan said, his voice a soft, deep tumble of sound, "since I was told I was imperfect and flushed from glass mother. Since, killing is all I have known, but you are different." His face bumped against the top of her head again. "You do not smell of mud and garbage."

Shepard took a step back, surprised. She should reek of the place having bathed in its filth more than once. "We're not from this planet. We came because the warlord, Okeer, called for help when
the Collectors attacked."

Wrex pushed up next to her. "Imperfect? Do you mean you aren't free of the genophage?"

The behemoth stepped back a couple of steps and rolled his shoulders a little. "I know only that the voice in the water stopped speaking, and I was flushed from glass mother. The ember did not spark, and so I fight. I am not what Father needed me to be."

The shaman moved up on Shepard's right. "The ember?" Reaching out, the female placed a hand on the tank-grown's head. "This father is disappointed because he believes your ember didn't spark?"

"Ember?" Shepard asked. "You mean, this father believes this krogan was created without a soul?"

The shaman nodded, but stayed focused on the young male under her hand. "I am the shaman of Clan Urdnot's females. Do you understand what that means?"

The tank-grown nodded, bowing so deeply that he went down on one knee. "The voice in the water called you the 'ever-burning ember of the krogan', the heart of the people."

"Yes." She crouched and shifted her hand to his chest. "Can you feel your hearts beating, child?"

The young krogan looked up and nodded.

"And what do they tell you? What do they whisper to you about the spirit they feed?" She pushed off her knee and held out her hand, pulling him up when he took it.

Feeling a sacred sort of hush fall over the muddy, stinky pit, Shepard backed away, giving the krogan their space. She waved the others forward, sending them to take positions along the road ahead. They were nearly to the tangle of wreckage that Okeer used as a base. Only Garrus remained behind, standing pressed against the back of Shepard's arm. She leaned back into him a little, grateful for the moment's peace.

"They say that I am alive, that I must fight ... struggle against the enemy of all krogan." His head fell. "But I failed."

"I am the guardian of the ember, and I say that it is not so." She slapped her palm against his shoulder, shoving him back a little. "You are not perfect, but as long as those hearts beat, you are krogan. That is all you need to be." She shoved him again. "Your ember burns as true as mine, child." The shaman turned and headed out to follow the others as if she expected to be obeyed.

"Walk with us away from this place and learn what it means to feel the fire of being true krogan."

The krogan looked at each of them, then turned and followed the shaman in a manner that made Shepard think very much of a puppy. She punched Wrex in the arm as he followed, his early rage cooled.

"That's one." Glancing up at Garrus, she gave him a thin-lipped smile. "Let's get this done and get the hell out of here."

"Can't be soon enough for me," he agreed, running a glove over her crusty, gritty hair. "And you need a shower. Seriously." He fanned his talons in front of his face and stepped away. "The stench coming off of you ... ."

"Careful there, General, I'm armed and rumor has it that I'm occasionally dangerous as well." She grinned and shook her head. "Sweet baby Jesus, you're lucky I love you." She bumped him with her shoulder as she jogged past. They made excellent time up the long, shallow slope, following a
makeshift road of plywood, sheet metal, and pallets toward the corpse of a massive dreadnought. They stopped for a lengthy rest inside one of the cabins, scrambling the locks on the doors entering and exiting the space. Along the inside, the deck had been sheared away, leaving a fifteen metre drop that provided an excellent lookout.

Once she ensured her squad was settled, Shepard leaned against the railing and looked out over the drop, the line of sight clear all the way down the hull of the old behemoth. She pressed her lips together and shook her head then glanced toward Garrus as he stepped up beside her. "This day has just gone from pretty cool to massive suckage." The words tumbled out along a heavy, weary sigh.

"Pretty cool? It started with our shuttle being shot down." Garrus reached out and rested his hand on her shoulder. "You might need to do a little life experience reclassification."

The sound of his voice, his gentle teasing, spread through her like warm water and drew her closer until their arms touched. "I never thought I'd say this, but I miss chasing Saren." She felt rather than saw his reaction to that, a mixture of surprise and understanding. "It was so damned easy. It was an adventure and … ." She shrugged again. "It was fun. Yes, we had our share of tragedy and terror and all sorts of horrible crap, but it was the dream team against the bad guy. And we kicked Sovereign's ass most soundly."

Garrus turned to half sit on the railing. He looked down at her for a moment before returning to watch the room. "It was clear cut, that's for sure. We knew we were the good guys. Saren was the bad guy. We had a firm target lock on our destination: stop Sovereign from letting the Reapers back into the galaxy."

Reaching out, he guided her around and tucked her under his arm. "This fight is just so huge, and so many shades of grey that it's impossible to get a handle on."

Shepard leaned into him and crossed her arms over her chest, dropping the gates. "What that tank-baby said about not having a spark … that's the same damned thing the Reapers are in a tizzy over. That's why the Collectors are here. Somehow Okeer broke the code, and the Reapers are desperate for what he's discovered."

He gave her a squeeze. "We'll make sure they don't get it, but for now, go hose down and rest. The Collectors definitely aren't going to vapourize the Reapers' metaphysical angst cure from orbit. We have time."

Shepard rolled her neck, wincing as the mud inside her collar abraded her neck. "Yeah, okay. You've got the watch for the next hour?" When he nodded, she pulled free of his embrace and headed over to the improvised hose they'd hooked up to a sink.

It really had started out as a pretty great day.

(1) W.B. Yeats 1919 (The Second Coming)
**Future Continuous Chapter 10**

Chapter Summary

Sol hummed for a moment as she mused then met his eyes, hers bright and curious … and a little teasing. "Did you have to do a lot of remedial training to get into the academy?" She wriggled a little, digging deeper into the covers. "I mean, out there in the wild merc territories, you didn't exactly grow up aimed toward the service the way Garrus and I did."

After staring at her for a couple of seconds, stunned into silence, Nihlus chuckled. "Seriously? You want to talk about my misspent youth? With all the questions you could ask?"

**Morumplacus** - Restless spirit, undead, ghoul. From ancient turian folklore. The souls of those slain by dishonourable means were believed to wander after death to exact justice. They were believed to torment the living by taking the form of whatever the victim feared most.

**45 Days ASR**

Nihlus kicked his feet up onto the bed, then threw the duvet over his legs. After piling the pillows under his cowl and fringe, he relaxed down into the deep, luxurious memcell, a long sigh greeting the painful bliss of horizontality. For long seconds, he just closed his eyes and breathed, pulling in long draughts of air.

Through the warmth, dispelling his comfort, a wan chill slithered along the length of his spine and oozed between the ridges of his brain. Spirits, did Shepard feel that way all the time: something alive and malevolent crawling around inside her skull? Surely, his current, mild uneasiness amounted to the tiniest taste of what the black orbs visited upon her, and suddenly his arms ached to hold her. The silent weight of his omnitool whispered that he should call her, but he pushed that selfishness aside. She'd call as soon as she and Garrus wrapped up things on Korlus. Wanting to call her was about easing the asari's slick caress inside his mind, rather than aiding Shepard in any form.

He didn't know who or even what that asari was, but he'd never experienced anything as terrifyingly cold and empty as her stare. The only other time he'd touched minds with an asari, it had been Shiala when she passed along the information from the Thorian. That contact felt like slipping into a warm bath, comforting and easy despite the horror of the information that she'd passed on. The mind that touched his at the club dumped him sprawling and screaming into a fathomless, black hole in the bottom of the ocean: a hole filled with dangerous, starving creatures snapping their jaws in anticipation of the moment he gave up and stopped trying to swim.

A heavy shudder stuttered down his spine, locking the muscles across his hips. Moaning as the serrated dagger abandoned his pelvis to saw its way down his thighs, he arched his back, tensing his muscles into tighter and tighter knots. He sucked in a long breath, holding it until his chest strained and his head pounded before letting it hiss slowly over his tongue. As he exhaled, he straightened out, his muscles all melting down into the mattress. It took tying himself into a knot and releasing it three more times before the muscle spasms eased.
Muttering his relief, he opened his eyes and reached over to lift Saren's journal from the night table. Distraction appeared to be the flavour of the night. He opened the book to a detailed sketch of a monstrously deformed, cybernetic-laced turian.

A massive crowd awaited our ship as it landed. Desolas draped himself and his monsters in robes fashioned after the ones worn by the Valluvian priests in ancient times. He stood before the crowd and claimed to have returned to reopen Temple Palaven, to lead the turian people into an age of glory and conquest. The monsters he explained as being warriors transformed by the war against the humans, warriors who had earned the robes they wore. I admit to being moved despite knowing it was all a lie.

My brother spoke like a prophet on the eve of apotheosis, and the people cheered him. They resented the council stepping in to end the war with the humans. The politicians said that it was the price we needed to pay for all that we received through cooperating with the rest of the races. Desolas called it betraying the turian people. I didn't disagree.

And so I watched my brother from behind the line of his 'priests' as he named himself saviour. I watched him trying to command his evolved troops, but they refused every order given to them unless it served the monolith's agenda. And yes, I believed it possessed an agenda, I just didn't know what it was.

Everything about the 'Evolved' made me uneasy. And as I spent more time in proximity to the monolith, I began to feel a strange scratching at the back of my skull, the irritation of a splinter under my plates. Maybe I didn't see it, or perhaps I chose to ignore how Desolas changed over those weeks, but as we arrived on Palaven, I could no longer deny that my brother was consumed by the machine. I hated the thing. It filled me with dread, and I hated it. It called to me, and I hated it.

My dread turned to fear as Desolas admitted that he was trying to form a sort of tentative control over the Evolved by making himself the monolith's protector. He hoped to buy time and learn how to use it to gain actual control over them. To say that I harboured reservations would be a gross understatement.

When we arrived at the temple, the Evolved refused to move the artefact. They claimed that the crowd concerned them, so Desolas bent, saying he didn't intend to move it until nightfall. How pathetic his delusions of power must have seemed to the intelligence behind the monolith ... even to himself. For surely, some part of him knew that he'd never control the creatures it created. The monolith controlled them, and as I looked in my brother's eyes, I saw a truth ... . No, I felt a truth, that the monolith controlled through deception.

The soft tread of bare feet on carpet and the slight catch of talons in the weave alerted Nihlus to the presence of an intruder. He lowered the book and looked toward the stairs, letting out a long, thin breath. "What are you doing? I thought you went to bed a half hour ago."

Sol padded around his bed, the duvet off the guest bed wrapped tightly around her. "You seemed like you needed some company after that weird crap with the psycho asari." She climbed up on the bed next to him, piled up the spare pillows, and spread her blanket over her legs. When she finished bouncing around and generally making a show of getting settled, she leaned up, her hand braced under her jaw and stared at him.

"So, want to talk about it?" she asked, narrowing her eyes into a laser-keen stare.

"No." He turned back to the journal, hoping that she'd go away if he ignored her. "And I don't need to have a sleep over. I stopped being afraid of morumplacus in my closet some time ago." After
thirty seconds of staring at the book without actually reading, he glanced her way just to meet her intense, sea-blue stare. Letting out a long, musical sigh, he said, "I appreciate your concern, but I'm fine."

Sol flopped down on the pillow and pulled her cover up to her mandibles. "Maybe I'm not." She closed her eyes. "Are you done reading? It's hard to sleep with the lights on." A well-pleased grin answered his sigh. "What? Is my generous offer of company and protection from the things that bite in the night causing you inconvenience?"

Nihlus set the journal down on the night table and turned off the lamp. "You cause me inconvenience in general, and I'm pretty certain that you delight in it, so shut up and go to sleep." After fluffing up the pillows again, he closed his eyes. Focusing on his breathing, he tried to clear and settle his mind enough to sleep, but between Sol's beady-eyed stare boring into the side of his head, his confrontation with the asari, the ache in his chest prompted by Saren's lonely descent into madness, and the horror of the Arca Monolith warping and indoctrinating everyone on Palaven . . . .

"Want to talk about it?"

Giving in, Nihlus rolled onto his side to find her brilliant eyes sparkling at him in the dim light. "Talk about what, exactly?" Grumbling to cover up the fact that her presence did calm the mess inside his head, he slid his arm under the pillows and dragged them down to hold them between his shoulder, cowl, and head. "What does that burning curiosity want to know?" His brow plates rose a little more every second that she considered the question. "Saren's journal perhaps?"

"Hm. No. I don't want to have nightmares." Sol hummed for a moment as she mused then met his eyes, hers bright and curious ... and a little teasing. "Did you have to do a lot of remedial training to get into the academy?" She wriggled a little, digging deeper into the covers. "I mean, out there in the wild merc territories, you didn't exactly grow up aimed toward the service the way Garrus and I did."

After staring at her for a couple of seconds, stunned into silence, Nihlus chuckled. "Seriously? You want to talk about my misspent youth? With all the questions you could ask?" He held up a hand when she opened her mouth. "No, if this is the query burning itself through your skull, I'll answer it." He scratched his neck. "I was actually educated and reasonably intelligent, and I'd grown up fighting and shooting, so I didn't have to take any remedial training."

He let out a long breath, relaxing down into the thick mattress, the breath turning into a sigh as the clenched muscles along his jaw and down his spine relaxed. "They asked me to take a placement test, which I passed with flying colours. Did have a few hiccups on the psych eval thanks to my complete scorn for authority and my tendency to answer annoying questions with my fists." He grinned, shrugging his one shoulder. "They also insisted that I refine my hand to hand technique. Apparently breaking off spurs isn't considered good form in the military."

"Who knew." Mandibles flicking hard, Sol shook her head. "You were a rebel?" She stared at him, her eyes narrowing until he couldn't make them out. "It's always the quiet ones."

He hummed a susurrus of agreement. "My lack of appreciation for authority figures and the rules continued to plague me into my postings with external forces, and they were glad to hand me over to the Spectres when my presence was requested." He closed his eyes, the small talk easing him into the pillows and weighing down his eyelids.

"And that was Saren, right?" She chuffed softly. "He was a legend back then. The youngest Spectre, the council's standard bearer?"
A long breath whispered between them before Nihlus answered, the picture of that lithe, quicksilver biotic in the gleaming armour forming crystal clear in his mind. "I'd seen him a couple of cycles before. He and a few other Spectres raided the mine where I worked after my pari died. He was amazing, every crazy dream that fills your head when you're a puer lying in bed, conjuring up great stories about Spectres."

He opened his eyes, meeting hers in the dark, and smiled as he recalled the combination of terror and awe. "I was starstruck, blown into the upper atmosphere by the sheer power of his presence, and stayed that way for a lot of cycles." As he said the last, Nihlus wondered if he'd ever truly loved Saren, or if it remained hero worship.

"Pari didn't tell us heroic stories of Spectres," Sol said, her voice slurring a little. "His heroes always stayed true to the path of law and order. Spectres were shady characters that haunted the line between good and evil." She chuckled and then yawned. "Naturally, Garrus and I became fascinated with them. I think Garrus would have made a good one if he managed to work that knot out of his … lower intestinal tract."

Silence drifted between them, warm and heavy, and Nihlus's eyes slipped closed again. Then a hand touched his face, startling him awake. Slender talons patted his mandible. "Did that asari scare you, tonight?" Sol asked, the words sliding along a yawn.

He nodded, and gave in as sleep started to claim him. "More than anything except the Reapers. There was a hole inside her, one that she will never be able to fill."

"Good thing we stopped her from taking that kid."

Nihlus yawned in reply and drifted off. It had been a good thing. A very good thing, in fact. He'd saved that child from a terrible death. Not a bad way to end his day. Spirits, he'd accomplished far less so many of his days as a Spectre.

"Goodnight, senux." Clumsy talons patted his mandible again, then slid back under Sol's blanket.

46 Days ASR

A soft ticking sound reeled Nihlus from sleep, pulling him inexorably back to consciousness. He fought back, his eyelids refusing to open, the covers warm and comfortable as their shackles held tight, insisting that he spend several more hours in their embrace. He yawned and rolled over, giving in to sleep's siren call for another minute or so before the tapping returned.

"Fine," he muttered, and forced his eyes open. On his left, Sol slept on. Her gentle, purring snore rolled in and out without interruption.

Tapping, again, like the sound of a branch in the wind. It was a sound for Palaven, where the gardens pressed up against the domin, not for Illium, where the nearest tree stood twenty floors and a bridge away. A shadow moved, black against the watery grey of city night, yanking him up off the mattress.

He stared at the small windows that looked out over the roof. Heart pounding, hard but not fast, he ticked through the possibilities, running a very familiar—almost comforting—tactical risk assessment. Of the scenarios that played out in his head, the most likely was someone on the roof. Another brief interruption in the light flickered across the room; someone definitely wanted his attention. Damn. Making sure not to wake Sol, he slipped out from under the duvet. He lifted his robe from where he'd tossed it before climbing into bed, retrieved his sidearm from the night table, and then headed downstairs.
When the elevator doors closed, he slipped his robe on, and stepped off to the blind side of the elevator. If whoever awaited him on the roof intended to attack, they employed either no guile, or some advanced form of it. Either way, he didn't intend to stand in the open and let anyone fill him full of holes.

*The asari.*

Spirits, maybe he should have awakened Thane. His talon hovered above the control to send the elevator back down. He couldn't trust himself to take her on alone. Of course, if the terror in her eyes when she ran was any indicator, she was either off-planet already or arranging her ride to the furthest corner of the galaxy.

What if his most likely guess proved true? He doubted Specimen Alpha would try to kill him, but how the hell was he supposed to react to the *torin*? Fury? Certainly justified, but probably not useful or productive. Grief? Relief? Happiness? A knot tied itself in his gut. Well, throwing up or succumbing to fluxus certainly made a statement. Not a particularly dignified one, however.

The elevator door slid open, halting his runaway thoughts before they crashed and burned. Thank the spirits.

Silence. Nothing moved, not even a breeze whispered past. Focusing his senses on the other side, he inhaled a long breath, then a second, drawing the air over the receptors in his mouth. Where his ears failed him, his nose wouldn't. Not asari. He clenched his jaw, the knot twisting until his guts felt like they hung from the back of his throat.

"I'm unarmed," a soft, raspy voice called from the other side, the subvocals flat and weary. "I only came to talk, Nihlus."

Still ... not disposed to taking the word of dead people lurking on his rooftop in the middle of the night, the Spectre waited another twenty seconds before he glanced out the door. A shadow stood over by the low wall that surrounded the roof. Although the dark shrouded him more effectively than his cloak, there was no doubt as to the intruder's identity. His sidearm leading the way, Nihlus stepped out onto the roof, the surface still warm under his bare talons, the acrid stink of tar biting the inside of his nostrils.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, pistol sight never wavering from the *torin's* head.

"I believe I said I came to talk." The shadow turned to face him, still anonymous within the obsidian drape of his hood. After another moment, a long, heavy sigh dropped out of that void. "After obtaining my freedom, I fully intended to leave you alone." The intruder strode over to the edge of the roof and pulled his cloak tight around him. "It was a noble, self-sacrificing intention."

"My memory is patchy at best, so I forgot that I've never been all that good with noble or self-sacrificing."

"You're Specimen Alpha?" Nihlus felt like an idiot asking, because he knew the answer, but it felt three or four percent more ridiculous not to ask.

"That's what Cerberus called me, but I think you know better, don't you, Nihlus?"

Nihlus formed his question then let it dissolve into silence a handful of times before he finally
strode over to sit a metre or so to the mysterious torin's left. Ignoring his better sense as it screamed warnings, he placed his pistol on the wall and turned to let his legs dangle over the very long drop into darkness. Once he settled, the question managed to bully its way to the fore.

"So, why did you come? What do you want to talk about?"

The torin leaned forward, bracing his hands against the edge. "I intended to pull the journal and then walk away, but then, I went through the apartment. When I touched those things … ." He shook his head, and let the silence stand.

"She's a good kid," the intruder said suddenly, leaning down to look between his feet. He kicked his heels off the side of the building.

Nihlus winced. That wall backed onto Thane's room. Hopefully the walls blocked sound sufficiently to let the assassin sleep. He scowled as the good kid comment registered. "Who?"

"The cop's filiam. Vakarian." He chuffed. "Your filiam now, too, I suppose. She's good people. I like that she keeps you on your toes."

"She definitely likes to kick with the spur." Nihlus chuckled and shook his head, sparing a glance at the anonymous figure. "She's not a kid. She's three cycles older than you were when you became a Spectre."

The torin laughed and shrugged, his head bobbing slightly inside the cloak. Truly, the person next to Nihlus felt anonymous, no trace of presence or personality, as if all traces of identity had been scrubbed away. Still, when that void turned to look at him, a glint of light reflected in the pale eyes, a tiny sparkle of something alive. "Well, I was exceptional."

Nihlus laughed, the warm, genuine mirth between them feeling like a rare and precious gift. "And modest. Always so modest." He looked down into the dark, faint streams of light flickering hundreds of storeys below. For a long moment, silence ruled. What did he say to this torin? How was he even supposed to feel? Furious? Sad? Fabric whispered against concrete, then a shoulder bumped his, tentative … a reaching out.

Anger sparked at the contact. "What do you want … ?" He spun to stare into the pale eyes beneath the hood. "What do I even call you? Specimen Alpha? Saren? Al?"

A low rumble rolled deep in his companion's throat, even that sound, so familiar, came across as anonymously as the hood. Who or what remained beneath the mantle of heavy fabric? "I loathe the first and am no longer the second. I suppose that means, as much as I hate the name Shepard gave me, it's appropriate to use it." He leaned a little closer, close enough for Nihlus to see his mandibles flutter.

Nihlus scowled and blurted out, "What do you mean, you aren't Saren? You don't stop being someone because your circumstances change."

Al shook his head. "I'm not Saren Arterius any longer. Sovereign devoured Saren, leaving nothing of him behind. Saren used up the last shred of who he was when he shot himself. Cerberus started his heart, got his body breathing again, but most of who he was is just gone." He turned to meet Nihlus's gaze, one hand reaching up to pull down his hood. "Do you see, Nihlus? Do you understand?"

Horror washed over Nihlus in a massive wave of bile and blood as black as what flowed through the Collectors' veins. Almost nothing of the ex-Spectre's face remained. Holes showed the bone
where plates had been removed in whole or in part, the edges of the wounds sealed with metal and circuitry. A singularity flaring to life in Nihlus's chest, he reached up, touching Al's ruined mandible with gentle talons. "Dear spirits."

Al nodded and pulled away, replacing the hood. "All that remains inside this skull is as ruined and patchy as the outside. I have a few, cherished scraps ... and the present." His voice dropped to a low tone over heavy subvocals. "Who I am is what Shepard released me to become. Saren is dead, Nihlus."

Nihlus nodded, the black hole inside his chest sucking in the tangle of anger and pity, resentment and grief, cleaning away the emotional sludge as it emptied him out. He wondered if Al even remembered that Saren had tried to kill him, but then decided that it didn't matter. Not if Saren was dead. Besides, that bullet had sent him down a long, strange path to somewhere amazing, and he wouldn't change it.

Still ... . "What do you want from me?" he asked, pulling himself back around to the reason Al was sitting next to him on the rooftop. "Is there a price on the journal? And why point me to a whole lot of cleared-out bank accounts and safety deposit boxes?"

"There is no price, Nihlus. The journal is everything Saren learned about the Reapers and the cycles. You'll need it, because I don't remember any of that information. The accounts ... ." He shook his head, millstones grinding down a rumble of frustration before it could escape his throat. "The accounts ... I remembered only to send the message, and there is a word ... Leviathan."

"Leviathan?" Nihlus scowled and shook his head. "What or who is it?" Had the entire galaxy begun to speak in riddles?

Al shrugged, shaking his head a little. "That word is associated with three others ... creators, suzerain, and enemy." He swung his legs around and stood, straightening his cloak, his movements declaring the conversation over. "Asking any more won't help, Nihlus. I don't remember. Look in the journal. If Sovereign told me about it, it will be in there."

Nihlus turned around, but didn't stand. "Why did you come here tonight?" He shook his head to ward off another half explanation or lie, frustration building into a choking wad in his throat. "Just tell me."

Al took a long breath and sat back down. "As I walked through the apartment, I touched all those things ... the art and furniture ... all the articles and trinkets that meant so much to him, and I realized that they all meant nothing. Only one thing in that apartment mattered, and he threw it away." Pale milky eyes stared into Nihlus's for a moment, then Al leaned in and touched his brow to Nihlus's. "I just wanted you to know that I see what he threw away, even if he never did."

He pushed up and strode across the roof, taking quick, limping steps that made Nihlus ache just watching them. "Good luck, Nihlus. Live well. Take Shepard as your bond-mate, let her love you, and be happy." He put a foot up on the fire escape and turned back. "Just don't let her talk you to death. Spirits, does that woman talk." He jumped onto the fire escape and disappeared from view.

Nihlus stayed where he was, mind racing and throat dry. Their conversation lasted what ... ten minutes, maybe fifteen and now ... spirits, how did he process everything that he'd been told?

One piece at a time.

The journal, well, nothing had changed there, but the accounts led to Leviathan. The only one he'd heard of was the Leviathan of Dis, but if it ever existed, it had disappeared cycles before. He stood
and walked to the elevator, his attention turned inward. Maybe Liara and the Brysons could figure out if Leviathan had any basis in reality. He still needed to figure out the identity of the asari who was cleaning out the accounts. If he believed Al, she formed a direct link.

Looking up, he realized that he stood inside the elevator, canted against the wall, but hadn't hit the control. Embarrassment traced one searing finger along the ridge of his plates as he reached out and sent the carriage down to the apartment.

Saren. Saren truly was dead. The Reapers had stolen everything he was, except for that last important second. Nihlus swallowed, his tongue sticking to the back of his throat. His talons grabbed a handful of his robe. Letting out a disgusted chuff, he smoothed the material back over his thigh. Al had set him free … set them both free … Nihlus to get on with his life, no more anchors tied to the past.

"I just wanted you to know that I see what he threw away, even if he never did."

The elevator doors opened. Nihlus stepped to the threshold and wrapped his arms around his waist, staring at the washed out grey on grey of the sitting room. How many nights had he spent sitting alone in Saren's beautiful, austere habitat while the Spectre went about his social life? How many parties had he spent upstairs because he ceased to exist when Saren had guests.

"It was an entire lifetime ago," he whispered, growling at himself under his breath. "You were barely more than a child. Let it go."

"I just wanted you to know that I see what he threw away, even if he never did."

Al had come to say what Saren never could have. Grief and a free-floating sort of anger bubbled to the surface.

Feet padded quietly down the stairs, interrupting his confusion and bitterness. Sol appeared at the bottom, wrapped in her duvet. After staring at him for a second, she shuffled over, her legs tangled in excess blanket. "Everything okay?" she asked, her voice sliding along the scale of a yawn.

Reaching out, she squeezed his forearm, the contact warm and grounding. "You look a little shaky."

He forced his mandibles into a smile and dropped his arms. "Yeah, I'm fine, go back to sleep. You could even go back to your own bed." He patted her hand then headed for the stairs. As he started the climb, he began to shiver, the cool, arctic night having slithered through the fabric of his robe. He shook out his hands then rubbed them against the heavy fabric. Yeah, it was just the cold.

"Goodnight, Sol. Sleep well." The whisper sounded tremulous to his ears, but he clenched his jaw and pushed on, heading into the bathroom. After relieving himself and washing the roof off his feet, he walked out the door to find Solana sitting on the end of his bed. Damn. He swallowed a couple of times and clenched his fist.

"Specimen Alpha?" she asked, peering at him like a maraquil sighting down its dinner. "It sounded like another torin out there." A wide yawn displayed all her teeth before she flicked her mandibles against her mouth a couple of times. She snuggled down into her duvet, pulling it up around her aural canals.

"Yes, and I'm fine, I just caught a chill and need a heavier robe. Now go to sleep. I'll explain everything at breakfast." He ducked into the closet, closing the door but leaving it unlatched. She might get suspicious if he locked himself in. He changed his robe for a heavier one, then turned to his armour rack and snatched his flask from its pouch. Tossing his head back, he poured the
remainder of the contents down his throat. The brandy burned all the way down, pulling a long, overloud sigh of relief from deep in his belly as the knots finally began to untie.

Sol had settled herself back on his bed when he walked out. "Your bed is comfier than mine," she said, matter-of-a-facty as if it explained why she hadn't returned to her own.

"You snore," he said, sitting on the side, facing away from her. He drank down half a bottle of soda, rinsing his mouth the best he could before he laid down. Once tucked in, his pillows mounded to support all the right places, he closed his eyes, hoping that Sol would take the hint.

The mattress shifted beside him, and long, thin talons wrapped around his. "Alpha is Saren, isn't he?" the tarin asked, her voice barely stirring the air.

"He was. Saren's dead. Sovereign destroyed him." He turned his hand over to squeeze her hand right back. "Al is someone new, but at least he had enough of Saren's memories to help us figure this out."

"Rest in peace, Saren Arterius," Sol said. "In the end, you came through."

Nihlus nodded. Saren had come through for them all ... and for him, even if it was from beyond the grave. It was enough to let it all go ... to let Saren rest.

Still, it took quite some time before he fell back to sleep.

Sol looked up from her breakfast when Nihlus's omnitool chimed. "So, what's on the agenda for today? Another day of following that asari around as she empties back accounts?"

Nihlus activated his omnitool's interface, shooting a glare over the small screen without lifting his head. He opened the notification and blew out a short sigh of relief. "No. The asari we want is Jona Sederis." Browplates rising, he read the rest of the bulletin. "Who is a real piece of work. She's the founder of the Eclipse mercenaries and a psychopath of the first order. Wonderful."

"Why does some looney Eclipse leader have access to Saren's accounts?" Sol asked. She turned to face Thane. "Come on, Mr. Assassin, you must have some thoughts on all of this?"

Thane looked up from his bowl of fruit, glanced at Nihlus, then leaped from his chair when the door chimed. "I'll see who is at the door," he called, already hurrying that way. "It might be an assassin. If I'm fortunate, they may kill me before I need to answer that question."

Nihlus grinned at Sol. "He'd rather deal with assassins than you." He continued down the report on Sederis. "How many killer asari are we going to have to deal—" He looked up, his heart dropping into his guts as Thane appeared in the doorway, the drell's face drawn, his submachine gun gripped in his hands.

"At least one more," Thane said, the bright skin along his jawline flushing even deeper hues. "The asari justicar is at the door."
Shepard opened her mouth to ask if the krogan was Okeer, but she didn't get a chance to speak before a cyclone of bellowing rage threw her aside. Murder entered that room, a specter clinging to Wrex's back, whispering promises of spilled blood and crushed bone into the clan lord's aural canals. Ignoring the protests launched by her healthy sense of self-preservation, Shepard leaped after Wrex, grabbing hold of one massive elbow.

46 Days ASR

"All right, let's get this done and get the hell out of here. I need to sleep for a week." Shepard waved her team forward, pausing to meet Kaidan's stare before following along. "You got this, Sparky?"

The Marine managed to find a smile hidden somewhere in his exhaustion to accessorize his nod. Still, it couldn't hide the bruised luggage beneath his eyes or shadowed hollows at his temples and beneath his cheekbones. "Yes, ma'am." Glancing back at the thirty-two Blue Suns and three tank-grown krogan, he shrugged. "Our guests look even more beat down and worn out than we do. I don't think they'll give us any trouble."

She gave him a jaunty little salute when he turned back. "Just make sure our exit stays clear." Ready and more than ready to be off Korlus and standing under a hot shower with her fiance, Shepard took off after her team. Only one small room stood in the way of reaching their goal. Well, one small room and a couple hundred Collectors.

Pausing as she passed an open panel, Shepard reached out, running her fingers over an ancient power coupling. Despite their having climbed up through more than twenty decks, the ancient turian dreadnought still loomed over them. The hierarchy certainly hadn't built them small before the council stepped in with their regulations and treaties.

She traced the pocked, time-worn ceramic surface, brow furrowed. Other than the wear, it looked as though she could slip it from its socket and stick it into a modern ship. How? The turians, salarians, and asari had all possessed prothean archives and beacons for a great deal longer than humanity; how could they have allowed their technology to stall for so long? They should be so far ahead of her people that it wasn't funny. Not that being on a near equal footing hadn't saved humanity's butt during the First Contact War.

Still, with their massive headstart, why hadn't the asari discovered ways to integrate biotic weapons into ships? And why did a power coupling from a thousand year old turian warship look almost exactly like the current gen version?

"Shepard." Garrus laid his hand on her shoulder, a slight flutter of amusement betraying his serious, scolding tone. "There will be lots of time to pick your way through the museum of wreckage once the mission is over. We can vacation here if you like." He slid his talons down her arm to removed her hand from the coupling, leaning in as he did so that his breath warmed her neck in a most delicious and definitely not scolding way. "We're almost there. Let's get it done."
She turned into him, pressing a quick kiss on the end of his nose. "Yeah, I know." She followed him across a long, open area to the door on the other side. "Do you ever wonder why your people aren't more advanced than mine?" She pressed her back against the side of the door as he took position opposite her. "You've had access to the prothean archives for a thousand or so years longer than we have."

Although the glare of his visor obscured his eyes from that distance, Shepard felt certain that Garrus rolled them at her. "No, I haven't. Now open the damned door, I want a shower and to sleep on a real bed."

Shepard stuck her tongue out at him, then motioned for Wrex and Jack to take positions a little further back and to the outside of she and Garrus. She might need their biotics to shoehorn their way into the room. Once they took their positions, Shepard counted down on her fingers. Three … two … one.

She hit the door, the stench of a hundred horrific, tormented deaths slapping her in the face so hard that she almost fell back. A meteor straight to the gut, the reek of vomit, shit, piss, bile, and decay sent a tsunami of sick scorching up the back of her throat. In her peripherals, she saw Garrus stagger back a little before pushing in on the threshold. Holding her breath, she swung into the opening, rifle leading the way.

"Clear," Garrus called, his voice choked, digging its way out of his chest. Lithe movements belying any discomfort, he swept the left hand side of the room before standing guard at the inner door.

"Clear," Shepard echoed, her gag reflex sucker punching her every three seconds as she swept right. Blinking in the gloomy light, she squinted at the ragged lumps strewn around the room, uncertain of what any of it was. Uncertainty lasted two heartbeats before morphing into horror and then rage. "What the hell is this?" she said. Three tables lined the right hand wall, all of them hosting a krogan corpse in some stage of autopsy. Behind them, corpses had been dumped into a pile, moldering. On the left side of the room a desk and another body-laden table stood side by side.

"We're clear," she managed to call back to the rest of the squad, remembering what she was doing. Gliding on a thin sheet of icy disgust, her feet barely lifted from the deck plating as she crossed the threshold into what felt more like an abattoir or the mass grave in an internment camp than a lab or a surgery. She turned to tell Wrex to stay back, knowing that the clan chief's barely controlled temper would boil over as soon as he caught sight of the bodies. She stopped halfway through the first step, her toe catching as she realized, she might as well try to halt the seasons.

After a moment of debate, she opted for the route of fewest friendly casualties and spun, hurrying through the room to the inner door. Trusting her instincts, she waved Garrus into position on the other side. She just needed to get the door open and get everyone out of Wrex's way. When Garrus nodded, she palmed the control.

What awaited her on the other side of the door raked sharp nails of surprise down her spine. Gun leading, she swung into the threshold, sweeping for unfriendlies. Nothing. Other than a krogan in a maturation tank, the room's only occupant was an elderly krogan who paced back and forth in front of a large bank of windows, mumbling to himself and waving his arms.

Shepard opened her mouth to ask if the krogan was Okeer, but she didn't get a chance to speak before a cyclone of bellowing rage threw her aside. Murder entered that room, a specter clinging to Wrex's back, whispering promises of spilled blood and crushed bone into the clan lord's aural canals. Ignoring the protests launched by her healthy sense of self-preservation, Shepard leaped after Wrex, grabbing hold of one massive elbow.
"Okeer!" the clan chief roared. His charge didn't slow, he simply dragged Shepard across the floor, paying her no more notice than he would a fly landing on his armour.

"Little help here," she called. Using the behemoth's arm like a slingshot, Shepard threw herself in front of him. She braced a hand against his chest and leaned into him—she might as well have been fighting a train. "Sweet baby Jesus, Wrex! Stop! You can't just rip Okeer to pieces."

He stopped, glaring at her with enough rage to burn two massive holes straight through her. "You saw those bodies, Shepard!"

Instead of backing down, she gave him a substantial shove, barely rocking him. "I did, but we need to find out what's going on here first, and if he has a genophage cure, we can't kill him. You can't sacrifice all your people just to have the pleasure of killing him."

"Cure? Surviving the genophage doesn't make a krogan special or worthy," a deep, throaty voice said from behind her. Madness curled through the words, grabbing hold and spinning Shepard around to face it.

Tar-slick spiders scrambled out of the folds and crannies of her brain, swarming out to embrace their brethren, the call of the krogan's indoctrination sweet, so very sweet, to them. Feeling the clan leader pushing on her from behind, Shepard reached back, her hands fastening around Wrex's wrists like shackles. Okeer's bronze-gold eyes latched onto her, forming shackles of another kind when she saw the old soul—over a millennia of wisdom and experience and regret—floundering beneath the white water currents of the indoctrination.

"Where is it?" she called, keeping her voice low and focused, a stiletto blade trying to pierce the madness. Whatever indoctrinated him had struck like a wrecking ball, smashing everything around it into pieces. Brute force had been deployed to destroy Okeer, to render him useless to the Collectors. "Where is the orb, Okeer?"

"Let a thousand die in a clutch," the warlord said, an almost frantic, greasy chuckle sliding beneath his words. "Don't lament the dead or coddle the ones that live. Pathetic. They are the last mewling cries of a people who died over fourteen hundred cycles ago." Okeer tore free of their stare and spun toward the massive growth tank and its unconscious occupant. Shepard winced, a sharp, ripping-band-aid pain accompanying the break.

"Only perfection will save us." Okeer pressed both hands to the tank's glass. "Perfection that spits on the genophage, a lance to pierce the galaxy's heart and tear it out."

Snapping the spider-silk tendrils weaving between she and the warlord, Shepard spun away. "He's indoctrinated," she said to Garrus and the others. "See if you can find one of the orbs here, and search the computers for any information. Okeer's useless."

Noting that Wrex had stopped trying to bulldoze over her, Shepard glanced over her shoulder at him. "You okay?" The set to his jaw and the fury that flickered beneath his carmine stare tightened her grip on his wrists, he still burned low but hot, ready to set fire to the planet.

"He's mad." Wrex stepped back and shook his head. "We won't get anything from him, Shepard. We should just put him down."

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Releasing him, Shepard nodded, knowing the truth when it growled at her. "Maybe, but let's give it a shot, Brother Wrex." Her shoulders crept toward her ears then dropped. "Can't hurt to try to figure out what's going on here." Spinning toward the door, Shepard searched the stunned and disgusted faces for the oasis of sanity at the heart of the madness. When her eyes found the
The shaman beckoned the female krogan forward. The shaman had been able to reach the tank-grown, her natural empathic abilities slipping along the ley lines of their particular madness.

"No one else has a chance," Shepard said, simply. A pair of large, scalding hot hands slid up the skin of her back, their touch sticky with dripping tar. She spun to face Okeer, drawing herself up as she reached into her belt pouch for the dose of serum she'd prayed she wouldn't need. Still, as the krogan loomed over her, the toxic black stink of desert pavement stabbed the inside of her nose. She stuck the syringe in her medigel port. Better safe than mindless.

"Shepard," Okeer whispered, deep and guttural, her name coming out as if he just registered her presence. "They want to take you apart, to pull you into pieces and dissect you in paper-thin slices." Leaning down to stare into her eyes, the krogan sniffed at her, then chuffed out a sharp, coughing laugh. "You reek of defiance." He grunted, his face scrunching into a frown. "And cybernetics, like burning batteries."

"They can be fought, Okeer," Shepard said, punching the point home despite her belief that whatever had taken crowbars and jackhammers to his brain had smashed it beyond hope. "I've been fighting for years, and my mind is still mostly my own." Her gut twisted with a sick, bile-sour wrench as the spiders rubbed against her grey matter like possessive cats.

The warlord leaned closer, his breath hot and fetid on her face. "They've waited. They're patient, because they know that no one can challenge them. They want you, and they want my prototype. They want Wrex and the general, and so I called." His laugh dripped a sort of relieved madness. "They're coming. Soon they'll let me die."

A muted explosion echoed through the chamber, slapping Shepard's taut nerves hard enough that she jumped despite staying focused on Okeer. As the orb exploded into slag, a blank expression wiped the warlord's face clean, his eyes and mouth drooping. When he dropped to one knee, Shepard took a deep breath and muttered a prayer. "Blessed Enkindlers, clench your giant backsides and cross all four eyes that this doesn't kill him outright." Grabbing two of her two serum injections, she stabbed them into the sides of his throat. Guilt's sly fingers twisted around her spine, but she shrugged them off. The worst the injections would do is give him a merciful death; at best, maybe they'd give her and the krogan a shot at getting something coherent out of him.

"Orb is down, Shepard," Garrus called. His footsteps thumped against the metal floor, solid and reassuring as he approached. "Do you and Wrex have this in hand?" Her nerves all let out a faint, electric jolt as his hand gripped her shoulder. "If so, I'll set the others to work securing the lab and downloading the computers. We should be headed for our extraction in under thirty"

"Take Wrex," she said, inspiration or desperation whispering that she'd get more out of Okeer with the shaman's help and Wrex's absence. "He can help get any unbirthed tank-grown organized and ready to move out. If Okeer is right, we're going to have visitors moving in on us soon, if they aren't already."

Inspiration or its bastard brother jabbed Shepard again, turning her toward Jack. "Set up a comm channel with EDI and Sparky. Have EDI keep you up to date with the Collector's movements while you and Sparky find us another route out of here if the Collectors wall us in." Half-expecting an argument or bad attitude, Shepard found herself pleasantly surprised as Jack nodded and started to work.

Two crooked fingers beckoned the shaman closer, then Shepard bent down, hooking an arm under Okeer's armpit. "Come on, big fella. Up you get." A marching band of grunts and groans welcoming her new hernia, Shepard managed to wrestle Okeer back onto his feet. "Good lord," she said between gasps. Slapping the side of the warlord's face none too gently, she managed to get
him aware enough to meet her eyes.

"What were you working on here?" Shepard asked, commanding an answer. Frustration met his continued blank silence, and she cracked her hand across his cheek so hard her fingers felt broken. "Come back to us. Was it a cure for the genophage? What?"

"Perfection," Okeer replied at last. "The krogan are dying. Merely hatching more mewling weaklings won't change that tide." He leaned heavily on her, mouth low to her ear as if confiding some great confidence. "And you should let them die. They're a pale shadow of the ancients. No pride. No real strength."

A massive, armoured elbow hooked around Shepard's neck, dragging her toward the tank and the unborn, but massive krogan inside. The warlord's madness choked her more surely than his muscle and bone. Survival demanded that she fight free, that she speak, and yet it slapped irons on her fight/flight response and stole the words from her mind.

"Okeer!" The deep, commanding yet feminine voice of the shaman broke through the warlord's madness. Holding his attention, the female stepped up to remove his arm. "Tell us what you've done. Why are the Collectors here?"

Abandoning Shepard to clutch at her throat and gasp, Okeer pressed both hands against the tank's glass, vibrating with an uninhibited excitement that assured Shepard how far gone he was: a child pressed against the toy store window. "I needed to find the spark. The rest … no spark."

"We met some of your rejected creations along the way," the shaman replied. "Their spark was intact."

He shook his head, a violent movement that rocked him to his toes. "Not perfect, not the spark of the ancient krogan … the strong, true krogan. Not even the strength of my brothers and sisters as we stomped rachni into puddles of blood and shell," he said, his voice curling back toward crazy, sliding over pebbled ice.

The low, guttural roar that came from the shaman consisted of a fury so palpable that it raised the hair on Shepard's arms and neck. "The ancient krogan destroyed Tuchanka, and those krogan of your days of glory are the reason the genophage exists." Before Shepard's eyes, the embodiment of rage—beautiful and terrible—manifested, provoking both fear and awe. "We want nothing to do with your version of perfection." Then as quickly as it appeared, the spirit of krogan violence disappeared back into the ether, and the shaman stepped away.

"No! This is the only way!" Grasping hands reached out, finding only handfuls of Shepard's armour as she stepped into the path of Okeer's lunge. "Don't you see? The Collectors understand that distilling perfection is all that matters." Either not realizing who he'd grabbed or not caring, he leaned back into Shepard's face, his breath hot and fetid, spittle splashing against her skin. "They're searching for the same thing."

Images of the husk asari on Thessia rolled through Shepard's mind.

*Oh definitely … perfection.*

His eyes latched onto Shepard, focusing in a way that sent a buzzing thrill of terror sizzling down her spine into her limbs. Rancid madness—a mind already rotting inside its skull—stared back at her as he whispered, deep and guttural, "That's why they want you, Shepard. To add your spark to theirs." He sneered, the curled lip and narrowed eyes broadcasting how imperfect he found her. Still, he nodded. "They're going to slice you into pieces to see what makes you special and then
consume it as they've consumed trillions … lives beyond counting."

Shepard clenched her hands and her teeth, forcing herself to meet the stare, trading crazy for crazy.

*I see your instant, brain-gooyifying indoctrination and raise you three years worth of the slow path.*

Shepard slammed both palms into his chest, shoving him backwards. His easy collapse threw her off balance and she stumbled, scrambling for a second before catching herself. "Keep your distance. And keep your—"

"Shepard." Garrus's voice came through the comms so tight and wrong that the single word grabbed her stomach and heaved, filling the back of her mouth with the sour, gritty remains of her earlier ration bar. "Come to the windows," he continued without giving her time to reply, hammering his urgency home.

"Keep him here," she said, tossing a glance over her shoulder at the shaman. Impatience grabbed her by the collar, dragging her around the warlord, while two days worth of dread shoved her face into the window. Something in the air had changed; it ticked away at the base of her skull, insects skittering through the grass, cold and hard against the hot earth.

The Collectors were making their move. She knew that with a painful certainty, but what the hell was it?

Her gaze slipped past Garrus to the spikes just beyond, slick metal gleaming so darkly that her eyes tried to slide right over it. The ticking in her head spelled out a picture of Eden Prime and a dozen small colonies and research bases. Husks. Either Okeer had been turning Blue Suns into husks, or he'd allowed the Collectors use his lab to do so. Either way, it spelled trap, not rescue mission.

Lungs threatening to blow straight out through her ribs, she spun to face the krogan. "What the hell?" she demanded, the words rushing out on a torrent of air. Collectors with dragon's teeth? Fuck, well, of course, they were as much Reaper lackies as Sovereign had been. She grabbed the collar of Okeer's armour, shoving her face into his. "What are the damned spikes for, Okeer?"

Turning her back to the Reapers' bared, bone-chilling teeth, she slammed herself into Okeer again. "How many mercs have you stuck on those spikes, Okeer? What the hell price did you pay for this perfect krogan?" Clenching her fists tight enough that the bones ached, she stomped on the urge to turn him over to Wrex for disposal in some brutal way.

Instead, she lifted her hand to her ear. "Sparky, get your asses in here. We're about to get hit from everywhere." She let him get out a 'yes, ma'am' before closing that channel and opening one to the *Ypres*. "EDI, we need a back way out of here as close to this room as possible."

"Captain," Steve broke through before she could hang up, the combination of perplexed and afraid in the pilot's tone sucking the air out of Shepard's lungs, "the Collectors have just disappeared off our scanners."

"What do you mean disappeared?" she asked, speaking slowly, over-enunciating every word. Husks in numbers and locations unknown, now the Collectors?

" Transmitting a false signal?" he offered. "All we know is that one second, they hadn't moved, and the next they aren't there. They aren't reading as being anywhere on Korlus's surface."

"Shepard," EDI interrupted, "the relay is active. Incoming vessels."

The vacuum inside Shepard's lungs dropped to absolute zero for three heartbeats, then the lab's
door opened. She spun toward it, Mattock up, finger ready on the trigger, that movement shattering
the ice encasing her heart and brain, allowing the wheels to start turning. When she saw Kaidan's
team, she let the gun sag and pointed to Miranda. "Get that krogan out of his tank, now!" When her
XO opened her mouth, Shepard raised the gun again. "That was an order, Operative Lawson."

As soon as Miranda moved to comply, Shepard spun to face Barl. "Get the prisoners armed and
down into the lower lab. We're going to need the guns."

The krogan grunted his acknowledgement and started barking orders. His competence and
command helped ease the cruel fist buried in Shepard's chest, allowing air to flow. Until—

"Captain! Two Collector cruisers incoming." A curse from Steve backed up EDI's report.

Damn, the Normandy didn't have a chance against them, and she doubted that either of the other
two frigates did either. "Did Cerberus steal the plans for the Ypres's IES system from Archangel?"
Shepard demanded of no one in particular. Maybe the geth designed shields on the Passch would
hold up to a hit or two. She raised her eyebrows when Miranda glanced in her direction. "Well?"
Her voice rose to a shout. Time pressed in on her, its breath heavy on the back of her neck; she
didn't have any to waste dancing.

The operative waggled her head as she activated her omnitool. "We did get a look at the plans for
Archangel's ships, but we improved upon the designs. I—"

"Like a well-oiled machine, Janey. You've still got it."

"That's fine," Shepard said, cutting the operative off before she could extol the virtues of Cerberus
engineering. "That's all I needed to know." She turned her attention back to her comms. "EDI, you
and Steve get the Ypres down here, stealth systems active. Try to be covert, they'll know where
you're going to be, but get down here now and get us off this rock. EDI, find us a backdoor and
now!"

When both answered to the affirmative, she opened a channel to Anderson, cutting him off when he
tried to preface with info on the enemy cruisers. "Get the Normandy out of here, sir. She can't
stand up to those things. The Ypres will extract us. We'll meet up with you on Omega."

"Are you in deep?" the captain asked, the wary edge to his voice saying he already knew they
were.

"Don't worry, we'll get out—"

"No! You can't have him!"

The roar of fury followed by a sharp cry of pain spun Shepard away from her call. The image of
Okeer holding Miranda by the neck registered for a half second before the shaman shoved the
muzzle of her shotgun against the warlord's temple and washed the wall with his blood and brains.
Shepard shuddered, a traitorous draft curling around her ear to taunt her with the fact that her brains
had slid down a wall just like that two years earlier.

A hand, not as calm or wry as she made it look, wiped the spattered viscera from her face. "You
okay, Lawson?" An unflappable nod answered her, the operative returning to her work as if she
didn't have an angry purple bruise blooming on the pale skin of her neck or bits of brain and skull
in her hair.

"Shepard?" Anderson called. "You there?"
"Yes, sir. Just get the *Normandy* out of here, and we'll see you in a couple of days." Her hand lifted to her ear to open a private channel to Garrus.

"Roger that, Shepard. *Normandy*, out."

Agreement to send the *Passch* to the relay to await flight or fight orders had just wrestled its way between Garrus's clenched teeth when the first unearthly howls shuddered through the air.

"Miranda, is the tank open?" Shepard hollered, the effort to keep her voice level costing her a premium as the deck plating vibrated under the onslaught of the desiccated remains of dozens of margens. Sweet baby Jesus, that sounded like a hell of a lot of husks.

"Done with the computers, Shepard," Jack announced, glancing toward the door and the uneven, staggering thunder of running feet. "EDI says we have Collectors and husks closing on us from every direction. She sent you a new extraction point it's at the end of the lower lab and up three levels. ETA fifteen minutes." The biotic settled her shotgun in her hands and ran for the door to the lower lab. "Unless we want to get cut off, we need to get down to the lower lab, now. They're swarming up between levels."

"Sparky," Shepard called, turning to the Marine who'd been standing guard at the door. "Scramble the lock on that door, then get down to the lower lab."

"Aye, ma'am," he replied, working on it even as the words left his mouth.

Shepard waved to her team. "Go!" Grabbing Miranda, she shoved the operative after Jack. "You too. I'll be right there." She bent over the tank controls. Blessed ass-cream of the Enkindlers, no wonder the krogan wasn't free. Miranda had been trying to preload orders into the tank-grown's head. Clearing that crap with a single command, she hit the override control. The doors opened, water flooding out to wash over the toes of her boots.

The krogan collapsed at her feet, choking the fluid from his lungs. As he took his first breath of real air, the deep cough of shotguns and bright, metallic chatter of submachine guns marked his birth. She couldn't think of a more appropriate welcome for a newborn krogan.

"Birthed in battle, his first actions and thoughts steeped in blood and death," the shaman said, her voice coloured with awe, "this one is meant for great things. Whether they save us or destroy us ...
"

"Come on, big fella," Shepard coaxed, reaching down a hand. "Up and at 'em."

Roaring so loud that Shepard's ears begged for mercy, the krogan surged up from the floor, setting straight into a charge that hit Shepard like a skycar, carrying her straight into a bank of lab equipment. She reached up, both hands gripping the massive forearm that threatened to crush her throat.

"Before I kill you, I need a name," he said, his mouth curling into a snarl that bared his remarkably white teeth. Teeth that white belonged in the mouths of movie stars, not krogan.

Shepard dragged her brain back to something slightly more important and relevant. "The name is Shepard," she said, gasping between each breath. "And we've got an actual battle to fight, so set me down and back off."

The sharp shake of his head ground his armour into her throat, cutting enough of her air and blood flow that a swirling vortex of vertigo began to suck all the light out of the room. "Not your name, mine."
"Whelp!" the shaman shouted, her voice demanding obedience. "Captain Shepard is your commanding officer. Set her down, and prepare for battle, grunt. Now! Do you not hear the gunfire?"

The tankborn turned to look at the shaman, the pressure on Shepard's neck reaching crush level rather than easing as his blue eyes narrowed. "Grunt?" He let out a rumbling sort of chuckle. "I like it. My name … Grunt."

Shepard managed to hold onto enough consciousness and brain power to pull her pistol, and when he turned back, she pressed the muzzle just behind his eye. "Let me go, or I'll drop you," she said, feeling good about the amount of menace she managed to squeeze into the raspy whisper.

The tank-grown, Grunt, laughed and backed up. Shepard's feet hit the floor, but she just kept on going, saved only by the shaman's arm catching her around the waist. It took a minute for the room to stop spinning around her, but even when it did, her every breath remained lined with razors.

"Shepard!" Garrus called in her ear, his subvocals strained. "There are hundreds of them. They've got you cut off from the rest of us, coming up through the stairwell."

"One of these fucking days, we're going to stop walking into traps, Vakarian!" Shepard let out a hissing sigh, steam released from a pressure valve. "We're on our way, just hold tight there and keep the team's retreat open. We'll fight our way through to you." She grabbed her sidearm off her hip and passed it to the shaman as she asked, "How are the prisoners doing?"

"They're solid." Garrus's subvocals thrummed as if he were on the verge of charging the line to come after her. "Just get here."

"Yes, sir, General Vakarian, sir." She closed the channel on his protest and turned to Grunt. "You and your shotgun are going to be the sharp end of the wedge to get us down the stairs. The shaman and I will stick right to your flanks, and hopefully we'll just bulldoze our way through." God, she wished they all had shotguns.

Glancing over at the shaman, Shepard posed a silent query: was she ready for a hell of a fight? The female krogan's eyes narrowed as she nodded, her determination and the excitement radiating off the youngster bolstering Shepard's resolve. The captain closed her eyes, taking deep breaths until her blood roared, her mind settled, her muscles keen to start the dance.

"Open the door, Grunt. Let's go." She took a deep breath, couched her Mattock in her shoulder, and pressed into the tank-grown's left flank. The door hissed open and for one, breathless second the enemy clogging the stairs hesitated, surprised. One second, and then chaos.

Grunt barrelled straight into the fray, his deep slow laugh punctuated by the roar of his shotgun. Shepard moved from target to target, doing her best to get them in the head and conserve her shots. Damn the heat sink "upgrade". Using the advantage of their surprise, they pushed through to the landing between the two staircases before the Collectors realized they had enemy shooting their backs full of bullets and turned to press the attack.

Shepard crushed a husk's skull with the butt of her rifle, before swinging the gun like a bat, stoving in another's face as she fought to get enough room to switch out her heat sink.

"What the fuck are those?" Jack yelled through the radio.

"Seeker swarms," Miranda answered. "Jack, Lt. Alenko, we need to hold a biotic barrier around the group. Everyone close up! Close up, quickly or we're all dead."
Seeker swarms? Shepard looked down through the open stairs even as she slapped a new heat sink into her gun. One of the Collector commanders appeared, his horned head and lighter colour standing out in the mass of writhing husks and Collector drones. "Take out the ones with the horns first," she said, her orders punching through the noise.

Desperate, she opened fire through the gap in the stairs, but not soon enough as a swarm massed around it. The low threat of their buzzing carried over the gunfire, settling into Shepard's gut like a promise.

_You escaped us before, but not this time. This time you're going to end up frozen and helpless, screaming as we tear you apart._

(A-N: At last. All the love. Thank you for reading and your generous support. *hugs*)
"For nearly four centuries, I have been pursuing the criminal you met last night." She set her teacup down. "She is a mass murderer with a record of hundreds of kills, and had you not rescued that child last night, she would surely have been murdered as well."

Glad to have his instincts confirmed, Nihlus nodded, but it was Sol who answered. "That's a long time to be hunting down one criminal. I'm not sure whether to admire your resolve or fear your obsession."

"Too long," the justicar said, a tight smile showing her agreement. "And, perhaps a bit of both would be appropriate."

Nais - Asari equivalent of woman.

Moruvesin - Winged insect analogues native to Palaven that grow to approximately 2 cms in length. Covered in articulated armour, they are very difficult to kill and have a sting that might not kill you, but burns so severely it will make you wish it had.

Mallupean - A turian song composed to honour the deceased. It is usually written and sung (keened) by their closest loved one as an act of devotion to both the individual and the relationship.

Inluvis - The second gestational period in turian pregnancy. Between 8 and 16 weeks. Slang: Little one, in the sense of being young and underdeveloped.


46 Days ASR

Nihlus stared at the image on the security screen off to the side of the apartment's front door. Damn, what did the justicar want? Showing up at his home and murdering him as he opened the door didn't seem very sporting. Taking a deep breath, he pressed the intercom control.

"Yes? How can I help you?" he asked, watching the asari's every twitch, trying to read her intentions.

She looked at the camera, a sort of intense hopefulness gleaming in her eyes. "Spectre Kryik?" The thin press of her lips, the tension along her square jaw screamed desperation.

"Yes, you have the right apartment." He swallowed a small chunk of ice, memories of the two weeks spent trying to outrun the justicar spitting it out. She'd proven dogged and resourceful, nearly ending him a couple of times before he managed to slip away. "What can I do for you?"

"I need to speak with you." She stared into the camera for a moment, then clenched her jaw, her whole body stiffening as she turned away a few degrees. Nihlus's mandibles flicked; he knew pride
being set aside when he saw it.

"You proved yourself an imaginative adversary the first time we fought," the asari said. "I do not have two weeks to devote to chasing you across this planet. I am here on another purpose, and I would speak to you about it."

Nihlus's brow plates rose. "If you don't have time to hunt me, then why not just stop hunting me?" Annoyance sparked, lighting a fire beneath his temper. "I have never threatened you. I don't have any desire to kill you." He let the fire build. She didn't have the time to hunt him? Seriously? He hadn't even seen her when she opened fire on him all those cycles ago, and even then, he retreated rather than engage. He choked back the worst of the rant that tried to force its way out. "I'll ask one more time, and then I'm going back to my breakfast. Why are you here?"

She spun and paced away from the camera, pivoting on her heel when she reached the far side of the hall. "Last night, why did you pull that youngster away from the asari in the bar?" As she stared into the camera, he saw something move across her face, something very old and very painful, but also something she worked very hard to keep hidden.

He narrowed his eyes at the screen, the spear rammed down through his spine softening a little. "I know someone planning to harm someone else when I see them," he said, his voice softer. The memory of the darkness slithering beneath the asari's seductive grace, the empty well of those eyes, sent a shudder rippling down his body. "That nais was a predator, and a child like the one she was seducing doesn't have enough experience or sense to see past the charming smile and the free 'mood enhancers'."

He let out a long, noisy breath that bordered on a snort and straightened, puffing his chest out a little. Drunken joke of a Spectre or not, he remained a Spectre. "I'm a peace officer, or I was. That means not standing by and letting a child end up raped, or dumped in some alley with a slit throat."

The justicar took a long breath and returned to stand so close her face took up the entire screen, as if she was trying to peer straight into his soul. "If you are an officer of the peace and a protector, why did you kill that nais on Lusia? She was unarmed."

That was why she went after him all those cycles ago? That day … . Nihlus closed his eyes and sagged against the wall … that day had been the culmination of the worst mission of his career. He let out a sigh that felt as if it started around his ankles. "I don't want to stand here and yell this story into the corridor." He reached toward the door controls. "If I let you in, do I have your word that you'll hear me out? If you do, I think you'll find the landscape murkier than you believe."

The lovely, severe face stood square in the camera, a single deep bow and a soft corona of biotic energy answering his question. "I swear that as long as I am not threatened, I will offer you no threat, nor will I bring harm to you or your companions. By the code, I swear it." The blue corona flared slightly then dissipated.

Nihlus turned to find Thane and Sol standing a couple of metres behind him. He shook his head then held a hand out toward the doors to the guest rooms. "You two can retire to your rooms unless you hear gunfire or people throwing one another around."

Sol's mandibles flicked, blue eyes flashing. "And if we do? Just turn up our vids so we don't have to listen to your preteril squeaks for help?" Cocking her head, she backed away a single step.

He didn't rise to her bait. "Yes, or come save me. Whichever one suits your mood." He flipped his hand toward her door.
"Our mood and the quality of whatever program we're watching," Thane deadpanned, then turned and strode for his room.

Nihlus let out a startled laugh and pointed an accusatory finger at Sol. "That's your influence."

She cackled and spun on her toes, practically flouncing to her room. "I know! It's fantastic. Good luck with your guest, senux." The door closed behind her, then opened a crack. "And don't get killed."

Nihlus let a slow, indulgent wave of affection flow through him, waiting for it to ebb before he turned back to the door. Despite the justicar's oath, he held his breath as he hit the control and the door slid open. He really didn't want to have to kill someone in his front room. When no biotics or weaponry appeared, he stepped aside, a quick sweep of his hand ushering her inside.

"Thank you," she said, her tone chill and stiff. Gliding across the floor, she crossed to where the living room carpet began. "It's been a very long night."

Nihlus merely nodded and held an arm out toward the sofa. "Please, make yourself comfortable. Can I get you anything? Water?" His mandibles twitched as he flailed, trying to think of anything else that wouldn't make her ill. He'd never really entertained, particularly any would-be murderers. What was the protocol for early morning detente?

Thane's door opened, the drell taking two steps into the room before giving the asari a slight bow. "I brewed a pot of lemon and ginger tea. It's still hot."

"Thank you," the justicar replied, her tone weary and grateful. "That would be welcome." She folded neatly onto the edge of the leather, holding herself rigid and straight.

Nihlus stared at her for another moment before clearing his throat. "I'm Nihlus Kryik, as you already know." He swept an arm toward Thane as the drell disappeared into the kitchen. "Sere Thane Krios." He glanced toward Sol's door, a thick, dark crease along the one edge betraying that she was spying on them. He crooked a talon, then held out his hand, palm up. "And Solana Vakarian."

The justicar nodded to Sol. "My name is Samara. I am a servant of the Justicar Code. I wish I could make your acquaintance under different, less urgent circumstances, but necessity demands what it demands."

Thane returned with two cups of tea and two of amarceru on a tray. He set them on the coffee table, then picked one up and moved over to a chair by the wall. Sol, on the other hand, gave the drell a wide grin and plopped herself down on the floor across the table from Samara.

Once everyone had taken a couple of stiff, awkward sips at their drinks, Nihlus drew in a deep breath. Time to tell his tale.

"I had tracked an organization of slavers from Lorek to Omega and Illium … a half dozen other worlds before I found the main farm." He took a drink, needing the warmth of the amarceru to fight back the chill creeping out of the past. "I hadn't expected an outfit that enormous, and so I found myself taking on platoon strength guard garrison and mounted weaponry that slowed my advance into the main compound." He swallowed, his tongue sticking to the back of his throat, and leaned forward to set his cup down. "The investigative team the council sent in afterwards said the first explosions were triggered in the mother house, then the barracks. By the time I made it through the wall, the entire inner compound was on fire."
He paused, finding a spec of something on the back of his talon that needed immediate investigation, allowing him to draw away from the stink and the horror of that day. "I found one small child alive. When I went back in after the fires were extinguished, I was able to identify all the inner circle of the slaving ring but for the two ringleaders. One was a batarian; I caught up with him on Omega. The other was the nais you saw me shoot on Lusia." He looked up, meeting the justicar's stare. "No, she wasn't carrying a weapon, but I'd chased her through the spaceport and a cafe. To slow me down, she used her biotics to fling five innocent people in my path. Three survived."

Nihlus cleared his throat and leaned down to pick up his mug, needing the heat on his hands and in his belly. "She was hardly innocent."

Samara bowed her head, still regal and stiff, but some of the hardness around her mouth and eyes softened. "I misjudged your actions. I apologize." She straightened and lifted her cup. "To have gone through such and then to be hunted." A short breath escaped that almost sounded like a regretful sigh before she cut it off.

Nihlus just nodded. 'No problem, don't worry about it' seemed insane considering she'd hunted him across half a continent. Instead, he took another swallow of his amarceru and leaned back in his chair. Her turn to take the hot seat. "So, why are you here?"

Although he would have thought it impossible, Samara stiffened even further. "For nearly four centuries, I have been pursuing the criminal you met last night." She set her teacup down. "She is a mass murderer with a record of hundreds of kills, and had you not rescued that child last night, she would surely have been murdered as well."

Glad to have his instincts confirmed, Nihlus nodded, but it was Sol who answered. "That's a long time to be hunting down one criminal. I'm not sure whether to admire your resolve or fear your obsession."

"Too long," the justicar said, a tight smile showing her agreement. "And, perhaps a bit of both would be appropriate." A brief pause and slight shift in her rigid form marked her topic change. "She is highly intelligent and gifted in the art of manipulation." Big, blue eyes turned to stare into Nihlus's. "I tracked her to Illium, but then saw you in the spaceport when I arrived. She must have been watching me, because she began to stalk you. I believe she did so in order to ascertain why I showed interest in you." A thin trickle of light wove through that stare. "I believe that distraction is why she has fled, but also presents me with my best chance to apprehend her."

Perking up at that, Nihlus leaned forward, elbows braced against the arms of the chair, his mug held between both hands. "You're here to ask for my help?" All the knots in his shoulder muscles began to untie. Helping catch an infamous mass murderer? That he could do. No massive, terrifying, unbeatable forces of doom, just investigating, tracking, and then some running and gunning at the end. Damn, that sounded good.

Except, that chasing down murderers wasn't why he'd come to Illium. He needed to chase his own shadows and discover what his behind the madness of Saren's accounts being cleared out.

"After you confronted her last night," Samara continued, reeling him from his thoughts, "Morinh went to the Eclipse, who smuggled her off world." Her jaw tightened as if she found her words distasteful. "I cannot lay siege to Eclipse headquarters alone. I am an experienced fighter and powerful biotic, but even so, I am one person."

"So you want us to help storm the castle?" Sol asked, her demeanour perking up. Her eyes sparked with eagerness as they latched onto Nihlus. If she started begging, he'd never be able to resist that
stare. Thank the spirits, their next goal also meant fighting their way through the Eclipse.

Still, Nihlus looked to Thane first, not wanting to volunteer any of his tiny squad against their will. When the assassin answered his silent inquiry with a nod, he mirrored it, then turned back to the justicar.

"It appears our purposes have converged. Our mission requires that we find Jona Sederis, the Eclipse leader, and we have reason to believe she's on Illium." He shifted forward in his chair and set his mug down on the corner of the table. "Do you have any intel on the Eclipse base?"

The justicar activated her omnitool. "Yes, I spent most of the early morning discovering its location and tracking down a volus trader with knowledge of its layout and a pass to get inside."

"Yes," Sol crowed, flashing a cocky grin his way. "At last, a decent fight, senux." The grin deepened and slanted into one sharpened to her usual edge. "You going to be okay? Should I fetch your tonics and linaments? Your cane?"

Replying only with a twitch toward her room to tell her to gear up, he looked down at the representation of the massive complex. "How do we get in?"

"A volus smuggler gave me a key card to get into the elevator that leads down into the base." She pointed to a large cargo elevator that tunneled through the center of the archology. "They'll be on us the moment we arrive on their level. Pitne For's intelligence puts their numbers at two hundred and fifty Eclipse regulars and initiates, one hundred and fifty LOKI and FENRIS mechs, twenty-five YMIR mechs, and twenty gunships, although they won't be able to mobilize most of those."

Nihlus stared into those earnest, fearless blue eyes for a long moment, letting the knots in his gut untangle before he took a deep breath and nodded. "So basically, the four of us are taking on an army."

Samara nodded, not a trace of humour in her expression. "Indeed."

Later

Nihlus slid into cover beside Sol, assault rifle overheating, knees and ankles shaking, thighs aching, shoulder throbbing, sweat trickling down his neck. "Let's take out an army, she said. I can't take them out alone, she said," he grumbled.

Sol snorted, and shot a spiked glare his way. "Don't worry, gorgeous, ageless asari, we can help you, he said." She nodded toward his shoulder. "How bad is it?"

Firing back a muttered curse, Nihlus shifted his weight to one leg, biting down on the moruvesin-sting burn as he rested the other. "I'm fine. After we get through this room, there's a hallway then a small side room before the next staircase. We'll lock ourselves in there for ten minutes and rest." Settling himself balanced on both feet once more, he popped up, doling out rounds in clusters of three.

At the end of the room, two new mechs raced through the door, setting his heart pounding. "Spirits, two more FENRIS incoming. Sol?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll protect you from the dogs," the tarin grumbled. "Don't go giving yourself a heart attack or stroke. I don't want to have to carry you out of here on my back."

"I hate those spirit-cursed things." As to carrying him out of there, Nihlus sent a subvocal retort that earned a sharp laugh. He concentrated his fire on a line of LOKI's slowly making their way
down the room. The stupid things offered no real threat unless they managed to sneak in close
while the team focused on the more mobile threats.

Sol leaned around the crate to hit the FENRIS with an overload, then peppered them with rounds.
"Thane, could you please throw those dogs? Buy me time to overload them again?"

"On it." From across and another five metres up the hallway, the drell's arm rolled into a graceful
hand flick that sent the two robot dogs tumbling down the tile. A half second later, Thane leaped
over his cover, his SMG whittling down the barriers on pair of vanguards at the far end of the
room. "Crossing field of fire," the assassin called, then nimbly rolled under Nihlus's sight-line.

"Spirits, he's fun to watch." Sol overloaded the FENRIS again, the two dog-things exploding,
taking out two of the nearly-finished-off LOKI, allowing Nihlus to move on to assisting Samara.
The justicar had four initiates pinned down behind a long desk.

"Moving up to cover Thane on the right. Samara, I'll be at your five," the Spectre called, then
leaped over the crate and sprinted across the hall. When he reached the stack of crates, he didn't
duck behind them but rather left himself open, a target to give Samara a chance to take some of the
less cautious Eclipse with her reave.

The broken-glass shards of their screams shredded Nihlus's calm as Samara's power tore the life
from their cells. Some days made him incredibly grateful that he wasn't a biotic. A bullet through
each helmet cut off the torment before it could unspool him entirely. Then spirit-blessed silence
fell, a relief he felt all the way down into the marrow of his bones.

"Spirits," Sol moaned, lifting one thigh onto her cover. "Are there enough of them?"

Nihlus merely nodded, hoarding his energy as he leaned against the crates at his side. They'd faced
a hard fight getting in, but it should ease up until they reached the Eclipse docks. That provided the
next good spot to form a solid resistance. Then, the rest of the mercs would gather around their
leader. Even thinking about the last fight tied his muscles into complicated knots.

"The galaxy is becoming a darker and darker place," Thane said, striding past, heading toward the
hallway and their rest stop. "People feel it, even if they don't know what it is they're feeling. They
seek safety in numbers. They seek companionship, the camaraderie of brothers and sisters in arms."
He shrugged. "I don't blame them. I feel it as well." A half-smile lifted one corner of his mouth as
he met Nihlus's gaze.

Nihlus nodded. Good company, people he trusted, who had his back ... who loved him ... he
understood that urge as well. Too bad all the Eclipse corpses behind them hadn't bothered to sign
up with Archangel instead. Archangel really needed to do something to start stealing the merc
gangs' recruits. If they continued to just wipe out the mercs the way they had been, things could get
sticky once the Reapers showed up. Maybe they needed to step out of the shadows a bit, start
taking on missions to do more than kill bad guys.

Pushing off the crate, he followed Thane into the empty hallway, his assault rifle sitting heavy in
his hands. "Come on, Sol. Let's get this room cleared and actually take a break."

"So how many do you think we've killed or deactivated?" his filitrin asked from his six.

"Seventy-three deceased, forty-seven deactivated," Thane supplied. The assassin paused outside the
closed door, cocked his head, then gestured from his tympanic membrane to the door. Without
waiting for an order, he slipped into a cover position against the right side.
Nihlus nodded and moved to cover the other side before gesturing to Sol to activate it. As she stepped up to the control, the Spectre listened. One voice: young and female.

Sol palmed the control, then stepped back and away, letting he and Thane lean out of their cover to sweep. Nihlus frowned, one brow plate migrating toward his nose. No one. So, more than likely, they'd discovered an initiate hiding from the fighting.

"We know you're in here," he called. "Come out with your hands raised, and we won't hurt you."

"I didn't shoot," a soft voice said. Hands appeared around the front edge of a computer console. "I swear. I don't even have a gun. I left it on the floor out behind my cover."

Nihlus stepped into the door. "Come out. We won't hurt you."

"Unless you try to hurt us," Sol said, marching past him, "then we'll fill you full of holes." She stepped straight up to the young asari even as the nais climbed up off her knees. After a second, Sol shook her head. "You're just a kid … well, comparatively speaking." Leaning back, Sol crossed her arms, looking so much like her mari in the moment that a keen burrowed down in behind Nihlus's keel. "So … what's your story?"

Nihlus left Sol to deal with their unexpected, reluctant recruit and waved Samara and Thane inside before scrambling the door. They couldn't rest for long, but they all needed a chance to eat, drink, and let their muscles recoup a little. As soon as he turned from the door, his eyelids sagged, his legs turned to rubber, and his arms succumbed to gravity's seductive song.

"My name's Elnora," the asari said in response to Sol's interrogation. "I thought being a merc would be cool, all hunting down bad guys and freeing slaves … like in the stories. It hasn't been like that at all." She wilted as she said the last.

Samara stepped up to look the young nais in the eye. "Mercenaries who possess honour do not find the life an easy one." She spoke with both an authority and passion that pulled Nihlus straight, his heart pumping with purpose.

He pushed off the door, a stiff limp jarring his spine as he walked to a crate and sat. He pulled out a water bottle and a ration bar, then leaned back, content to just listen and watch as his other three team members dealt with Elnora.

They needed the justicar back at Archangel, he decided. Something about Samara pulled together ravelled ends and wove them into a whole: something stronger. Even after a few hours in her presence, he felt it. How much more could she accomplish with fresh recruits? An intractable moral compass couldn't be a bad thing when facing the fight they faced.

Across the room, Elnora began to beam in answer to Sol's suggestion she might find working with Archangel more to her liking, her smile so innocent and filled with hope that it felt like a slap. Samara gripped the kid's shoulder and said something that transformed the wide grin into something solid and ready to face the fight ahead.

A low 'huh' rumbled in his chest. Maybe, just maybe, if Samara returned to Archangel, she could help Shepard weave some of her frayed ends together, and the glowing asses of the Enkindlers might find their way back in at least some of their former glory.

Later

Nihlus twitched, electricity arcing along his hide and between his teeth for a last few seconds, before he collapsed, a puddle of roasted turian on the docking bay floor.
"Senux?" Sol crouched next to him, gentle talons moving over his plates. "You all right?"

He glared at her but didn't move, unsure if he even could, his spine and brain still shooting random impulses down his scorched neural pathways. Opening his mouth, he tried to speak, but his tongue remained glued to the top of his mouth, his jaw still wooden. Fighting the all-too-familiar agony in his overheated and swollen joints, he managed to straighten out the clawed rictus in his talons.

"Spirits, that looked painful," she said, hitting his medigel dispenser. "Not sure this will help, but it can't hurt, right?" She cradled his face between her hands. "Are you in there? Can you see me?"

Oh, he could see her. That made up one of the true evils of dying by devil robot dog. Seeing his inevitable death circling him, hearing his screams and then moans and squeals, smelling his flesh roasting, able to conjure a crystal clear image of Shepard's face as they told her about his death … check. Being paralyzed and unable to do anything about his looming demise while his teeth shattered inside his mouth and his talon joints cracked from stress … also check. Able to do anything to save himself … not so much.

The muscles in his jaw melted from granite to gelatin, followed by enough air flowing through his airways that the thin whistle stopped, and he could speak. "You were supposed cover me while I took out the gunships."

Sol shrugged. "I was. I didn't see that last one dump its load of FENRIS. And when they came charging up the center of the bay …" She winced a little and shrugged. "They're just robot dogs, I didn't think they'd pack a punch like that."

Thane crouched on Nihlus's other side. "A pack of three or four FENRIS mechs can kill in under thirty seconds," he said, his voice heavy with a gentle sort of disapproval. "In a single attack if their quarry's heart isn't strong." He held a hand out to Nihlus. "Your heart muscle and spinal cord may have taken damage and your joints will be swelling. We need to complete the mission and get you to a medical facility."

"I'll be okay. It's not my first experience with those things." Nihlus flexed his talons a few times before he grasped Thane's hand and stood, his arms and legs feeling like saplings in a winter storm. He nodded toward the door out, and gave Samara a small mandible twitch of a smile in answer to her wordless stare of concern. "Go ahead. Secure the next corridor. We're almost there." When the others moved on, Nihlus stumbled toward the nearest crate, leaning heavily against the solid support.

Allowing Shepard's face to remain seared into his inner vision for a moment, Nihlus let the crate hold him up and just sucked in deep, shaky breaths. He still felt the stinging tingle in his hands and feet, still felt random needle jabs along his spine, and as Thane had kindly pointed out, fluid flooded his joints, trying to make up for the trauma. But none of that ached like the thought that he'd come so very close to never seeing Shepard again. He'd just learned what passion tasted like in her kisses.

No. They hadn't killed him. Glancing over his shoulder at the rough circle of seven robotic corpses sparking and leaking slow curls and clouds of smoke, he allowed himself one last shudder. Between Thane and Samara's throws and Sol's overload, they'd gotten him out, and in the end, nothing else mattered. It didn't matter if death's talons missed by a quarter of a millimetre, as long as they missed. Turning his back, he forced Shepard's face from his thoughts. One more room and they could all go home.

"Elnora, time to move up," he called. "Stay in the hallway." When she replied from her hiding hole, he headed for the door.
"Um, Nihlus?" Sol appeared in the door. "You've got to see this." She stepped back out of his path and held out her arm. "It ummm … it appears that the Eclipse have been abducting people and experimenting on them."

Nihlus brushed past her, a vague nausea settling into not just his gut, but his entire body. What in the name of buratrum? Had the entire galaxy lost its mind? He twisted sideways to brush past Sol but the stopped a couple of steps over the threshold. Banks of vidscreens scrolled what looked like scientific data above a line of computer terminals. As he stared at the numbers and information, an altogether too familiar, yet almost forgotten tickle started behind his eyes.

"Is that what attacked Shepard on the Citadel?" Nihlus asked, pushing up behind Garrus's right shoulder. The Spectre shuddered as the orb exploded. "It's not the only one. I still feel them crawling around inside my head."

Nihlus shook off the memory of the darkness and horror of the Haestrom shipyard and turned to his team. "Get what you can off these computers," he said, glancing at Sol. A steady, sonorous alarm began to blare at the base of his skull, echoing up through his skull. Sederis emptied Saren's accounts of millions of credits. Millions he'd assumed had been used to purchase weapons or lavish Illium estates and cars.

That tickle behind his eyes—the feeling of someone else slithering through his mind—that said she hadn't been gathering the money for herself at all. That tickle explained why the Eclipse had thrown themselves into death without the slightest hesitation. "Take a dose of indoctrination serum," he ordered, levelling Sol with a glare that allowed no argument.

Thane obeyed the command without hesitation, but Nihlus glanced over at Samara when he felt her stiffen, hesitating. "Do it, and go back out and give one to Elnora as well. I can feel indoctrination orbs here, and they don't play around." Tiny claws sprouted from the tickle, latching into his brain, sending his talons to his belt pouch to follow his own order.

Ice crackled through his muscles, working its way inward to his spine then climbing into his brain as he realized how much worse things could get. The last time he'd faced the orbs, he'd bolted. He'd taken his serum and still, he bolted. What happened if he allowed the terror to grab hold of him again?

"Nihlus?" Thane called, yanking him clear of his downward spiral. The drell stood next to a vending machine at the far end of the hallway, one hand holding an unsteady volus at a distance. "It appears one of the Eclipse's guests escaped. He's not well."

The volus gave Thane a shove, but only managed to sending himself reeling and then rolling to the floor. When Thane bent to help him back up, he didn't resist, but once on his feet, he threw off the assassin's hand. "I am a biotic god! Fear me, lesser creatures, for I am biotics made flesh!"

Nihlus shook his head as a weak biotic field wrapped around the staggering volus. "What happened to you? Did the Eclipse experiment on you?" He knew that, although rare, the volus did manifest biotics. Mostly due to a wave of turian ships that crashed on Irune a couple of decades before.

"They injected me, and yes, it was terrifying at first." The volus hesitated, his arms slumping to his sides for the space of a couple hissing breaths. "And painful. But then I began to realize my true power! I began to smell my greatness!" He gave another little blue flare, but then stumbled and fell face first on the floor.

"You need medical treatment." Nihlus nodded to Thane. "Take him out to Elnora. He can wait with her." He helped Thane lift the volus onto his feet, then watched them retreat down the hallway, the
"But, it's my destiny to destroy the Eclipse leader," the biotic god protested as Thane led him away. "She's waiting for me! I'm a biotic god!"

Jona Sederis was waiting for them all, Nihlus agreed. Glancing up at the cameras in the corners, he let out a long breath. They needed to get in there. The four of them had exhausted themselves, and by all his counts they still had a massive fight ahead of them. The last thing they needed to do was give her extra time to prepare.

"I've got everything off these computers," Sol said. She turned to him, her eyes narrow, her mandibles fluttering, betrayed her distress. "There's data here for a dozen experiments, all strange crap, senux. Not normal, let's find a cure for a disease sort of research, but 'let's see what happens if we give the krogan and varren great big brains' or make armies of attack plants sort of research." She swallowed hard and raked her talons down her cheek. "Spirits, what in the name of buratrum is happening to the galaxy? Is everyone losing their minds?"

He strode over to grip her shoulder, not sure how to reply. Galactic insanity certainly seemed to be the most likely explanation.

Thane and Samara returned, not giving him a chance to worry over the experiments and what they meant in conjunction with the orbs. They could worry about all that when they returned to Omega. Questing fingers dove into his pack for his first stim of the day. He stared at the ampule for a half second before injecting it. Looking up, he met Sol's disapproval with a shake of his head. As much as he hated using stims—they ramped his urge to drink up to fifteen on a scale of ten—he didn't see another way to get through the coming battle. Not when someone had pulled the bones out of his limbs and replaced them with wilted villur stalks.

"Sol and I will take on the big mechs," he said, turning to his small squad. "We'll pull them around the room, try to take them out with headshots. Thane and Samara, you two try to whittle down the biotics. We're in for a hell of a fight." He looked to each of them, hating the exhaustion he saw etched in heavy lines on their faces and in the sag of their shoulders, but admiring the resolute determination that straightened their backs and gripped guns in steady hands.

"All right," he said, striding to the door control. "Let's get this done."

(A-N: Just a quick thanks for still being here. I hope it's still holding people's interest. Time to wrap up these missions and get their butts home! :D *hugs for those who want them*)
"Clear a path for me," she shouted back. She glanced over her shoulder, then let out a pained grunt as a husk slammed into her a moment before his rounds took it out. "Shepard has no protection from the swarms. I've got to get to her."

It might prove a suicide run, but Miranda had the right of it.

**Moruvesin** - Winged insect analogues native to Palaven that grow to approximately 2 cms in length. Covered in articulated armour, they are very difficult to kill and have a sting that might not kill you, but it will make you wish it had.

**Netichik**: Insect analogues native to Palaven that have been exported to many colony worlds. About two centimetres long, they live in colonies burrowed into trees. Meat eaters, they drop out of trees in large masses onto the backs of animals passing beneath their nests.

**Gasin (Gasinu - pl)** - Prothean male the age of majority. (Dropped from 20 to 13 over the course of the war.)

**46 Days ASR**

The darkness outside Garrus's frigid, underground prison swelled with insectile sounds. Papery wings fluttered, chittering and clicking sounds swelled outside the door of his cell, another wave approaching. How many days had it been since the shipyard and the horrible, but very different darkness?

The voice returned. It spoke in his head, but it certainly wasn't any internal voice of his. Female, clipped, professional, cold ... almost antiseptic in its lack of emotion.

"They're coming again. Get up!"

His body obeyed the voice inside his head, and he fumbled in the dark, searching for, and then scrambling up the wall. Every cell in his body screamed, netichiks eating him from the inside out while moruvesin swarmed over his hide. Leaning into the slick concrete, he dragged his feet under him and managed to claw his way to his feet.

"I can't do it," he whispered to the darkness as his legs trembled so hard his knees kept locking to keep him on his feet, and claws scraped at the door, alien fists pounding against it, trying to get in. "No more." Sagging against the wall, Garrus began to slide back down to the floor. For a moment, everything turned into stillness and acceptance, and he understood why, in that last breath, Shepard relaxed in his arms. The inevitable cannot be fought, not in that last, airless second as one's breath leaves their lungs for the last time.

And it didn't need to be fought. There was nothing to fight against. Everything ended.

And it was okay.
"Get up. Think light, then think medigel twice, then stims, then painkillers, and then hydration. In that order. Then get to your feet and fight to stay alive."

Not that he had any choice, his mind forming the ideas as the voice spoke them inside his head. Light blossomed, a diffuse, but bright illumination that revealed the featureless walls and the door that cracked open, giving way before the horde on the other side. The familiar, cool bliss of medigel shot through him, propelled by the heart that took a last beat, and then another last beat, and then another, the foreign parts and pieces inside him obeying the voice, refusing to let him quit. Stims calmed his tremor-wracked muscles—filaments of chemically-induced steel reinforcing them—then painkillers beat back the netichiks and moruvesin.


"General Vakarian?" Not the same voice, but definitely the same tone.

He stood and reached for Roger, his movements smooth and strong. A wall slammed up, locking down his mind, his weariness, everything that made up Garrus Vakarian. His body moved, reacting faster, hitting harder, and lasting longer than he could have imagined. Then, as the last alien fell, Roger's broken stalk fell from numb hands, a dark curtain falling even before his body hit the floor.

"General Vakarian? Have you been hit?" Miranda.

Garrus shook his head, trying to swipe Haestrom's cobwebs from his eyes.

"They're coming in on all sides!"

"Jack! Alenko! We need barriers over everyone!"

"General Vakarian?" Collector claws latched onto his shoulders, but fell away as he swung his rifle around to club his attacker. "It's Operative Lawson! General, are you all right?"

"Wrex, move your krogan to the back edge, hold our six. Jack and I can't fight if we're going to hold this barrier."

"Gun barrels outside the fucking barrier, assholes. We can't hold against fire from both sides."

"Let me know when you get tired, pyjaks. Uncle Urdnot can take over."

"Uncle … what? Seriously?"

"General!" That time something impacted Garrus's cheek hard enough to drop him to one knee.

Surging to his feet, he drew back his rifle, winding up to smash his attacker in the face. Cerberus had done this to him … and to Nihlus. The bastards tore him apart, filled him full of tech that didn't allow him any choice but to play their sick fucking game. He'd kill her! He'd tear her to pieces before she got a chance to do the same to him.

"General Vakarian! Snap out of it!" Sour veins of bile-coloured fear threaded through that voice, disrupting his rage. No, he was a lot of things, but no … not what that blow would make him.

The bitter, overripe stink of the woman's fear finally grabbed Garrus by the mandibles, yanking him into the present and halting his blow. The cold darkness of Haestrom's underground vanished, the watery light of their second day on Korlus blinding him. He stumbled, the room swirling unsteadily around him as his vision cleared, allowing him to focus on a set of black and gold
"Welcome back," the operative said. With a snap of both wrists, she created a barrier around herself and pushed out of their circle.

"Oh, the princess is running away from the castle," Jack said, her tone might have been teasing but for all its sharp edges.

Garrus nodded. "Focus on the barrier," he said, then snapped his attention back to the Cerberus agent. "Lawson! What are you doing?" He aimed his assault rifle at the Collectors and husks swarming into the room through the far door. The second the enemy disentangled themselves from the portal and each other, they howled and raced toward the cerberus operative.

"Lawson!" Louder that time. "What are you doing?" Damned woman.

"Clear a path for me," she shouted back. She glanced over her shoulder, then let out a pained grunt as a husk slammed into her a moment before his rounds took it out. "Shepard has no protection from the swarms. I've got to get to her."

It might prove a suicide run, but Miranda had the right of it. A wall made of pure, frozen fury met the idea of Miranda's death, but he let the truth of the situation burn through it. They needed to bulldoze a path to Shepard and get her through to the group. He clenched his jaw, firing into the doorway, trying to bottleneck the enemy a little. Whether being willing to sacrifice Miranda made him callous and brutal or not, she amounted to an expendable wedge to hammer through the enemy ranks.

No, not just expendable ... someone they needed to lose before she could hurt Shepard more than she had already.

Setting those thoughts aside, he did as she asked, sending a nearly uninterrupted stream of rounds through the door while keeping track of the fight surging around him through their shouts to each other. They fought better as a unit than he'd feared, forming a tight circle with the unarmed in the center of the formation.

A husk charged at Miranda, the thing looking as though its inner workings had started on fire and burned through the exterior. Garrus took it out with two headshots, but then it exploded, splashing everything around it with some sort of incendiary. "Spirits!"

"What the fuck was that?" Jack hollered. "That is some messed up shit."

Is that what hit me on Lorek in the slaver's den?

"Concentrate on the ones that aren't dead," Kaidan replied, exhausted snark sliding beneath the words, slick and just as edged as Jack's.

Despite putting up a strong fight, Miranda began lagging long before she reached the door. Damn. Without some major intervention, she'd go down without ever reaching Shepard. They needed more biotics in Archangel. Then the light dawned: they had another biotic with them.

"Javik, get out there and support Lawson," he called, looking to the silent prothean. "You can hold a barrier, can't you?"

The gasin didn't reply, just summoned a barrier and started pushing his way out through the wall of husks, both active and dead.
The cacophony of bodies clambered and howled, their roars and the sound of hundreds of weapons firing swirled into a veritable maelstrom that neither Shepard's group nor his own could survive for long. If they faced only the husks, maybe, but the chaos provided the perfect distraction for the Collectors to disperse around the large room, using the growth pods as cover. Most of them used a sort of assault rifle, but a few wielded particle rifles. Bunched up as Garrus's people were, they didn't stand a chance once those opened fire. Luckily, the sheer number of husks beating at their line provided some cover, the monstrosities' armour blocking incoming rounds.

And everywhere, the small drones swooped and dove at the barrier like a flock of birds, moving in single-minded formations.

Garrus studiously ignored the little seekers, as if doing so could keep Shepard's safe from their sting. Instead, he kept laser-keen focus on the husks trying to take down Miranda, relaxing it only to glance over at Jack and Kaidan when he traded out heat sinks. He watched the biotics for weariness, any sign of their stamina cracking. Duty first … always duty first, even when his heart beat on the other side of that door, amidst a hundred enemies, and the rest of him screamed to join it.

"Wrex, spell Jack on the barrier!" Garrus shouted, seeing the young human lagging. "Jack, stims! And take his place on the firing line."

A deep, guttural roar rose above the scream of shredding metal and crunch of shattering bones to announce Shepard's arrival in the lower labs. Husks and Collectors exploded in through the door, flying through the air as if launched by missiles. The massive krogan from the tank plowed through everything in his path, tramping what remained with a reckless glee. Another krogan, the shaman, muscled in right behind him, the pistol in her hand shooting two or three times before smashing a husk's head into paste. Behind them, Shepard fought backwards, her back pressed to the shaman's as she kept the enemy off their six.

Garrus reached up to his radio with his one hand, the other pulling the stock of his assault rifle in close against his side to steady its fire. "Shepard, make your way toward Miranda and Javik. They're moving in to protect you from the swarms."

A sharp nod was his only answer, but it proved enough to warm him through and put the steel back in his spine he hadn't realized was missing. No fight had ever proved hopeless around Shepard. He focused on clearing her path to Miranda, letting out a faint sigh when the biotic's faltering barrier surrounded all four of them.

Shepard slipped one arm around Miranda, dragging the operative toward Javik and his oddly green, but hardy barrier. Before they reached the prothean, Miranda stumbled and went down on one knee.

"Dammit!" Shepard hollered over the noise. "Grunt, break us a path through to the alien with the green barrier." Showing strength remarkable even for her, Shepard hoisted Miranda over one shoulder and continued fire, her back never budging from the shaman's, stuck there as if someone had soldered their armour together.

Three deep chuckles rumbled from the young tank-grown's throat as he set his head down into his shoulders, dug in, and then charged. Like a wrecking ball, the youngster plowed through the crowd, tossing ruined bodies in every direction. Garrus stilled, heart stopping for the moments it took Shepard's group to cross the five or six metres of floor. The entire way, the seeker swarms swooped in on them with the speed of diving *maraquil*, but Wrex tossed a steady stream of warps that kept them at bay despite weakening with each volley.
"Come on," Garrus said, a low growl between clenched teeth. His muscles pushed, striving to help them along, railing against his helplessness. Sometimes bullets just didn't seem enough. "Come on." Another heat sink spent in under five seconds. "Push through."

"Hey!" Jack elbowed him, hard, and he realized he'd been creeping in Shepard's direction. "Back off, big man, you're cramping my fucking style."

Then the prothean enveloped them in his bubble of green energy, keeping it tight around them, probably to maintain the barrier's strength and his own. Javik turned, not wasting any time making his way back down the right hand side of the room to the ramp and the safety of the larger bubble.

"EDI," Shepard called, "ETA?" Despite not hearing the response, Garrus read by the grimace on Shepard's face that it was going to be a good deal longer than Shepard wanted. His muscles turned to water for a half-second. Exhaustion weighed everyone down; he didn't know how long they could hold: a tiny island in a sea of enemies, and they were running low on heat sinks.

The small group made it back to their bubble, Javik taking over to give Kaidan a break as soon as he returned. Not two breaths later, Shepard slid into position next to him.

"The Ypres is still ten minutes out," she reported, leaning in a little to keep it between them. She launched her drone out into the clusterfuck of enemies outside their perimeter. "They had to play hide and seek with the cruiser to get into orbit." Peeling off her utility belt, she tossed it behind her. "There are a dozen or so heat sinks there." She took out a husk with a couple of quick headshots. "They're sneaking up on us from the other side of the planet."

"Not sure how long our biotics are going to hold up." he replied, keeping his voice low. "We need something major to turn our way." A clutch of husks raced at him, all loose limbs and animal howls. He waited until they were just about on him before blowing them back with a heavy concussive shot. "Wouldn't happen to have a miracle on you?"

He saw Shepard stiffen in his peripherals, and spun, expecting to see blood, not a wide grin. She nodded. "Glory be to the great glowing asses of the Enkindlers, Brother General! I do indeed appear to have a miracle handy. Praise be the Father of Light's slimy tentacles!" She hung up her Mattock. "Cover me for few seconds, and I'll get us some relief."

Garrus saw her omnitool flare to life, but needed to pay attention to keeping the seemingly unending horde held back. Where in the name of buratrum were they all coming from? That number couldn't be Suns stuck on dragon's teeth. The Collectors brought husks with them: colonists turned into husks. Dear spirits, the well just kept going down and down, no bottom in sight.

"Jack! You okay?"

Garrus glanced toward Kaidan's call, but the shaman already knelt at the young biotic's side, administering medigel. Two of the krogan lie in the center of the circle along with Miranda, who was just starting to look aware of her surroundings.

The sound of a large mech core spinning up set his heart racing, and he knew what Shepard had done. Love washed over him like a hot summer rain, and he allowed himself a second of indulgence to stand in it. He'd fight through a thousand battles, endure any amount of torture—even at the hands of Cerberus—if he had even the smallest hope of getting back to her.

Because she's a miracle, the kind that only ever comes along once.
"Sweet baby Jesus, I'm good. One miracle as requested, General," Shepard said, her shout bordering on slipping into a self-congratulatory crow. "Thank you, thank you, really. I'll be here all week. Don't forget to tip your engineer!"

He bit down on a laugh and focused, slipping the lover back into the crate so the soldier could get back to work.

Yes, only once, and thank the spirits for that. Who could survive two of her?

The YMIR's guns whirled to life, targeting the Collectors with their twin mass accelerator cannons and rockets. Garrus could make out the Collectors' particle rifles firing at it, but Shepard kept boosting its shields and concentrated on taking out those Collectors first.

"When this thing is about to die," Shepard called, "finish it off with a headshot. That'll vaporize everything around it."

Garrus grunted his acknowledgement, seeing a slight thinning in the enemy ranks. "Everyone, start moving toward the open side of the room," he said into his radio, the mech making too much noise without. "We need to keep them from getting a foothold on that side." The krogan on the back side of the circle began to push toward the edge, Shepard's YMIR taking off enough pressure to free up a couple guns … enough to help get them moving.

Jack appeared back on the line at his side. "Ready to spell whoever's been holding the barrier the longest."

"Okay, General," Shepard said, cutting across Kaidan's reply, "it's on its last legs."

In a quick, smooth movement, Garrus traded guns, lifting his sniper rifle to his shoulder to sight the mech's head. He adjusted the sight, a thin thread of longing for Ingrid drifting out with his breath, then fired. As the mech went into meltdown, he realized they were all far too exposed for an explosion of that magnitude. Luckily, the rest of them had seen it before him and leaped for cover, dragging others along with them.

Shepard grabbed the cowl of his armour and hauled him down next to her behind a trashed grow-tank. She tucked her face into his neck, covering both of their heads with an arm as the mech blew. Taking shelter in her embrace, he hid his face from the brilliant flash and searing heat that blasted over them. When it passed, an absolute hush fell over the lab for two breathless heartbeats before chaos poured back in, the tidal wave racing into shore. He listened for gunfire, pleased to hear only intermittent bursts, and no droning from the swarms.

Shepard pressed a hurried kiss against his mandible. "No hot dogging, General," she whispered, her face pressed to his aural canal. "You've got a family to look after." Then she leaped up and held out a hand to help him up. "Everyone okay?" she called even as she tugged him to his feet.

"Wrex is down," Kaidan called. "We need to get him to medbay and soon." The smell of charred shell and flesh told Garrus all he wanted to know about the krogan's injuries.

"EDI," Shepard called, even as she couched her Mattock in the crook of her elbow and strode out to finish off any stragglers. "ETA." She stopped and spun toward the open side of the room, eyes intent, but free of fear. Instead, she showed the face that meant the tumblers inside that keen mind spun faster than light, searching for a solution for whatever new hell awaited them. "If you give me any more bad news, I swear …." Nodding to the voice in her ear, she hung up her rifle. "Roger that, see you in five. Shepard out."
Shepard pointed to Grunt, Jack, and those among the Marines and krogan who hadn't been wounded. "We have a couple hundred Collectors and husks coming up that side of the ship at an unreasonable speed, and I am all out of mechs. Those I've pointed out, we're running up the stairs and through the labs. Grab all the grenades you can carry." She looked to Garrus, her expression sending his heart plunging into his gut. It told him he was taking the safer, slow road. "General, get the wounded up and moving. We'll clear your path, and when you get through the door, make sure it doesn't open."

He nodded and, shoving a rod of tempered steel down his spine, turned to his people. "You heard the captain, let's get the wounded ready to move." He glanced back at Shepard, her tiny form looking even more fragile as she strode amidst the krogan. A grin tweaked his mandibles. Anyone who thought his Kahri fragile or weak were in for the last surprise of their lives. He chuckled and headed over to help Miranda up off the floor.

"Come on, Operative," he said, grunting a little as he saw the jagged wound in her shoulder. He checked it briefly, but someone had already administered medigel, and the bleeding had slowed to a slow seep. "Let's go get that shoulder into medbay."

"Amp … fried," she said, her voice soft and dreamy.

When she mentioned it, he could smell the scent of burned hair around her. An almost cruel satisfaction sparked—not so perfect after all—and then smothered under a cold splash of shame.

A primal challenge that could have come from only one set of lungs screamed on the other side of the door to the upper labs, and then buratrum unleashed its denizens. Gunfire, biotic detonations, bones cracked so hard that he winced, hearing it over the rest of the cacophony. Over it all, his Kahri, bellowing like a krogan, and he knew in a sudden rush of certainty that she'd get them out.

"Move out. Shepard's breaking through." He could see her squad in the picture windows above, bursting through the door. "We can't let the Collectors cut us off from one another." He glanced over to make sure Wrex was covered to find the krogan hanging almost limp between the shaman and one of the less wounded krogan. "All right. Move quickly. Stay in the bubble. Kaidan? Javik?"

A swirling dome of blue and green appeared around them, and he started to the door, keeping an eye and an ear on the fight above.

"Stop that," Miranda said, her voice slurring a little. When he arched a brow plate at her, she let out a gravelly coughing sound. "Grinning like an idiot. It's not general-ly."

Through his worry, through the days of exhaustion, through the stink, and the sweat, and the uncertainty of battle, Garrus laughed. "General-ly." He cocked a brow plate at her and shook his head, then tugged a little, urging her to move faster.

The Ypres flashed past the open end of the room, pivoting around in the tight space between ship pieces to pick them up on the other side. Garrus's heart jumped into his throat, strangling him as it pounded there. How the hell did the pilot think he could maneuver a frigate that size in that space? It remained their one chance to get off that damned mudball.

"Don't worry," Miranda said, patting the hand holding her waist, "Lt. Cortez was chosen for this because he's the best fighter pilot out there."

"That's not a fighter." Garrus looked past her to check on the others, pleased at their speed, only a few more strides to the door, then the stairs. Dear spirits, he hoped the stairs remained clear.
The door slid open, but before he could put a bullet into their attacker, Shepard ran in. "What's taking you guys so long? There's a giant, metal husk head beetle thing attacking the Ypres." She glanced over her shoulder. "Kaidan, Grunt, Barl, hold the door, make sure we have a clear exit. The rest of you down here and help."

She jumped in to help one of the Marines who'd taken rounds to his leg and shoulder. "We've got to move fast, so this won't be big on dignity," she said as she heaved him over her shoulders in a fireman's carry. A quick, bracing smile and wink, and she took off at a light jog, holding Peterson's weight with an ease that tied a knot in Garrus gut, that unbelievable strength reinforcing everything Cerberus had done to her.

A heavy, low droning sound rose over the sound of running feet on metal deck plating, one that he'd heard before. "Run!" he shouted. "As fast as you can. Shepard have the Ypres use its GARDIANs! They're the only thing that'll take that thing out fast."

"Sweet Jesus." Shepard lifted one hand to her radio, stumbling a little as Peterson's weight shifted. Garrus didn't hear what she said, he was too busy trying to locate the massive Reaper-beetle's location through all the echoes, failing completely until the twin lasers exploded through the wall of the lab. The force picked Garrus up, flicking him into the air. As he hit the ground face down, his breath hammered from his lungs, he caught a glimpse of at least one Blue Sun vanishing in a brilliant blue flash.

They needed to get out. He needed to get up. Damn it!

"General! Get up!" That voice … Miranda? The one from Haestrom?

Without air, he tried to claw his way up off the floor but just floundered, the room spinning, his muscles as weak as a newborn drellak.

"Come on, General." Miranda crouched next to him, ducking under one of his arms to haul him up with a strength he wouldn't have believed possible.

He sucked in a shuddering, stringent-acid breath, able to do little but stumble along next to her as he recovered from the impact. The razor-edged buzz of the lasers roared through the derelict ship again, metal shrieking and crashing as the wreck began to disintegrate under the onslaught. Above the rest, a deep, hoarse scream punched him in the gut, telling him that the monstrosity had claimed at least one of the krogan.

And then Korlus's sky opened above him, the Ypres hanging, huge and beautiful at the edge of the deck, maybe twenty metres distant. Its GARDIANs fired almost constantly, losing focus as they heated.

"Cruiser incoming!"

Shepard's bellow over the radio steadied Garrus's limbs, his muscles rallying enough that he simply scooped up Miranda in one arm and sprinted for the ramp … so close, beckoning with promises of safety and rest. The Reaper-beetle thing exploded behind him, the blast hot on the back of his neck, but he didn't even flinch. If that Collector cruiser got within weapon range, they were still all very, very dead.

Then hands grabbed him, heaving him up onto the steep grade, dragging him into the cargo bay even as the ramp began to close, the Ypres fleeing for the relay.

He reached the shuttle bay floor, his trembling legs stumbling, failing to adjust to flat deck plating,
and went down. Twisting, he managed to land on his side rather than on Miranda. Dizzy and
gasping, the air burning in his chest, he closed his eyes, waiting to feel the slight, internal torque as
the inertial dampeners lagged behind evasive maneuvers. It never came. Instead, the brief tug of
the relay grabbed them, and he relaxed down into the floor. They'd escaped. Mission success. Too
bad it felt like a question mark followed those two words.

"Hey." Gentle, calloused hands caressed his face, their warmth pulling him all the way back from
the edge. Instead of trying to get him up, Shephard sat on the deck next to him and pulled him into
her arms. She pressed her brow against his cheek. "Holy crap, Garrus." Despite inhaling as if she
intended to continue, she simply held his head close, her arms wrapped around his neck as if her
life depended on it.

He cleared his throat, a soft chuff of strangled air. "Kahri? I can't breathe."

Her arms loosened a little but didn't release him. "I nearly lost you there," she whispered. "Don't
ever scare me like that again."

Garrus frowned at the thick, phlegmy undercurrent in her voice, surprised by her reaction. She
didn't usually over-dramatise. "It didn't come very close to me and Miranda." He nuzzled her
cheek. "The laser must have hit something that blew up and gave us a good shove."

Shephard pulled away and smacked his shoulder hard enough to rock him before scrambling free
and up onto her feet. He stared at the hand she shoved in his face, his confusion deepening when
she shook it at him. "Get up!" she ordered. "Come on, up."

Indulging the tangle of fear, love, and anger twisting her features, he took her hand and allowed her
to help pull him to his feet. He wobbled a little, then looked around, surprised when he didn't see
Miranda, even more surprised at himself for caring enough to wonder. She was the enemy … the
cold, clinical voice of Cerberus. Not the one who had ordered him while they cut him apart and
tortured him, but still culpable for so very much, Shepard's control chip paramount on that list. He
sighed. Still, she'd stayed and gotten him to his feet. "Is Miranda in medbay?"

"Yeah, all our biotics are, well, except Javik. Apparently in his cycle …" She stiffened and arched
her neck a little, imitating the prothean's arrogance. "... a well-grown child could hold a barrier
longer than that without suffering ill effects." She shrugged. "The rest of them fried their amps and
will be out of commission for a week or so."

She swallowed hard and cracked her neck, her eyes glassy with emotion held in a tight grip. "We
lost five. Two suns, two krogan, and Nyguen. Wrex is critical, but the docs say he'll pull through.
Handful of others have a few more holes than they started with." Shaking herself and cracking her
neck again, she held out her hand. "Take off the armour." When he hesitated, she gave him her
'don't test me' glare and slammed her arms down over her chest, walling herself off.

Confused irritation simmering behind his eyes, he obeyed, popping the seals on his gauntlets. As
he removed each piece, she snatched it from his hand. He unclasped the two halves of his torso
armour and lifted it off, his breath rushing from his lungs in a short, heavy sigh when he saw the
reason she was upset. The ceramic had been burned away, the metal melted to slag that looked like
dripping wax.

He set it down and held out his arms, pulling her into a hug, armour and all. "I didn't realize it got
that close." He nuzzled the top of her head. "But I'm okay. All parts and pieces intact."

She dropped his armour and wrapped her arms around him. She didn't speak, and judging by the
way she shivered in his embrace, she probably couldn't. It had been a long, hellish few days for
them all.

He smiled, weary, sore, and a little heart-sick, but like so many times before, his ornery little miracle had brought them through. As he'd thought when she burst into the room and commandeered the mech, in the end, he'd fight through a thousand battles, endure any amount of torture if he had even the smallest hope of ending the day in her arms.

*Even if it means playing nice with Cerberus.*

He tightened his grip. "Let's go up to your cabin, shower, and then get some sleep?" Pulling away, he pressed a knuckle under her chin, lifting her gaze to meet his. "Then we'll head back to Omega, grab Nihlus and your family, and take off to Palaven to get married." He grinned wide at the surprise that wiped away the leftovers of anger and terror. "Sound good?"

Shepard pulled in a deep breath, and returned his smile, some of the spark returning to the brilliant green. "Yeah, that sounds like a really great plan. You'll make me an excellent wife."

Heart settling back into place, blood warming, he chuckled and caressed her cheek. "You're such a giant pain in my assless." But damn it, if she wasn't the good, clean air in his lungs.

*Because she's not just a miracle, she's my miracle, the kind that only ever comes along once.*

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(A-N: So, as always, thanks so much for reading! I have all the love for you and your support! *Passes out baskets of hugs and cookies*

I appear to have made a big boo boo when I split this story into two pieces, I lost a lot of people. So, this was the last chapter I posted under Future Continuous. That way, it will all be in one, easy place. :D And if people go … holy crap, that story is way too long to even think about reading, when it gets to 250 chapters, well … their loss. ) And their lack of screen eyes and migraines! :D So yeah, Chapter 14 will be posted here in the original story.

Thanks again, and moar hugs!)
Darkness fell, a guillotine of tar-coated ice. His gun fell from numb talons as he reached up, groping at blind eyes and deafened aural canals. Terror, colder than a midwinter night on Noveria, stabbed shards of that impossible black through his heart and lungs, driving them in deep. Unable to breathe, he collapsed into a pile of armour and limp, frozen flesh.

NEW CHAPTER!

47 Days ASR (insanely early in the AM Omega time)

The YMIR's alarm built from intermittent beeps to a solid wail as the mech careened toward detonation. Crap, he'd taken it down too quickly. Nihlus grabbed hold of Sol's wrist and ran, dragging her behind him. "Thane! Samara!" He hollered into his radio. "Heavy cover and breather helmets! Now!" Nihlus tossed Sol behind a dividing wall and over a stack of crates, then leaped after her, landing a hand's width from her head. She yelped, but he merely threw himself over her as the beeping alarm sped to a steady tone. Then a half heartbeat of silence. Then ...

... the last four YMIR mechs exploded in a blast that rocked the building and, judging by the sheer cacophony, launched the contents and occupants of the warehouse, missiles fired in every direction. When the din of falling debris ended, Nihlus glanced out from under his arm. Despite a few crates lying over his legs, their shelter held. The breath that he'd been holding escaped, replaced with a lungful of dust and smoke that set him choking. Despite warning the others to put on their breathers, he hadn't had time.

A pointy elbow jabbed him in the gut. "Get off my head!" Sol jabbed him another half dozen times and landed a few decent kicks before he managed to push the crates off and roll to one side. Gasping and flailing, she clambered out from under him. "What part of making me the bottom portion of that pile seemed like a good idea?" she muttered, flopping onto her side, lungs heaving.

"Put your helmet on," he said, ignoring her protest. "The place is filled with smoke." He stood, and reached down, pulling her to her feet when she grabbed it.

"Thane? Samara? You two come through okay?" he asked, shouting over the roar of fires and the answering suppression systems. He clambered over the crates with far less grace than he'd shown going the other way, then stepped around the wall to utter destruction. At least the ventilation system was making quick work of the smoke, sucking it away as dry foam smothered the flames.

The mechs had blown a massive hole through the floor and ceiling. Very little of them remained, chunks of arms and other parts had torn holes through everything and embedded themselves in the walls.

"We're alive," Thane responded. "Samara just charged off with murderous intent."

"Yeah, I see her," Nihlus answered as the asari justicar pulled a biotic hurdle over a pile of jumbled up crates and machinery. She moved with murderous intent indeed, storming over to where Jona
Sederis had taken refuge behind a large, metal desk. Glancing at Sol, he nodded toward the asari. "If we want to find out what Sederis was doing with Saren's money, we'd better get in there."

Sol chuckled, the sound hollow through her helmet speakers. "I want to be an asari when I grow up." She took a couple of steps, then turned back. "You going to put your helmet on, senux?"

Nihlus shook his head despite coughing into his forearm. "No, the fire suppression system has it handled." He pressed a hand to his temple, pushing in against a dull but insistent pressure. The thought of looking out through that black faceplate, having the HUD flashing so close to his face sent shivers down his spine.

"Note to self," he muttered under his breath, "don't blow up four YMIR's using headshots on two."

"Yeah, remember that one," Sol muttered. "I think you broke my lungs and the left side of my right kidney." She stretched, cracking her back a little as she limped past. "Also, next time we take a quick trip to pick up a few of your belongings, let's bring a platoon of Martin's frame armour infantry and at least a half dozen tanks." She pulled her right arm across her chest, sighing as it cracked and settled back into place. "And maybe a gunship."

Thane appeared in the doorway at the far end of the warehouse. "I could use a hand getting the test subjects and prisoners free from their cells."

"Sol?" Nihlus nodded toward the ruins of twisted metal and crumbling concrete. "Help Thane check for survivors." When she acknowledged his order, he began to pick his way across the weakened floor toward the figure writhing in Samara's grip.

"Samara?" Nihlus could see the justicar's mouth moving, but couldn't hear anything she said. "Don't kill her. I need to question her." He stopped to check the pulse on a young female turian, but found nothing. The moment his team breached the doorway, a wave of unarmed, psychotic civilians had charged at them. Choking back his rage, Nihlus straightened and looked toward the lunatic responsible for all it. He and the others had no choice but to cut down all those innocents, something he felt certain Samara was discussing with Sederis.

Sederis dropped, hitting the floor in a heap as Samara stepped away to search the desk. "She is yours to interrogate," the justicar said, her voice colder than Nihlus had heard it. "Unless, I don't find the information I require."

Sederis let out a short, but horrific string of curses. "Top drawer, just like I told you, bitch." She laughed, the sound high and shrill with madness. "Do you really think that you'll catch her? You've been chasing her four centuries, and she slips from your grip every time because your code doesn't allow you to harm innocents."

Nihlus bent over Sederis, hooked a hand under the asari merc's arm, and pulled her to her feet. For her part, she just ignored Nihlus completely, lunging at the justicar and spitting a gob of violet in Samara's face. "You're pathetic and weak. She's a monster, one whose power is beyond your ability to fathom."

Nihlus shook Sederis hard enough to break through her diatribe. "Shut up. You're under arrest; Spectre authority. Who are you? And what happened to all these people?" he demanded. She lunged at him, teeth gnashing. "Sweet spirits, what's wrong with you?" He held her at arm's length, leaning back to keep his face out of biting range.

Sederis laughed. "You know who I am. Don't be obtuse." She flared her biotics, breaking free of his grip as she threw him back. Keeping her eyes on him despite averting her face, she circled the
The crazy behind that sideways stare burrowed beneath his plates, virulent and vicious like a nest of netichiks. She laughed, high and shrill. "Do you honestly believe that I didn't realize that the transmission was a trap, laden as it was with oh-so-tempting banking information for one of the richest Spectres to ever take a bribe?" Glancing back, she shrugged and rolled her eyes. "Give me a little credit. Please."

The casual nature of that shrug forced Nihlus's last two meal bars up into the back of his throat. Sharp, jagged claws dragged up his spine to bury themselves in the base of his skull. Damn. The heel of his hand migrated back to his temple as the pain ramped up from a seven to a ten on the Shepard scale.

Sederis reversed direction before she got too close to Samara, still keeping part of the desk between herself and Nihlus. "Although, I admit I didn't expect you to team up with the justicar bitch. Losing an entire base full of people is inconvenient." She let out a low, feral growl as her fingers trailed through the dust along the edge of the desktop. "We were just starting to get some decent data from this batch."

A dramatic sigh heaved through her nostrils and she shrugged again, lifting her fingers to rub them together. "Oh well, they will start again somewhere else, and you're fooling yourself if you believe we were the only ones carrying on their good and necessary work." She turned her back to him and wandered toward a wall of crates that had managed to withstand the explosion.

Nihlus's teeth ground together as he forced his hand back to his rifle. Why did the crazy ones always have to monologue? "Inconvenient?" He stalked after her, keeping his rifle aimed at her back. "Losing two hundred and fifty people under your command is inconvenient?" Actually, that wasn't even the question. The real question was: why was he surprised? She was a madwoman in command of a band of mercenaries, with all the apparent and implied consequences.

"Under my command?" She looked over her shoulder, her brow knitted tight above her eyes, as if his statement truly perplexed her. "Oh, you mean the sisters and initiates?" She shrugged and resumed her course. "Easily replaced. No, the true loss is the subjects. It's taken us a great deal of time to get any real results from the experiments." Sederis pushed the single crate at the end of the wall aside, and stepped out of sight. Nihlus leaped after her. He'd be damned if he'd fought through hundreds of her people and mechs ... getting electrocuted by a pack of fake fucking dogs ... just for her to disappear.

"Senux!" Sol called from the other side of the space. He heard her shoving her way between crates and rubble. "Where ...? Wait up, dammit." Her boots rang on the tile as she ran after him.

Stepping around the crate, Nihlus saw Sederis standing in the center of a half circle of black orbs. Her head lolled back, her eyes closed, arms held out as she swayed. A smile of pure bliss beamed across her face, upping the creepy factor to a factor of infinity. His boots sliding on the floor, Nihlus struggled to stop, backpedaling as his eyes followed the line, his brain counting them as if it mattered. Eight. Eight of the orbs. No wonder his head had been aching, the restless talons scraping along his spine and digging into the base of his skull.

Spirits ... no wonder Sederis was—

 Darkness fell, a guillotine of tar-coated ice. His gun fell from numb talons as he reached up, groping at blind eyes and deafened aural canals. Terror, colder than a midwinter night on Noveria, stabbed shards of that impossible black through his heart and lungs, driving them in deep. Unable to breathe, he collapsed into a pile of armour and limp, frozen flesh.

A strangled mewl of pain rattled out between clenched teeth as one hand cracked against the floor,
his wrist letting out a snap he felt rather than heard. The floor ... . Blinking against the pale, watery
darkness, he realized that he could see again. He tipped forward onto all fours, lungs straining
against a vacuum, his vision darkening around the edges once more.

"Your mind belongs to us," a deep voice said, the sound reminiscent of boulders rolling around
inside a cloth sack filled with pudding. "Breathe."

Nihilus sucked in a long, gasping breath, collapsing onto his hip as chill, damp air burned its way
into his aching lungs. His vision began to clear, sending his survival instinct into overdrive as he
scrambled up out of the ... . It looked like water. He'd thought himself about to drown. He slapped
a hand against the surface: it looked as though he knelt on water ... but that was impossible.

Anyway ... . He shook his head. It didn't matter. Where was he? That mattered. Along with how
he'd gotten there. Pressing both palms into the floor, he dragged his knees back under him, every
cell in his body keening a mallupean in high, shrill voices.

Spirits, he hurt ... his entire body screamed in pain.

Shoving himself up, he made it onto all fours, feet under him, palms still pressed to the floor. He
took another deep breath and straightened. Arms held out, stiff and awkward, he managed to stand
despite feeling as though he stood on the deck of a rolling ship. Stumbling in the near dark, he
struggled to find and keep his balance, ending up splay-legged, but still upright. Where in the name
of the good spirits was he?

The foggy veil surrounding him parted, a figure stepping through it to walk toward him, its identity
betrayed by the short, red hair—vivid even in the dark—and the cocky swing to its gait.

"Shepard?" He looked around, nothing but shifting caustics and dim, watery grey visible in every
direction. "What's happening? How did you get here? How did I get here?" He took a step toward
her, his booted talons scraping to a halt when he looked into Shepard's eyes, his gut freezing solid.
It wasn't Jane, but the tar-slick darkness wearing her face, just as it had worn the faces of his mari
and pari above Haestrom.

"What are you?" he asked, backing away a couple of steps, feet dragging. Oily, the gloom flowed
from those blank eyes, long tentacles of malevolent nothingness writhing across the soupy grey to
wrap around his head, blinding him.

Stop, dear spirits, just stop! Just tell me what you want.

Sharp knives stabbed into both eyes, the force behind them twisting, driving the blades in deeper
and deeper. He clapped one hand over his eye, knees buckling as his stomach heaved. Rusted iron
filled his sinuses, dripping from his nostrils.

He fell forward, landing on his hands and knees, his vision returning as the dry heaves tried to turn
him inside out. He pressed down into that impossibly solid water, talons splayed and focused on
breathing through the agony. Drips of bright cobalt splashed, breaking through the surface to twine
with the water in lazy swirls. He let it drip. Why not? Let the blood flow ... let them see the
evidence of their indoctrination turning his brain to pudding. What good would he be to them then?

The pain eased up enough that he could pull his talons from where he'd embedded them in the
floor. They'd punched holes through the tips of his gloves. "What are you?" he repeated. "Or
who?" He pushed himself up until he was sitting on his lower legs, the heels of his hands braced
against his thighs.
"You were never meant to breach the darkness," the monster said, the sound of that voice coming from those lips painting a stark, ugly face on whatever possessed Shepard. "It is not yet our time."

"What is that supposed to mean?" He shimmied back a metre, trying to keep some distance between them. His heart hammered between his lungs, all three organs straining as if he'd run ten klicks. The dizziness still churning inside his skull and nausea sucker-punching him in the guts drove home the alien nature of wherever the hell he was. "For fuck's sake, stop torturing me and just talk to me. What are you?"

Shepard crouched just out of his reach. "The echoes have discovered what they need," that horrible grinding boulder voice said through her mouth. "They cannot be allowed to complete the Catalyst." She shuffled toward him … or it shuffled toward him, still crouched. "They build it! Millions dying. Screaming as their bodies are reduced then reformed, still screaming."

"What catalyst?" The daggers piercing Nihlus's brain exploded into a cloud of sticky-tar spiders, their writhing bodies and tiny, scratching legs scraping along the inside of his skull. The drip from his nose sped up as he fought to understand … but more, to break free. Shepard had been able to break free, but—

Something stabbed him in the neck twice … then a third time. The spiders began to evaporate into black smoke and drift away. Indoctrination serum. Sol had injected him with a half litre of the stuff judging by the throbbing in his neck.

An explosion went off next to his head. Damn, excellent timing: getting his hearing back just to have it reduced to shrill ringing. Another explosion … no, not an explosion, a hand cannon firing. He sagged a little, relaxing as the noise echoed in his skull, each one another orb blown to bits. Six more times the gun pounded at his brain. He sagged onto the floor as his dim, watery surroundings vanished.

Another shot let him know that Sederis wouldn't escape to cause any more pain and suffering. Thank the spirits. He slid down onto his side, hiding his face beneath his arm as the bright lights of the warehouse burned like brands inside his head. Drawing in a long breath, he gagged: the air stunk of crap and urine, burned plastic, and spent heatsinks.

"Senux?" Strong talons gripped the back of his neck. "Are you with me?"

Dear spirits, so loud! Did she have to yell right in his face?

Nihlus took a deep breath, clenched his teeth against the ebbing agony in his skull, and nodded. "Yeah, I'm here," he said, forcing the words out through a clenched jaw. "Just give me a second." After what felt like a half hour, but probably amounted to five minutes, he pushed himself up off the floor. When he made it to one knee, he paused to look up at the shattered orbs. Sederis sprawled at their center, her blank eyes staring straight at him.

Lifting a hand to press over one, ringing aural canal, he glared at the torin crouched in front of him. "Good work," he said, his voice slurred. "Next time, don't shoot them all right next to my head."

She shrugged, a quick dip of her head toward one shoulder. "Yeah, sorry about all the bells ringing inside your skull." She grinned, her mandibles fluttering far too gleefully to be decent. "Well, maybe not all that sorry. I was saving your feeble backside, after all, and your cowl made an excellent support." She hung her pistol from her hip, then dug into her belt pouch. "Now, hold still," she said, lifting a cloth to wipe the blood from his face. "There's a good little torin."

She cackled, but then looked past him toward the sound of boots on tile. "Did you find what you
were looking for, Samara?"

"I did," the justicar replied. "The Eclipse smuggled Morinth out on the HML Demeter. It is bound for Omega." Despite the dark circles under her eyes that betrayed her exhaustion, she held herself proudly, strong and determined. Again, Nihlus didn't know whether to admire Samara's focus or fear her single-mindedness.

Nihlus plucked the cloth from Sol and turned to face the justicar. "I guess we're headed home, then." He wiped his face, then tucked the rag into his belt. He held a hand out to Sol, who helped haul him up. Once he stood firmly on two feet, he wrapped an arm around her, and pulled her in to touch brows. "Thank you, inluvis."

"Back off, senux. You can just get me something really expensive and fancy for dinner." She shoved him, but not hard enough to break free. "Now, stop drooling on me, and let's get the cops here to clean up. I need to eat something."

An hour and a half later, they returned to the apartment, but instead of showering and then crashing into the glorious depth of his mattress like Nihlus's body insisted, the four of them ended up rushing through packing everything he wanted to take to Omega. The next ship to Omega left in three hours, and Samara had booked them cabins, insisting that they could eat and sleep once on board.

"I think I'm actually too tired to eat," Sol groaned as they stood at the threshold of the ship's galley. She craned her head to look at the tray of a turian business torin as he passed by. Her stomach roared with all the fury of an enraged ugentira. "Spirits, is that seared panflel?" Without waiting for anyone to answer, she bolted across to the serving line, and began filling a tray.

Thane's low, kind laughter rumbled from Nihlus's right side. "Apparently, she discovered a second wind." He followed at a much slower pace, limping a little. A blood stain on his leather jacket betrayed where a piece of shrapnel had embedded itself in his lower back. Sol said it was just a flesh wound and would heal just fine in a couple of days.

Nihlus glanced around the galley, but didn't see Samara. She'd probably taken something back to her cabin. She'd expressed a desire to spend the time in transit meditating, and told them that she would meet up with them on Omega. The Spectre let out a long, weary breath and followed the other two. He needed food, he just hoped he didn't fall asleep face down in the seared panflel.

An hour later, after nearly falling asleep in the panflel:

"Well, look who it is." Shepard's smile betrayed her weariness, even as it warmed him through. He recognized the room behind her as the conference room aboard the Ypres, so she'd made it off Korlus intact. "Are you all right?" She leaned into the imager. "You look like you've been dragged halfway to hell and back."

Nihlus returned her smile. "I'm fine, just tired. We faced a few complications on Illium, but we're aboard a passenger liner on our way home." His fingers lifted to the image as if somehow, they could find a way to touch her. "I just wanted to check in before I hit the rack." A sweet ache spread through his chest when she lifted her fingers to meet his. "Are you two all right? Didn't take any damage?"

Shepard shook her head, then covered a yawn with her hand. "We're both going to sleep all the rest of the way back to Omega, but we only took a few nicks and cuts." Her fingers raked through her short, still-damp hair. "We lost a few people, and Wrex was badly burned, so we're racing him back to a proper hospital. Miranda, Jack, Woo, and a few others came out with more holes than
they went in with, but we got out.”

Nihlus just stared, watching her lips as she spoke, then meeting her eyes as she fell into silence. Spirits, she looked good, and he wished that instead of trying to cram himself into the narrow, too short bunk in his cabin, he was climbing into bed next to her. Ah well, in under a day, he’d be back on Omega, and maybe they'd catch a night or two before the galaxy threw them back into hell.

"Hey, cikabeknai, you there?" She cocked her head, a slight knot between her brows.

Heat flushed beneath Nihlus's plates as he realized that he'd just been staring at her like an obluvis. He smiled and nodded. "Just admiring the view."

Pink blossomed across her nose and touched her cheeks. Spirits, sometimes her beauty just blindsided him. "When do you get in?" she asked. "We'll be home in eleven hours."

"Eighteen hours … well, more like seventeen and a half now," he replied. "You'll pick me up at the dock?" He flicked his mandibles at the mask of teasing denial that painted over her face.

"No, sorry, couldn't possibly do that." She shook her head and dropped her arms across her chest. "Sweet baby Jesus, you've just gone too far, now. I've got to hang up." She grinned and blew him a kiss. "See you in seventeen and a half hours."

Nihlus nodded, and grinned, mostly at himself for the ridiculous prickling in the corners of his eyes. He must be tired. "Until then, haksaya kubenar." He touched the backs of his talons to his brow. "I love you."

Her grin widened, her eyes growing glassy. "And I love you, Nihlus. I've missed you. Well, we've both missed you something crazy. See you in a few hours." She stared into his eyes for a few more seconds before finally closing the channel.

After staring at the bunk for a few minutes, Nihlus sat on the side. He was never going to fit. Pulling his knees up to his chest, he managed to get his feet past the supports. The mattress definitely wasn't made for turians, so if he tried to lay on his back, he'd end up rocking back and forth on his cowl. He piled pillows under his head and neck, deciding to give it a shot, but he no sooner laid back and he began to roll.

"Tarc!" He rolled three quarters of the way onto his side and stretched out, groaning when the end of the bunk frame dug in just below his knee. Damned human transports! Resorting his pillows, he rolled over onto his side and tucked his knees into his stomach. His body parts immediately began lining up at the complaints department to file paperwork.

He swung his legs off the side of the bunk and stood. "I've got to sleep," he muttered, groaning a little at the thought of trying to sleep sitting up all the way back to Omega. His neck twinged, as if warning him the sort of pain he'd have to endure if he tried it. Sighing, he bent down and grabbed the mattress. Ships usually secured them to the bunks to prevent them flying around if the ship lost gravity.

A soft cry of victory greeted the thing lifting out of the frame. Sleeping with his feet hanging over onto the floor, he could handle. He threw it down, pulled back the blankets and flopped.

"Oh yes … so much better." Wriggling under the covers, he pulled them up around his mandibles and closed his eyes. His muscles all tightened as his body adjusted to the position, burning with a most wonderful pain as they relaxed, everything going heavy and soft. Blessed sleep. "Glory hallelujah and praise the blessed Enkindlers' light."
His door opened. "So, I've been thinking … " Sol's voice said. He heard her step over the threshold but didn't open his eyes. Maybe if he ignored her, she'd go back to her cabin and sleep.

The tarin flopped down on the mattress next to him and pushed in until she took up nearly half the width. She waited, not speaking for well over a minute, but he could feel her breath on his face. "I know you're not asleep, senux. You came in here fifteen minutes ago." She pressed in tighter, her nose butting against his. "You're not asleep. Stop pretending." Sighing, she pulled back a little and began to bounce around, sorting blankets by the feel of it.

When she stilled, Sol let out a long, soft breath, a gentle keen threading through her subvocals. "Look, senux, I'm really sorry that I didn't have your back the way I should have today." She sniffed and then a warm hand pressed against his mandible. "You're a good fratrin, and you deserved better than I gave."

Nihlus sighed, but didn't open his eyes, merely tilting his head to rest his brow against hers.

"Anyway, I wanted you to know, I won't let you down like that again." Her talons entwined with his, and she stilled, her breathing evening out even before he drifted off.

(A-N: Sorry for any confusion caused by my mistake of splitting this story up. I hope you enjoyed the end of the mission to Illium. It's high time to get these crazy kids back together.

Thanks so much for your support … as always. Always. *hugs and baskets of kittens*)
The shadow moved, the asari keeping outside the bright spotlights illuminating the bar and dance floor. Despite the light blue of her skin, and how much skin she showed, she blended very well with the inky pools along the walls, appearing to materialize next to Shepard's booth.

"Do you mind if I sit?" the asari asked.

Shepard shook her head and held a hand out toward the seat opposite, breathing a sigh when it remained rock steady. Thank the sweet baby Jesus for Anderson and all his warrior training. "Not at all. It's a big table for one person."

(A-N: If you missed Ch 139 because of my flurry of updates moving the chapters over ... it's new as well. Nihlus versus the orbs of doooooom)

49 Days ASR

Shepard watched the public dock, her eyes searching the faces of everyone who disembarked from the human-registered passenger liner. Her heart pounded so hard and fast against her breastbone that she felt ever so slightly dizzy, her pulse throbbing in her ears. Was she nervous? Damned if she wasn't. She grinned. Other than the whole dead for nearly two years thing, she and Nihlus hadn't been apart for more than a day or two since Eden Prime, and she felt his absence as both an empty space at her side and in her gut.

A strong arm encircled her, and she turned her smile toward Garrus. She knew he'd missed his fratri almost as much as he'd worried about his baby sister. But they were all back where they belonged now, all home, and the next day, they'd be on their way back to Palaven. A new wave of dizziness washed over her, her heart stopping dead at the thought of what awaited her on Palaven: her wedding.

Sweet baby Jesus, in a few days, she'd be a married woman. What then? Kids? On Omega? In the middle of the war? Were they mad to even be considering getting the whole family thing off the ground? Leaning into Garrus, she forced herself to take a few long, slow breaths until the terror eased back.

Jane Gwendolyn Shepard-Vakarian … and good lord, even worse, a little further up the road she'd be Jane Gwendolyn Shepard-Vakarian-Kryik. She'd need a limo to carry her name. Maybe she could go the way of pop stars: call herself JG SVK.

She caught sight of Nihlus as he exited the hatch at the end of the docking arm, and she pulled free of Garrus's side. Solana followed the Spectre out and tapped his arm, passing him a bag before they both turned to help Thane herd a volus and a very young-looking asari out through the hatch. Shepard grinned; none of them could resist bringing home strays.

A tall, regal-looking asari stepped out, her eyes scanning the docks with a stare that made Shepard wonder if she was the hunter or the hunted. The asari spoke to Nihlus, and he nodded, herding the
rest of his brood down the ramp toward the dock floor. About halfway down, his eyes latched on Shepard, a slow grin spreading across his face, hitting the nitrous on Shepard's heart rate. Damn, he looked good. Exhausted, and worn thin, but he'd ditched the brittle tension that had plagued him for as long as she'd known him. Whatever he'd been through in searching out Saren's past … his own past … it looked as though he felt better for it.

"Welcome home," Shepard called as Nihlus reached shouting distance, a wide grin beaming up at him. Then, grabbing his hand the moment he stepped out of the passenger only area, she dragged him a few metres out of the traffic flow, and threw her arms around him. "Holy blessed Enkindlers, I've missed you."

"Mmmm." He lifted her off the floor into a soft, but passionate kiss, one arm wrapped tight around her back, the other under her backside, supporting her weight. "I've missed you too," he whispered against her lips before deepening the kiss.

Shepard let herself slip into that contact, into the rough, solid texture of his hide beneath her lips, the still shy dance of his tongue against hers.

"Dear spirits," Sol's voice groaned from behind Shepard, "do you have to go mining for stomach contents? Here … in public?"

Nihlus pulled back, a smile tweaking his mandibles as he stared into Shepard's eyes. "Yes. Yes, I do." He rubbed his nose against hers, his hide deliciously warm, even there. When he spoke again, his voice formed a soft whisper, tones meant to stay between them. "I dreamed about moments like these for far too long not to savour them."

Shepard swallowed hard, blinking back the sudden rush of warmth that prickled the corners of her eyes. "Welcome home, Nihlus." She kissed him again, lips tugging at his mouth with gentle suction. Letting out a soft sigh, she tilted her head back to include the rest of their small party. "Maybe we should get going. We can pick this up a little later on."

A wide grin met his reluctance as he nuzzled her lips. "Fine, but not too much later on."

"Deal." When her feet hit the floor, Shepard turned to greet the rest of the returning party. "Welcome back, everyone." She clasped wrists with Thane and Sol, then nodded to the asari in the uncomfortable looking armour standing just outside the circle.

"Jane, Garrus," Nihlus said, stepping up beside Shepard, "this is Samara, a justicar. Samara, I'd like you to meet Spectre Jane Shepard and General Garrus Vakarian."

Shepard grinned and held out a hand to grasp the nais's wrist. "I'm pleased to meet you, Samara. Thank you for helping bring my people home."

"I'm pleased to meet you as well, Spectre … General." Samara's grip wrapped around Shepard's wrist, firm and confident. "Spectre Kryik and the others assisted me far more than I did them."

Nihlus gestured to the volus and asari standing pressed so close together that they could have been a very odd pair of conjoined twins. "And these are a couple of new recruits: Niftu Cal and Elnora."

Shepard nodded. "Welcome to Omega."

Samara drew Shepard's attention, the justicar glancing around the docking bay. "I apologize, but perhaps we could become acquainted somewhere out of the public eye. I am closer to my quarry than I have been for more than four hundred cycles. I do not wish to lose that advantage."
Shepard nodded and forced a smile, stomping down the unkind voice that wanted to suggest that the justicar not wear her bright red, bathing-suit armour if she didn't want to be easily ID'd. Instead, she clamped her teeth down on the outside edges of her tongue and held an arm out toward the waiting cars.

On the way back to Archangel headquarters, she curled in against Nihlus's side in the backseat. He wrapped his arm around her as he brought them up to speed on Samara and her quest to kill the mass murderer known as Morinth. Shepard burrowed into him, trying hard to concentrate on what he said when all she wanted to do was breathe him in, to dive into the touch she'd denied both of them for so long.

"Morinth will know me on sight," he said, pulling away just far enough to look down into Shepard's eyes. "You, on the other hand, might just intrigue her enough to pull her into a trap." He smiled, his free hand reaching up, his gloved talon pads skating along her jawline. "You game to play the part of bait?"

Shepard shook off the warm, cozy, slightly amorous cocoon and nodded without the slightest hesitation. "Hell, yeah. We can't let her roam Omega. We have way too many angsty, hopelessly romantic kids in Archangel. I'm not okay with even one of them falling into her trap. Martin would be the first one in line." She leaned forward and slipped a hand between sections of Garrus's armour to squeeze his shoulder. "You okay with being my backup, Callor?"

Garrus nodded. "When we get back, I'll grab the kid, we'll dress for the occasion, and head for the major hangouts." He glanced at Nihlus in the rear mirror. "Samara have a profile of the places and types of prey Morinth goes after?"

"Not to mention a picture." Shepard sat up, sliding her feet off the seat onto the floor. "Although I suspect from what you've said, she'll come after me rather than making me look for her."

"She's a bold predator," Nihlus said, confirming Shepard's gut feeling. "She tried to take that child right in front of me, despite the fact I'd told her I was a Spectre." He shook his head and leaned down to nuzzle Shepard's temple. "She assumes that she can dominate the will of anyone who gets close enough to capture her, and she's not far wrong."

Shepard scowled, not liking the thread of fear woven through his voice. "Did she try to put the whammy on you, cikabeknai?" She looked up into his eyes, seeing the truth there. Morinth had tried, and come close enough to succeeding to scare the Spectre. She reached up to caress his cheek and along the length of his mandible.

He nodded, but then a small, gentle flutter of a smile eased back the haunted aura. "She did, went straight for that lonely, terrified little puer hiding from his mother's rage." He pulled her in tight, wrapping both arms around her. "But then his beautiful, invisible friend stepped in and took his hand, giving him the strength to fight the ardat yakshi off."

Shepard slipped her arms around his waist and laid her head against his chest. "I wish I'd been there for you, Nihlus."

He rested his cheek against her hair, the atmosphere in the car stilling into something comforting, almost reverent. "You were."

Shepard smoothed the wrinkles from the front of her dress and looked down at the moaning turian. "I didn't get dressed up and put all this crap on my face to wrestle with idiots, so go home, and don't let me see your face for the rest of the night." Turning her back on him, she ran a hand down
the young *nais's* arm to squeeze her hand. "You all right?"

The asari leaned in and pressed a soft, lightly perfumed kiss to Shepard's cheek. "Thanks, the bouncers were totally sleeping on the job." She gripped the Spectre's hand for another second, then turned and stormed off to confront the aforementioned bouncers. Shepard winced away from her extreme use of the word fuck, and backed away. Maybe she hadn't had to step in to help that one, her mouth could flay the hide off even a turian.

Shepard glared down at the turian as she stepped around him. "Drunk is no excuse for treating people like crap. Call your dear old *mari* and ask her how she wants you to treat females … of any species." Turning on one high heel, she strode to the bar.

"Cranberry juice, please," she called, leaning easily against the bar. Suddenly, she remembered exactly why she'd never been a huge fan of the bar scene. Drunk people made really stupid choices.

"Thanks," she said, giving the bartender a curt nod as she grabbed her cranberry juice and wandered off toward a seating area. They'd been insanely optimistic believing that she'd lure this asari out of the shadows in a single evening.

"A lot of creds on display tonight," a dual toned voice said from somewhere behind her. "We just need to pick who to follow out of here."

"Seriously?" A low groan rolled deep in her throat. They couldn't help themselves. Turning, she scanned the crowd until she saw two turians huddled head to head in a corner. Well, if the fact she'd spent her night as some sort of vigilante in heels didn't intrigue the *ardat yakshi*, what would?

Shepard thumped down in the chair next to the turians. "So, is being a couple of small time crooks how you envisioned your life when you were *peririn* dreaming of what you would be when you grew up?" she asked, crossing her legs at the knee. She swung her lower leg a little and crossed her arms over her chest. "Is it what your *mari's* dreamed you would grow up to be?"

The one closest to her jumped up, looming over her. "Who do you think you're talking to, lady? Do you know who we work for?"

"Hink," the second one supplied, raising his brow plates like she should know and be impressed by the name.

She didn't, and she wasn't. Thugs, all such big cowards beneath the posturing and scary name dropping. Seriously though … Hink? How did that guy become a crime boss with a name that sounded like a mild hip cramp?

*Ow, hold up, I've got a hink!*

Eyebrows lifting toward her hairline, she chuckled and shook her head when the nearest one bristled. "Oh, come on." She nodded toward the chair. "Go ahead and sit down; you can't intimidate me." She leaned forward, arms crossed over her knee. She pointed to the chair, hardening her glare. "Go on, sit. I'm not the cops. I'm not going to arrest you. I might break your kneecaps to keep you from hurting any of these people, but let's leave the violence as a last resort."

The two looked back and forth for a second, then the first one sat, but next to his buddy rather than retaking his previous seat. "Look, lady," he said, all his bravado crumbling, "we just can't go back to Hink with empty hands. We don't hurt anyone."

Shepard nodded. "You don't have to go back to Hink at all." Eyes narrowed, she stared them down. "You could make a change, maybe even a few good, solid life choices." After a second, she leaned
Shepard jumped, spinning toward a deep pool of shadows. Chuckling, she clapped a hand over her heart. "Phew, that was a good jump scare." As her heart rate dropped, a slow chill moved in behind it, an oily shadow slithering across the floor. "Should I be worried about your stalking?" she asked.

An asari in a corset and sleek, floor length, black leather skirt detached from the shadows. A graceful shrug rolled along her bare shoulders, ripples spreading across deep, dark waters. "I don't know. Do you scare easily?"

Shepard chuckled. "No, but then shadows don't normally tell me that they've had their eyes on me. I'll get back to you once I've had a chance to process." A tight smile accompanied a stiff nod. "Have a great night," she said and continued to a corner booth, half-hidden in shadow. Now to see if Morinth took the bait and followed.

_Blessed Enkindlers, shine the light of your corpulent, glowing asses on that decision._

The shadow moved, the asari keeping outside the bright spotlights illuminating the bar and dance floor. Despite the light blue of her skin, and how much skin she showed, she blended very well with the inky pools along the walls, appearing to materialize next to Shepard's booth.

"Do you mind if I sit?" the asari asked.

Shepard shook her head and held a hand out toward the seat opposite, breathing a sigh when it remained rock steady. Thank the sweet baby Jesus for Anderson and all his warrior training. "Not at all. It's a big table for one person."

She took a long sip of her juice and looked away to watch the dancing. The dancers all swayed like reeds along a river bank. Well, except one large turian, very handsome in his blue and black suit with gold trim. He swung his giggling human partner around the floor with enough flare to draw a crowd. She hid her grin behind a delicate swipe at her mouth. Her Callor was such a show off.

"My name is Morinth." The asari leaned back in her seat, one arm lifting to drape along the back of the booth in such a way as to showcase her elbow-length black gloves. Every centimetre of her screamed seduction.

"Jane," Shepard supplied. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Morinth."

"I just arrived on Omega yesterday, but had already begun to despair that I wouldn't meet anyone interesting on this rock." Tipping her chin down and to one side, the niais watched Shepard from under heavily lidded eyes, a soft, sly smile painted on her lips. "Then you came along and gave me hope."

Shepard shrugged. "I almost didn't come out tonight, I have an early appointment, but then I thought, what the hell. Life's short, you're young, take your chances." She cast a sideways glance at
"Must be my lucky night, then." Deftly painted lids closing over blue eyes, Morinth tilted her head back on the long column of her neck. "I love the music here," she said, her voice pitched just right to carry, but at a volume that forced Shepard to lean in to hear it. "It calls to my blood … like it's trying to seduce me out onto the dance floor so it can break through my body's defenses and possess me entirely."

"Space age siren of the new deep?" Shepard asked, one brow lifting. She smiled and nodded. "I like it. Very poetic." Shrugging, she looked back to the dancers. "I'm almost always deployed, so I don't get much of a chance to stop and listen to insanely loud techno noise. This is a treat."

"You? You're a soldier?" Morinth's incredulous smile slowly transformed as she narrowed her eyes, studying Shepard. "Yes, I suppose I see it." She nodded toward the scars down Shepard's arms. "Upgrades?"

"The sort that bring you back from the almost dead, yeah." Shepard shrugged. "My doctor says my body is as ornery as my spirit. It's taking a bit to convince it to accept the implants."

"Ornery, are you? That's promising." The nais's smile warmed. "Blind acceptance is for those without the courage to think for themselves."

The song changed to a wild, heavy-bass cacophony that sent Shepard's fingers up to adjust her aural implants. Blessed Enkindlers, what a racket.

A blissful, almost drugged-looking smile bloomed on Morinth's deep red lips. "Oh, Expel 10. They're sublime. Doesn't this beat just reach down inside you? This band's music … it's like they are playing the base code of my soul … all our souls."

"It really is something," Shepard replied. It reached down into her, but if it was playing the basecode of her soul, her soul needed to run some malware repair. A dull ache wormed in behind her eyes.

Morinth's arm lifted from the back of the seat and glided across the table, long digits grazing the back of Shepard's fingers. "Come, lets dance," Morinth said, leaning in, her eyes focused on Shepard, blinking long and slow. "If you don't get the chance to do this often, might as well take advantage of it." Her fingers wrapped around Shepard's, not giving her a chance to argue, and winked. "Come, you know you want to."

"Well, certainly not when you're dragging me up there." The captain laughed, stepping up rather than allowing herself to be dragged. The nais's emboldening demands easing Shepard's nerves. So far, so good. The snare seemed to be holding. "Just so you're warned," she said, tone light and teasing, "I'm terrible. Hooved animals on ice are more graceful than I am."

The asari's laugh rolled soft and smooth, warm butter over fresh bread. "After seeing you take out that turian buffoon, I don't believe that for a minute. You were a living work of art." Morinth stepped onto the dance floor, pulling Shepard just past her. Slipping in behind the captain, the asari covered both of Shepard's hands with hers, lacing their fingers as she began to move.

Shepard struggled to relax enough to not give herself away or drive Morinth off, but the nais pressed far too tightly against her back. Gloved hands slipped along the underside of Shepard's arms, the touch setting off the captain's tickle reflex as the asari lifted them over her head.

"That's it," Morinth whispered, her lips pressed just above Shepard's ear. "See, you dance
beautifully." The words crawled inside Shepard's head, their whispers adamant and beguiling.
'Relax,' they said, 'enjoy yourself. You're safe with me.'

The ardat yakshi's hands caressed their way back down Shepard's arms, the touch repellant and enticing in equal measure as it slipped along her sides. Resting on the captain's hips, insistent pressure coaxed her to sway in time with the body pressed tight against her back.

"I noticed you the moment you walked in," Morinth said, her voice weaving a private bubble around them. It pressed in, safe and so very easy. "There's something special about you." She chuckled, a spring breeze that twined around Shepard's limbs, caressing them with sweet warmth. "The only person in here who isn't dazzled by you, is you."

A slender finger pointed to the dancer Shepard had rescued earlier. "She wants you so badly that she'll end up dragging one of those bouncers into the back room on break just to ease the ache." Morinth smiled and nodded in answer to Shepard's dubious frown, and then tipped her head toward Garrus. "And that one might be dancing with every other female in the place, but he can't take his eyes off you." She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, a hungry smile curling across her lips, and when she spoke, the words came out raw and edged. "He wants you with an intensity that I can smell in his sweat. It's intoxicating."

Morinth pressed closer, every movement brushing against Shepard's body, somewhere different each time, as if the asari drew the runes of a spell, one that pulled the captain in tighter. "But you won't be leaving with him will you, lovely Jane?"

Shepard shook her head, a breathless, "No, not him," tumbling from her lips. Morinth captured the words with a quick, lusty inhale before Shepard could even be certain she'd said them.

The song changed, but Morinth merely adjusted the weaving of her web to suit, slowing it down, moving in tighter, the silken strands thicker, coated with perfumed honey. "That's it," she said, breath stirring the short, delicate hairs on the side of Shepard's neck. "It's just us. We're the only two people left in the galaxy."

A gentle, grey fog surrounded them, the effect a little disorienting, making Shepard feel as though she floated adrift amongst the clouds. Shepard turned to face the asari, her hands following the long, graceful arms to bare, heated sapphire shoulders, using them as an anchor. Morinth's skin felt like silk, textured but so soft that it practically begged Shepard's fingers to caress it. "The only two people left in the galaxy," she agreed.

Five, then six more songs drifted past, the changing rhythm the only marker of time. Morinth said little, her voice the least of her weapons. When the throbbing bass eased back for the seventh time, the nais led Shepard back to their booth. That time, she slid in next to the captain.

A pill appeared on the table, a single black-laced finger tip pushing it toward Shepard, but she shook her head. "No, thank you. In another life, I took enough of those to support the industry for the following decade."

Morinth nodded, and the pill disappeared. "I knew I sensed pain in you." Before Shepard could answer, the asari smiled, and changed the subject. "What sorts of things interest you?" she asked, leaning back, an arm draping itself across the back of the seat so that her fingertips rested at the base of Shepard's neck, drawing slow circles of fire on the bare skin. "I want to know absolutely everything about you."

Shepard smiled and shifted to end the maddening touch. "That will take more than a short conversation at a bar." She shrugged and forced herself to hold her ground when those fingers
stroked through the hair around her ear. "I'm interested in a great many things: art, books, old movies, sport shooting."

At the mention of art, Morinth perked up, her eyes sparkling with an innocent zeal that left a swelling bruise in Shepard's resolve. "Art? Really?" A bright, curious smile took her expression all the way to heartbreaking. "Do you know the artist, Forta?" Morinth asked.

Shepard nodded, but then looked up and flagged down a server. "Cranberry juice, please," she ordered, then looked to Morinth.

"Thessian Cloudburst," the asari said, her eyes never leaving Shepard. "So, Forta? What do you think? Have you seen his latest?"

Shepard shook her head. "No, I haven't seen his newest pieces, but I prefer sculpture that I can look at for more than five seconds without feeling as though I've overdosed on a badly mixed batch of Hallex." Tearing her eyes away from the asari's, she bolstered her resolve. The nais might not have been able to help being born an ardat yakshi, and it might not be fair for her to spend her life locked away, but the choice to kill hundreds of times … that was all on her, and it made the lovely Morinth a monster.

*Note to self: She intends to kill you before the week is out, you soft-hearted … or is that soft-headed … idiot. And that's if she decides to toy with you a little. Otherwise it'll be tonight. Focus on that.*

Shepard cleared her throat. "When it comes to elcor artists, I prefer Drothal. Her paintings … " She purred a little in the back of her throat. "... they transcend form in a way that shattered the curtain for me, letting me glimpse into the void." Wagging her head, she chuckled. "However, my real passion is hyalus, the older the better." She wrinkled her nose. "But I think a part of that is the mystery of it, you know? How the hell did the ancient turians create most of it?"

A soft sound from beside the table drew Shepard's smile to the server. She accepted the drinks and paid for them. "Thanks."

The asari took a sip from her drink, then set it down, one fingertip swirling around the rim of the glass. "That's a secret to which the answer might just drive us mad," she said, a throaty laugh punctuating the sentence.

"Probably, but still, the ones that stand guard over the front doors to the Seat in Cipritine … . I can't even guess at how they were made." She shrugged. "I suppose I don't really need to. Not when the light hits them just right, and you'd swear that blood and fire flows through them." Ducking her head, Shepard blushed a little under the weight of Morinth's regard. "Sorry, my mouth runs away with me when I get passionate."

Morinth reached out to caress Shepard's cheek. "Never apologize for passion. There's nothing else in the galaxy worth striving for. Without it, life is just a cage with invisible bars." She swallowed her drink in one and nodded toward the door. "Want to go somewhere a little bit more conducive to talk? I'm tired of yelling over the music."

Shepard met the invitation with a raised eyebrow and a dubious head slant. "It might be a bit early in our friendship for going somewhere quiet. What do you have in mind?"

Morinth slipped from the booth. "Skewers and salarian pale rice? All of it very public so that I'm not too tempted to find out if the body under that dress is as perfect as it is tiny." She tweaked one eyebrow, her eyes sparkling again but nothing in that twinkle could be called innocent.
Shepard stared up at the asari for long seconds, not wanting to appear too eager. Screwing her face up a little, she nodded. "Sure, why not. I could definitely eat. Spent so much time running around today that my stomach thinks my throat's been cut."

Morinth winced. "That's a terrible saying." As soon as Shepard slid out of the booth, the nais slipped her hand through the captain's elbow. "You humans can be so tragically morbid."

Shepard chuckled and guided them through the crowd to the door. "Wait until I introduce you to country music. Now that is truly depressing." She palmed the door and stepped through. "I swear it's all written by people who've just had their heart broken. All of it."

Morinth nodded. "Pain is the driving force behind all art. That's why it's so beautiful and precious: it's been purchased with shattered hearts and dreams even before the artist's hands give birth to it." She let out a long, slow breath. "It's why art transcends race and class, individuals and genders. Pain is the universal language." She froze at the top of the flight of stairs, her eyes glaring down at the approaching asari in red. "We all speak it." She slipped her hand out of Shepard's arm. "Isn't that right, Mother?"

"Don't call me that!" Cloaked in an aura of blue energy, Samara stormed up the first handful of stairs. She launched a throw that flung Morinth back against the door and pinned her there. Morinth flared her power, breaking free. She landed balanced and controlled. "Step back, lovely Jane," she said, brushing a soft kiss along Shepard's cheek bone even as she hurled a throw that tossed Samara back down the stairs. "This little family feud will only take a moment to sort." She stepped down two stairs. "I can't just choose to stop being your daughter, bitch." She launched a careless warp that Samara batted away with equal ease and carelessness.

Shepard grabbed the bouncer and shoved him toward the door. "Get inside before you end up being a collateral casualty." Even as the door closed behind him, a warp seared across Shepard's back, impacting the wall. She yelped, and backed away, trying to press herself into the corner. Samara came back, throwing two warp fields in quick succession. The first sent Morinth and Shepard both diving out of the way, the second bore the ardat yakshi to the floor, bowing backwards as she writhed in agony. "You made your choice long ago."

"What choice?" Morinth sprang back, furious and terrible, far stronger than anyone had a right to be considering. "The choice to spend my life imprisoned? And for what crime? Falere, Rila, and I … our only crime was the accident of our birth … the gifts you gave us."

Both launched powers at the other at the same time, the result forming a ball-shaped nimbus trapped between them, the thing building in power until neither could shift even the slightest without taking a near fatal blast. Shepard shuffled forward a little, one hand held up to shade her eyes from the brilliant light. The crates next to the wall shifted, the mass effect field pulling at them as it gained strength. Mind racing, Shepard crept closer, trying to see a way to end the standoff without any innocent bystanders getting hurt.

Morinth focused on Shepard, that gaze a fathomless black through the crackling blue aura of her biotics. "Jane, help me. What kind of nais hunts her own daughter for four hundred cycles, killing hundreds of innocents just to destroy what she brought into the universe?" That stare sank hooks into Shepard's mind, pulling her in, demanding that she do what Morinth asked.

Shepard pressed her eyes shut, ducking her head and yanking her chin in toward her chest as if she could tear the seductive, pleading ties pulling her toward the ardat yakshi. Morinth was a murderer. She killed for the thrill of it. No matter what her words and the whispers in Shepard's mind said,
she was no victim. She did not need—

"Save me, please, Shepard. You can't let me die." The gossamer ties doubled in strength. "You care about me! You know how good we could be together. You'd never let her hurt me." The black void drew Shepard's eyes back to stare into the depths of eternity. "Just grab her hand. Give me a second's advantage, and we can be together. We can escape … ."

Escape? The beacon images tore through Shepard's mind, the horror and chaos of a dying galaxy smashing her into pieces then grinding them beneath its heel.

Joy swept in to greet her terror and helplessness, the whispers growing louder, more insistent. "Yes! We can escape it all, disappear. We can be happy. I can take away all these burdens you carry. No more fear, no more terrible responsibility."

Shepard felt the hooks loosen. Responsibility? Who would shoulder it if she ran away? Garrus? Nihlus? No! Molten steel poured into her gut, and the scent of iron bloomed deep in her sinuses. She couldn't run. The battle needed her. Her torins needed her. She'd been brought back to fight, and as painful and terrifying as it might be time to time, she'd damned well fight.

Wrestling against the bonds shackling her body through her mind, Shepard threw herself forward, straining to reach for Morinth's hand. The clashing biotic fields ripped along her skin as she entered that mass effect battlefield, two titans locked in a battle of equal power. Panting, sweat trickling down her neck and between her breasts, Shepard laboured forward, one agonizing millimetre at a time. trying to grab the ardat yakshi's wrist, but the voice whispering in her mind pushed back against her will.

"Then I will join your fight. Give in to me. Help me kill her, and everything will be all right. I can help you stop them. I can help you save everyone." The whispers wrapped tight, pushing Shepard toward the elder asari. "Do as I say, and the Reapers won't stand a chance."

"Kahri!" The club's door opened, letting loose a heavy wave of the throbbing, pounding music, but then heavy footsteps raced toward her and strong talons gripped her shoulders, shattering the whispers' hold on her. Twisting, she lunged into the competing warp fields, grabbed Morinth's arm and hauled back on it.

"Nothing you could offer me can hold the tiniest spark to him." A razor-wire grimace slashed across her face as Morinth's wide-eyed stare flicked to Garrus. "You're just a parasite."

A throw tore Morinth's wrist from Shepard's grip and spun them both around. The nais slammed headfirst into the corner of a large crate, hitting with enough force that she flipped over it and into the pipes lining the wall. Violet blood and gore splashed across Shepard's face and shoulder as bones cracked and splintered, tearing through the once flawless blue skin.

Talons latched around Shepard's shoulders, pulling her back against Garrus's body, but she resisted when he tried to turn her away. Samara stepped around them, striding to her daughter's body. The nimbus that had surrounded the entire nais drew in, concentrating around the asari's fist, growing brighter and brighter as she raised it, then smashed it into Morinth's jaw. With another horrific crack, the ardat yakshi's neck broke, and the body slumped, dead.

The hooks inside her mind vanished, the sudden freedom sending a flood of ice water pouring through Shepard's veins. How close had she come to giving in? She didn't know, but she felt pretty sure that the part of her mind trying to reassure her that she never would have let Morinth dominate her was a fucking liar. Clenching her teeth together, she sucked in long breaths through her nose, fighting to avoid throwing up. Pieces of skull and brain stuck to the crate, smaller pieces flowing
along the thin river of blood toward the edge of the stair.

"Nihlus?" Garrus called, startling Shepard from her horrified fascination. She looked up then turned to see the Spectre hurrying up the stairs from the market. Garrus wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her into his heat envelope. "Can you and Samara see to getting this sorted? I'm taking Shepard back to base."

Warm, rough palms cradled Shepard's face, then Nihlus nuzzled her brow. "Are you all right, haksaya kubenar?" His thumbs brushed through the blood on her cheek, spreading the chill dampness into the hair in front of her ear. "She didn't hurt you?"

She nodded and straightened, the numb shock drawing back. "I'll live." Sniffing, she reached up to grip his wrist. "Yeah, having a ardat yakshi begging for her life inside your head, then having her ripped out is … well … ." A fragile chuckle tumbled out, shattering even before it hit the floor. "Don't worry, I'll shake it off."

Nihlus touched his brow to hers for a second, then drew back and looked to Garrus. "I'll stay here with Samara and take care of the body. I'll see you back at base an hour before departure time."

Shepard wrapped an arm around Garrus's waist, allowing him to lead her to Afterlife where Martin waited with the car. No one spoke all the way back to base, Garrus seeming willing to wait for her to make the first move. For her part, Shepard relished the silence, a slow-building headache pressing into her temples. So, instead of talking, she laid her head against her dilan's chest and closed her eyes.

After ten minutes or so of flight, his arm tightened around her, alerting her to their arrival. Taking a long breath, Shepard pulled away. Time to push it aside and get ready for her wedding. She didn't even own an appropriate dress for the occasion. "Okay," she said, policing up all the random bits of crazy, "I need to take a shower, get dressed, grab my mother, and run out to purchase a wedding dress." She grinned up at Garrus. "Which you're not allowed to see until the big day."

Garrus arched his neck, looking quite pleased with himself as he chuckled. "I'll retrieve our things from the laundry and pack our armour?"

Shepard leaned up and kissed his mandible. "Thank you, Callor. You are the very best almost husband there is."

The top and sides opened, and Garrus got out, but it was Martin who reached in to help Shepard out of the car. When she stood on her own, he grinned. "You look insanely hot in that dress, Shepard." He leaned in, his mouth pressed to her ear. "Are you sure you don't want to ditch the general and marry me, instead?"

Shepard scarcely got a chance to chuckle before Garrus grabbed the kid by the shoulders and propelled him toward the door. "Sorry, kid. I guess not," she called after him.

Martin shrugged and walked through, but then popped back around the door. "Think about it! We'd make beautiful babies!"

Garrus planted a hand on the top of Martin's head, pushing it back over the threshold. "Get out of here and go pack for Palaven. And quit hitting on my mate. As best man, it's in very poor taste."

"Best man?" The joy in the kid's voice wrapped a tight hand around Shepard's throat. "Really?"
"Really," Garrus replied, "so get moving."

"Okay, I'm … thanks, boss … General … Garrus." Running bootsteps retreated across the tile, disappearing into the elevator.

Shepard smiled and shook her head, watching Garrus with a warm, weighted stare as he turned from the door. All her earlier panic about being married, having kids … it all vanished as their eyes met. "I love you," she whispered, emotion washing her brain clean of thought.

He smiled and closed the few metres between them. His hands cupped her shoulders for a moment, before sliding down her arms, to close his talons around her fingers. "And I love you." His grin turned wicked, his eyes flashing a little as he shrugged and swallowed hard. "And you do look insanely sexy. I would have much rather you were rubbing all of this … " He lifted her arms away from her sides and twirled her around, pulling her in tight against him. "... all over me rather than that psycho."

Shepard relaxed into his arms, laying her head back against his arm. "Trust me, that would have been my preference too, and I will, but I fully intend for us to be naked at the time." She closed her eyes. "Right now, however, we need to get packed and get our butts onto our ships." Pulling from his grip, she turned, reaching up to cradle his face between her hands. "You're okay with Nihlus and I spending the trip on the Ypres?"

The question ached in her chest as she asked. There it was, the down side of the three way relationship.

"Yes. I've had you all to myself for the week, although most of that was sleeping in our armour propped up in a corner somewhere." He leaned down and nuzzled her lips. "When we get to Palaven, you'll be all mine again, so definitely spend this time with Nihlus."

Shepard kissed him. "I am the luckiest woman in the entire galaxy." She stepped out of his arms. "Now, I'd better get changed, grab Mom—and Bunny, if she'll come—and go find something to wear." Standing on her tiptoes, she kissed him again, then dashed into the building. "But first, I need to pee."

Shepard stepped out through the curtain and twirled, the cream, gauzy material of the dress whispering around her legs in a most delicious way. After a couple of spins, she held out her arms. "I love it. What do you think?"

Lucy—it was so very hard to think of her as Mom after so long—smiled and stood. "It's beautiful, Janey." She adjusted the peasant neckline so that it draped off Shepard's least scarred shoulder. "What are you going to wear on your feet?"

Pulling the neck back up, Shepard shrugged. "The part that I'm wearing the dress for is in his parents' garden, so nothing more than likely." Meeting her mother's eyes, Shepard reached up to brush a stray lock of brilliant red behind an ear. "I'm so glad you're going to be there." And, despite the strange newness of Lucy's presence, she meant it. She just wished that her mother would stop staring at her like she was trying to give her an xray.

They hadn't had very much time to get reaquainted, with dashing off to Palaven to meet with Victus, and then straight from there to Korlus. If Shepard had to tell the truth, the awkwardness of it … well, once the initial joy settled, the whole mess brought about by Bunny's hatred, and the fact her mother kept looking at her like she was some sort of alien … . Well, it all sent her into avoidance mode.
Stepping back, Shepard twirled a couple more times, grinning as the skirt spread out. "I definitely think this is the one, don't you?"

Lucy pressed her lips together in a tight smile and nodded. "Definitely the one."

"I remember the last time you came in here," the asari attendant said, smiling wide in the mirror's reflection from behind Shepard's left side. "Are you marrying the one you bought that last dress for?" She stepped up, a gorgeous beaded belt stretched between her hands. Without asking, she slipped it around Shepard's waist, tying it in a loose loop off to one side. "There, perfect."

Shepard grinned as she remembered the way Garrus hadn't even recognized her in that other dress, then just stared, his mouth and mandibles hanging. "Yes, he's the one. That mission was a few weeks before we started seeing one another. I needed the dress to get past the Blue Suns."

The asari nodded in a knowing way. "I saw the way he looked at you and knew something was there."

Shepard chuckled and cocked her head one way then the other, swinging her hips to watch the beaded tassels on the belt sway. "You knew more than I did at that point, then. That was one hell of a crazy night. Went in to find a doctor and came out with a whole pile more people needing a doctor." She nodded, loving the way the light played off the cream and gold beads. "I'll take the belt too." Ducking inside the change room, she felt those few days close around her, heavy and rich. Her fear for Nihlus, how safe she felt with Garrus at her side, even walking into that viper's lair. She untied the belt and looped it over the hook on the wall.

Crazy times. She smiled. And good ones. Strange how often her life paired those two things.

"Wait," the asari called through the fabric barrier, "you needed the dress to get past the Blue Suns?"

Shepard squawked as the curtain flew back, the asari standing in the gap. Thank god she hadn't taken off the dress. She flinched back, having spent far too much time with boundaryless asari in her space. "Yes, I went in under the guise of prostitute servicing a rich bastard in the district."

The asari lunged forward and flung her arms around Shepard, squeezing another squawk out along with all of the captain's air. "You killed Donovan, didn't you? You saved his victims?"

Shepard pried herself loose and held the nais at arm's length. "Yes. My dilan … Garrus … General Vakarian helped."

Tears rolled over the lavender cheeks. "Thank you." Breaking free of the vicelike grip on her arms, she wrapped Shepard in another strong, but much briefer, hug. "My neice was one of the girls you saved that day," she explained, wiping her face on her sleeve. Flapping a flustered hand at the dress, she shrugged, her shoulders crumpling as her cheeks flushed violet. "Sorry for grabbing you like that; I'll let you get changed." Still fussing, she pulled the curtain closed behind her. "Just pass the dress through when you're ready, and I'll put it in a garment bag for you."

Shepard grinned and slipped out of the beautiful layers of sheer fabric. As startled as she'd been, it felt good to see the effect of her actions. Knowing that she'd saved somebody's loved one almost wiped away the look in Hock's eyes when she'd murdered him.

Violet blood splashed across her face, the terrible crunch of bones shattering … .

No! Shepard shook her head and glanced at her chronometer. The Ypres departed in just over an hour. She didn't have time for indulging that nonsense. She scrambled for her clothes.
When she emerged from the stall, her mother and the sales associate stood over by the door, speaking in hushed tones. Suspicious, she sidled up to them, but they saw her and broke off before she could hear what they were talking about.

"I'm ready, I think," she said, letting out a short sigh as she nodded. "We'd better get over to the docks and get ready to go."

The asari thrust the garment bag and another, smaller bag into Shepard's arms. "Here." She waved Shepard off when she tried to pay. "No charge. Consider it a thank you for my niece's life." A wicked gleam sparkled in her eyes. "And … ah … I threw in a little something to thank the general as well."

Shepard peered into the bag, but couldn't make out much other than black lace. She chuckled. "Thank you, and I'm sure the general will thank you too."

"Have a wonderful bonding ceremony," the nais called, waving them off.

Shepard headed across the markets to the stairs that led up to Afterlife. She stumbled to a weary stop at the bottom of the flight leading to the club's VIP section. Only a couple of hours before she'd been dancing with a murderer, trying to seduce her to a terrible but justified death. She hadn't fired that shot, not like Donovan Hock, but she'd still taken justice into her own hands again. Her stomach rolled. She didn't want that sort of power. She couldn't be trusted with that sort of power. No one could, that was why courts existed.

Courts? Really, Janey? You'd trust your fate to a court overseen by the council?

Clenching her jaw, she brought that train to a screeching halt before it derailed.

"Janey?" Lucy said, her tone soft and confused as she interrupted Shepard's guilt storm without dissipating it. "Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"I'm fine, Mom." Shepard tried to nod and smile, to show the brave, unaffected face, but the nod decayed into a slow shrug, the violet stain on the stairs holding her eyes captive. At least Nihlus and Samara had gotten the body removed. She didn't know if she could keep herself from throwing up if she had to hold her wedding dress and stare at Morinth's crushed skull and broken neck. "I'm just very tired and a little over emotional. Nothing to worry about."

Sucking in a ragged breath, she spun away. They needed to get to the ship. She could go through the eighteen stages of vigilante guilt and grief once Nihlus's arms sheltered her from the rest of the galaxy.

"Jane?"

She spun towards his voice, its warm timber coaxing a soft hum of relief from deep in her chest. Her torins both possessed spectacular timing. He jogged over and pulled her straight into a tight hug.

"How are you doing, haksaya kubenar?" He pulled back, holding her away by her shoulders. "You looked rattled when Garrus took you back to base."

She just shook her head and wrapped her arms around him. "Get me to the transit station, please, love."

He held her tight and leaned down to nuzzle her temple. "Of course." Wrapping an arm around her waist, he pulled her in tight and started toward the doors.
"Janey?"

"Oh sweet baby Jesus," Shepard whispered, keeping the words too low for her mother to hear. She hadn't prepared her mother for the whole two turian boyfriends, marrying both of them eventually, thing.

Shepard pulled a tinman turn, practically able to hear all her joints creaking. "Mom, you've met Spectre Kryik before?"

Lucy nodded, just as rusted and stiff. "I have." Her eyes looked to Nihlus. "Hello again." Then darted right back to pin Shepard to the wall.

"Nihlus is my boyfriend, Mom." She sighed. "It will take quite a lot of explaining, but he and Garrus are sort of … blood brothers, I guess you could say."

"Does the general know about this?" Lucy demanded, pointed and bristled.

Shepard smiled. "Of course, he does, Mom. He talked me into it." She nodded her head in the direction of the transit station and started shuffling that way. "I'll explain everything … actually, the three of us will, but for now, let's get to our ship."

*Please, sweet Jesus, just let me get her to the cab before she detonates.*

Shepard shuffled a couple more steps sideways. "Come on, Mom. It's all okay. The three of us are a family."

Lucy's jaw remained clenched, her neck stiff as she moved, but at least she started moving. Nihlus loosened his hold on Shepard, but she gripped his hand and pulled him in tight again. She loved Nihlus, they were together, and if her mother couldn't handle that … well, then she couldn't.

They managed to make it to the cab, where Nihlus gave her a quick nuzzle goodbye, then took off with some excuse about having a couple last things to take care of. Shepard watched him run from her mother, then got in. Holding her breath as the cab closed around them, she felt her mother's disapproval like a small crate of grenades sitting in the back seat, waiting to detonate.

"The general is a very good man," Lucy said, her stare burning a hole through the front screen.

Well, at least Shepard could agree with that. A thin sigh preceded her words. "He's the very best, and I love him so hard it hurts."

The heavy, painful rigor of Lucy swallowing reached Shepard even over the engine noise. "Then why isn't he enough for you?" She whirled around, lunging a little, her face that brittle mask that Shepard remembered so well. "I didn't raise my daughter to be that selfish or greedy." A sound rolled low in her throat, a sound rotting with disgust. "And I didn't raise some mare to brood herself out."

Shepard locked her jaw shut against the words that struggled to get out. Armed with shivs and broken bottles, they rioted across her tongue, clamouring to cut as they bashed against the insides of her teeth. Instead, she focused on programming the car to take them to the *Ypres*. When the guards wrestled the prisoners into straight jackets and tossed them into their padded cells, she took a long breath in.

"You know, Mom, you spent my whole childhood believing that I was Dad. That I had somehow been created to test your patience and your connection to God." The destination entered into the cab's computer, Shepard let her hands fall into her lap. "And I agreed. How on earth could we ever
have anything in common?" A long breath whistled through her nose.

"It took about five years after Minder before I realized something. I am you. I've always been you. You raised me with this will that is a match to your own." A soft chuckle dissipated the last of her anger at being called a selfish broodmare. "And that's why we've always butted heads. And it's also why we always stayed connected even as much as we drove one another crazy." Shepard turned in her seat to take her mother's hands then leaned forward to press her lips to Lucy's brow.

She shrugged, ducking her head toward one shoulder, and squeezed her mother's warm, dry fingers. "And now, I'm going to take the two gifts you gave me—the impossible will and the great big heart—and I'm going to set my own path as I always have." She pulled back just far enough to meet her mother's eyes. "I'm going to marry Garrus in his parent's garden with his brother standing behind us. And then I'm going to marry Nihlus with Garrus standing by our sides, and I am going to love them both the very best that I can."

"Janey … ." Lucy tugged back on her hands, so Shepard released them, watching as they drifted back to rest on her mother's lap.

Shepard shook her head, not willing to let her mother gain any steam. "And if you can't be there for both weddings, and love and celebrate both of my bond-mates … then don't come to either wedding." Focusing on Lucy's eyes, she buttoned down her resolve. "I'll miss you, but Nihlus doesn't deserve to be made to feel second best, and I don't deserve to feel like I am some sort of horrible bitch or whore on the two most important days of my life."

Shepard turned back to the car's controls. "I hope you'll decide to be there for both. I really do."

(A-N: Having decided that the reason people have quit on the story is likely the pace, I'll be moving along a lot more quickly. So yeah ... thanks for still being here. Love yah ... yep, even if I don't know yah. *hugs*)
Heart still racing, head still reeling, Shepard drew in a long breath and nodded. "Yeah, I really do. Garrus and how much I love him isn't the problem. It's all the rest of it, Anderson. It's being married. Married for God's sake! It's Nihlus, and then … kids? What the hell am I going to do with kids?"

"Love them." He chuckled again. "You won't be doing it alone, kid. You have this huge family that adores you, and every last one of us will be right there with you, and Garrus, and Nihlus. Even for the kids."

"Janey?"

Shepard stopped and twisted to look back at her mother, who stood just outside the starboard observation lounge. Her hand stalled halfway to the elevator control, hanging there like some halfwit hummingbird, uncertain whether to fly on or withdraw.

"Could I join you for supper this evening?" Lucy asked. She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders, pulling her head back on her neck. "You and Spectre Kryik?"

A slow smile pulled back one corner of Shepard's mouth as her hand finally decided to go for it and hit the control to call the elevator. "Sure, Mom, I'd love that." She activated her omnitool to check her schedule. "I have a meeting until 1900, will that be okay?"

Lucy smiled, lips pressed tight. She nodded twice, then turned back toward the door. A couple of steps down the corridor, she stopped and looked back without turning. "I'm sorry for what I said to you in the car, Janey." She sucked a noisy breath in through her nose. "I watch you, and I am just always … " Her shoulders rolled ever so slightly. "... amazed at the woman my rebellious little girl turned into. I don't understand the arrangement between you, the general, and Spectre Kryik, but you didn't deserve such unkindness."

The elevator door dinged, but Shepard turned away from it. She pressed together her trembling lips and blinked away the burning in her eyes. "Thank you, Mom. I appreciate that, and I'm glad you and Bunny are here." She closed the distance between them. "It wouldn't have been the same without you."

Lucy turned and reached up to press her palm against Shepard's cheek, her thumb caressing the edge of the wounds carved into the flesh, soothing and warm. "You've borne so much pain, Janey, and I keep searching to see … ." She ran her bottom lip between her teeth, then her entire body shrugged, eyebrows lifting in a gesture of complete bafflement. "I don't know … the connections, I guess, between the girl I remember and this remarkable woman before me. How are you this woman? I missed everything in between."

Shepard stepped in and wrapped her arms around her mother. "Part of it is you teaching me through your strength," she whispered, her voice meant to travel no further than her mother's ear. "Part of it
is Dad's faith that I had some great and terrible fate, and part is Anderson and his endless patience." She pressed her lips to her mother's ear. "And part of it is them, Mom. Garrus's solidity, Nihlus's volatility and vulnerability … both of them so strong in their own ways." Drawing back, she lifted a hand to mirror her mother's caress. "And the rest … just me trying to find my way through the dark."

Blinking quickly against the glassiness in her eyes, Lucy nodded. "If you love them, and they love you, then I'll try to understand."

"Thank you," Shepard replied, biting back a retort to the effect that Lucy's understanding wasn't required, nor would it make any difference. She could either accept or not. One included her in Shepard's life and one didn't. "I've got to meet with my XO and yeoman. I'll see you at 1900." She grinned and turned back to the elevator. "I'll ask Sgt. Gardener if he can put together something edible." When she reached the elevator, she found the doors open and frowned, puzzled, until she stepped between them and saw Nihlus hiding off to the side by the controls.

She turned to face the doors as they closed. "You hiding from my mother?" she asked, watching him out of the corner of her eye.

He chuckled and stepped into her, wrapping an arm over her shoulder and around her back, turning her into his embrace. "No, I just wanted to give you space and privacy, but if I'd gone ahead up to the cabin, you would have been waiting for the elevator for twenty minutes." He nuzzled her brow. "So, you have to meet with Operative Lawson and Kelly?"

Shepard nodded as she relaxed into him, her cheek pressed to the panel of his tunic, eyes settling closed, heavy and content. "Come up anyway? We've got a few minutes."

She felt him nod, his mandibles brushing through her hair. Neither of them moved the rest of the way up to her cabin, peeling apart reluctantly when the doors opened into the little foyer. Shepard slipped her fingers into his talons, drawing him after her as she walked into the spacious cabin. Even before the door closed, she stopped, surprise pulling a sharp, delighted smile onto her face.

"Fish!" she said, releasing Nihlus's hand to stride over, both hands lifting to press against the fishtank glass. She leaned in, ducking to follow the darting motions of the tank's colourful denizens. "Where did you lovely little chaps come from, huh?" She pressed a fingertip against the glass, grinning as a blue fellow with large gold fins tried to nibble it.

"Ms. Chambers is the culprit, I believe," Nihlus said. He stroked a slow, heavy hand down Shepard's back. "She seems to think you need stress relief." She heard him walk to the stairs and down. The leather couch let out a soft, squeaky groan as he sat.

"She might be right." His gravity drew her down the stairs. She watched him for a second, wishing that she'd cancelled her meeting and told her mother that they could have dinner the next day. All she wanted to do was curl up in his arms. No talk, no requirements or expectations of any kind, just savouring one another's presence in the quiet.

Nihlus held out a hand. She placed her fingers in his talons and allowed him to draw her over. She knelt on the couch next to him, then swung one knee over to straddle his lap.

Settling onto his thighs, she smiled, one hand draping itself over his shoulder, the other lifting to trace his familia notas with the pad of her thumb. "Hello there," she said, her voice soft and pitched low.

"Hello." His mandibles flicked as he stared into her eyes, the love in that gaze like a sturdy rope
securing her to a dock in a stormy sea. He let out a long breath and nodded. "How are you doing?"
he asked. "Really?"

"The 'had someone crowbar their way into my brain' headache is starting to fade." Shepard slipped
her arms under his, wrapping them around him and laid her head against his chest. "I feel sorry for
her, Nihlus," she said, the words tiptoeing out. "I mean, I know she was a monster, well … I mean,
was she?" Closing her eyes, she burrowed into him. "I don't know. Yes, she was a monster, but
what a crappy hand to be dealt. Live in a cage your entire life, die, or run and kill."

He wrapped his arms around her. "What would you have chosen, Jane? In her place, what decisions
would you have made?"

She shrugged, the question leaning with an uncomfortable edge digging into her conscience. "I'd
like to think that I'd have chosen the noble route, tried to find the best in the prison, and live to
better the lives of others like myself." She nuzzled into him, breathing in the subtle spice and sand
scent of him. "But would I? After Mindoir, I had plenty of opportunities to take the positive path.
Instead, I chose self-destruction."

Nihlus's talons dragged up her spine, the touch comforting, easing her deeper into his embrace as
they reversed and slipped back down. "Self destruction is very different than taking your pain out
on others or feeding an addiction through killing, haksaya kubenar." He nuzzled the top of her
head. "I believe you would have heeded the guidance of nobler, gentler spirits."

The fact that, despite everything they'd been through and all her questionable decisions, he still saw
her that way amazed her. Shepard pulled back to gaze into his eyes. "I love the way you see me,
cikabeknai, but I don't deserve it." She traced the ridge of his mandible with her thumb. "How
about you? Are you all right? She forced her way into your head, too."

He nodded. "It scared me, but no lasting damage." He leaned down, nuzzling her lips. "The
damned orbs, that's another matter altogether." A heavy shudder rolled up his body. "There were so
many of them, but even though I could sense an intelligence behind each one, only one voice spoke
inside my head."

Shepard leaned up on her knees and pressed her brow to his. "You'll tell me about it after my
mother leaves this evening?"

Another nod and a sigh. "I will. I don't understand most of what they said. Maybe you can help me
sort it." He tilted his chin up to nuzzle her lips. "But for the moment, I'd much rather just kiss you."

Shepard smiled against the rough hide. "I think that can be arranged." Returning his kiss, she
wrapped her arms around his neck as it deepened. His grip on her tightened, pulling her in, the fire
smoldering just beneath the surface, but restrained. A soft, disappointed sigh escaped her as he
pulled back, the hard, strong pounding of her heart and the ache in her gut insisting that they not
only keep going, but escalate.

Nihlus chuckled, brushing her lips with the upper plate of his mouth. "You have to meet with
Miranda and Kelly, and I would much rather pick this up when we can take it as far as we like
without worrying about time."

She let out a long, melodramatic sigh, then chuckled as knuckles rapped against the door. "Oh,
fine, since the entire galaxy seems determined to deny me." She kissed him one last time, just a
brief brush of lips, then clambered off his lap.

"Come in," she called, nodding to Miranda when the operative stepped through the door. "Come on
down and get comfortable."

Nihlus stood, pressing tight in behind her. "Operative Lawson," he said, his tone curt. He gripped Shepard's upper arm, leaning around her a little. "Do you mind if I use your computer to take care of a few things?"

"Not at all. My computer is your computer." Shepard stepped out of the way, glad that he'd be just a few metres away. Miranda didn't have any sort of control over her, but she still didn't trust the operative even as far as she could throw her. Never hurt to have back up.

Kelly arrived a moment later, and the three of them got down to business. When Nihlus finished whatever he was doing on her computer, he plunked down next to her on the couch, turned to put his feet up, and started reading Saren's journal. Shepard shifted a little to act as a better back rest, and just carried on with the rest of the meeting.

"The organization has feelers on all the colony worlds," Miranda reported, her eyes shifting back and forth between Shepard and Nihlus. "They report in every hour on the hour, so we should be ready to respond as soon as one goes dark."

Shepard chuckled. "Miranda, I think we're past calling your employers 'the organization', don't you?" She shook her head at the stubborn clench that set the operative's jaw and carried on. "Omega is the best staging area we could hope for with all of Sahrabarik's relays. We can be halfway across the galaxy in any direction within a day."

The operative tipped her head in a regal sort of nod. "It is conveniently central to most of the Attican Traverse and Terminus." She checked her data pad. "How long do you anticipate remaining on Palaven?"

"A couple of days, at least. Schedule leave in twelve hour shifts, and get everyone who will be involved in ground missions training together a couple of hours a day, at least." Shepard sucked in a big breath, then let her chest collapse, driving it out. "None of them can tolerate the others, and as much as they did well on Korlus, they could do better if they worked as a unit."

"I'll see that they do." Miranda cleared her throat and straightened a little in her chair. "I'd like to approach the justicar about joining our team. We can always use more biotic power against the collectors."

Shepard nodded. "I'll contact her and make the invitation. See if your sources can dig us up a couple more tech experts. The Collectors might be primarily organic, but the fight is bigger than that, and the Reapers and their husks are most definitely tech." She closed her omnitool and shifted a bit to warn Nihlus before she stood, declaring the meeting adjourned. "I want you training with the team as well, Miranda, and I'll join them when I'm able."

Looking from her XO to her yeoman, she raised her eyebrows. "Is there anything else?"

"No, ma'am," Kelly said.

"That's all I have, Shepard," Miranda agreed, also standing. She gathered up her datapads and then stopped to look Shepard in the eye. "Congratulations on your bonding, Captain. I wish you the best." Her gaze darted to Nihlus, who'd pressed himself in behind Shepard's elbow. A quick nod acknowledged him before the operative turned on her heel and strode to the door.

Kelly stretched out a hand. "Congratulations, Shepard. I wish you and the general long years of happiness." She grinned as she looked up at Nihlus. "Your wishes will have to wait for your big
day." A soft giggle met his chuff, then the yeoman followed Miranda to the elevator.

Nihlus's arms crept around Shepard's waist, pulling her back against him.

"You know, they're all going to start to wonder when I always have a turian glaring at them from behind me," Shepard said, then laughed. She turned within his embrace, then pulled him down for a kiss. "You two are far too overprotective, but I love you for it." She glanced at the time, then made a face. "We have about fifteen minutes before Mom comes up. Can you ask Sgt. Gardner to send up some dinner while I take care of these details?"

"I can." He nuzzled along her jaw. "The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can be alone."

Shepard took a deep breath and nodded. "From your mouth to God's ears, cikabeknai. From your mouth to God's ears."

52 Days ASR

"Oh, sweet baby Jesus," Shepard whispered as she stared into the mirror. When she'd looked at the dress in the store on Omega, she'd been sure that … well, sure of everything. Why then did it suddenly seem as though she was dooming all three of them to disaster and heartache? It had all happened too fast. She'd just barely gotten back from the dead … just barely remembered either of her torins. She didn't even really have a handle on her identity as a single unit.

And what she did know about herself didn't bode well for marriage. She was crazy, closed off, and terrified of everything. Did Garrus and Nihlus want to spend their whole lives tied to that? A deep breath trembled into a soft moan.

Warm, dry palms pressed down on her shoulders, brilliant green eyes staring at her in the mirror. "What is it, Janey?"

Shepard tried for a smile that felt like a nauseated grimace. "I believe the technical term is cold feet."

Lucy nodded. "Yeah, I was so terrified the night before I married your father that I drank nearly a fifth of coconut rum."

A startled laugh escaped as Shepard met her mother's eyes in the reflection. "You? You drank yourself silly the night before your wedding?"

"I wasn't always a cranky old woman," Lucy replied, trying to look affronted, the effect spoiled by the sparkle in her eye. "Trust me, you do not want to get married with a hangover." She straightened the spray of rylamia in Shepard's hair. "I spent the entire ceremony trying not to throw up on your father's tuxedo." She caressed Shepard's cheek. "He was so handsome. The moment I saw him standing there, waiting for me, I knew that I was making the right decision, and so will you."

Shepard turned to face her mother. "Thank you for the other night." She wrapped her arms around Lucy's narrow shoulders. "Your being so kind to Nihlus meant … means so much to me."

Lucy returned the hug. "He adores you, and I haven't got the slightest doubt that he'd do anything to protect you and make sure you're happy," She pulled away and shrugged. "What else can a mother hope for?" She frowned and turned away, reaching for her hand bag and a tissue. "You know, the day I met your general," she said, blotting away the dampness in the corner of Shepard's eyes, "I knew that I'd met the man who would spend his entire life loving my daughter, faithful to her even in death."
Shepard swallowed hard and blinked. "Who wears eye makeup for an event that was practically invented for crying?" She took the offered tissue and turned back to the mirror. "I adore him for loving me that much, and I'm glad that he found comfort in my memory, but I'd never want him to spend his entire life alone, mourning." She levelled a fierce glare on her mother. "Remind him of that—forcibly, if you need to—if it ever comes up again."

A deep, breathy sigh met that. "Oh, my girl, after today, he won't look at another woman as long as he lives." Lucy smiled. "He loves you, and he'll spend his life dedicated to making sure you're happy and taken care of." She chuckled, the laugh accompanied by half a shrug. "If I have to take on two sons-in-law, I couldn't wish for ones who love my little girl any better."

Lucy pulled in a hard, noisy breath and thumped her shoulders back, straightening up. "All right, enough of that. You'll be fine once you get out there." She pressed a kiss to Shepard's cheek, the contact rough, almost brusque. "You look beautiful, and I know your daddy is looking down on you today, bursting with pride." Another kiss, rougher than the one before, and then she spun and strode out of the room. "I'll let them know you're ready."

Shepard chuckled and shook her head, watching the door for a few seconds as she processed everything her mother had said. Good old Lucy, never one for suffering emotions for too long before she had to throw up a wall. "Guess the apple didn't fall far from that tree," she whispered, turning to look back into the mirror. After a second, she swallowed hard. "I hope you're looking on, Daddy," she said. Eyes prickling with tears again, she ripped her tissue in half to form a dam under both eyes.

"I wish you were here. I wish you'd gotten a chance to meet Garrus and Nihlus. You would have told me to be wary of Nihlus, but I know you'd love him. Garrus," she said and chuckled, "well, the two of you are peas from the same pod."

Shepard spun away from the mirror and hastily wiped her eyes as knuckles rapped against the wood. Smoothing her hands down the front of the dress, she fought to still their trembling. She was ready. Maybe. Oh, dear God, not even remotely. "Yes?"

"You decent?" Anderson called.

"Never," she retorted, grinning at the sigh that answered her. "But I'm dressed, so come on in." When the door opened, the captain stepping through, she spread her arms, twirled, and then gave a self-conscious little shrug. "Well? What do you think?"

The captain stepped over the threshold and turned to close the door, taking the time to slowly press it shut. After a moment's hesitation, he turned back, meeting her gaze with a glassy one. "You look absolutely stunning." He strode over to her, his strides so strong and quick that she leaned back, feeling as though she were being charged, but then he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into a tight hug.

"I … ," he started to say, but then just shook his head and held her.

After a stunned second, her arms stuck out and flailing a little like a scarecrow in a nor'easter, she wrapped her arms around him. "Am I making a mistake, Anderson? It's all too fast, isn't it? It's all so … not me, and in the end, they're both going to end up getting hurt." Pulling away, she backed up a few steps. "Stop me from panicking here, Anderson. Mom had me calmed down, but she left the room five minutes ago, and it's all coming back." She looked around. "You wouldn't have a fifth of coconut rum on you?"

A drink started sounding really, really good … better than one had since Noveria. Noveria …
where Garrus told her he wanted to be with her, and she freaked out and nearly got them both frozen to death. Well … then she went into a terror spiral and drank enough to end up face down on a bathroom floor. Was that the sort of woman who should be marrying anyone?

She spun toward the door. "Sweet baby Jesus, where's Nihlus's bag. It'll have something in it."

Lunging after her, Anderson caught her by the shoulders. "Take a few deep breaths, this is Garrus we're talking about. You aren't being sold off to some robber baron." His deep, rumbling laugh rolled over her as warm as a hug. "You love Garrus, don't you?"

Heart still racing, head still reeling, Shepard drew in a long breath and nodded. "Yeah, I really do. Garrus and how much I love him isn't the problem. It's all the rest of it, Anderson. It's being married. Married for God's sake! It's Nihlus, and then … kids? What the hell am I going to do with kids?"

"Love them." He chuckled again. "You won't be doing it alone, kid. You have this huge family that adores you, and every last one of us will be right there with you, and Garrus, and Nihlus. Even for the kids."

After staring into her eyes, he seemed to see that he’d talked her heart rate back down and eased the whirlwind inside her head, and nodded. "I came in here to tell you that no father could be prouder of a daughter, or love one better … or be happier to see her find men who love her like yours do, because you deserve it, kid."

Pulling her into another hug, he said, "And I wanted to say that I know that your father is here, and that he's just as amazed by you and just sure that those two torins will never deserve you." He thrust himself back, all business as he released her and straightened his dress blues. "And just as sure that they'd better damned well spend their lives trying to."

Nodding as if that decided everything, he dusted down the front of his uniform again. "Okay, I'm going to use the facilities so I don't dance my way through the ceremony and then come back and take you down there whether you're ready to or not." He reached out and brushed her cheek. "The day I found you on Mindoir … that was my very best day."

Before she could force anything past the lump in her throat to reply, he spun on his heel and marched out the door. "You're unbelievably lucky, Jane Shepard," she whispered, her stare returning to the mirror, then past it to the chest of drawers. Pictures and mementos of family covered every millimetre of the surface. She grinned and reached out to stroke a fingertip along the mandible of a very awkward-looking, gangly young turian with a massive sniper rifle angled against his shoulder.

The batarian slavers stole her family. Yeah, she'd been sixteen, so would have been moving on in a couple of years anyway, but … . She sighed, long and low. Maybe it didn't make any sense, but that day, they'd stolen more than just the years to come. They'd also stolen the years that came before. They'd stolen trust, and innocence, and belief … the belief that tragedy didn't come as a multiple of the good that preceded it … the belief in a just and kind universe … the belief that someone loving kept watch and carried one through hard times.

*Is that why you're so afraid? It's not about driving them away or being afraid of commitment and kids. You think that all the good Garrus and Nihlus bring into your life—the love and security—just means something so much worse coming?*

She pulled her hand back from the picture.
A soft rustling drifted in from the open window. She turned into the breeze that carried the sound, drawing in a long breath of the sweet, spicy tang of the still-blooming rylamia. The sun had sunk far enough that the cliffs cast their shadow over the house. She hadn't wanted the ceremony to take place under the thick protection of the tarp, so they'd planned it to take place in the late afternoon shadows. Once the party started, the tarp would roll back out to protect the fragile human guests, but Shepard would bind her life to Garrus's with the sky gleaming deep blue overhead.

The rustling became more pronounced, definitely too loud to be bird analogues in the trees beneath her window. Branches snapped, and then a skeleton-like, three taloned hand grasped the window sill. Heart leaping into her throat, her entire body washed with adrenaline. Suddenly the rylamia bit at the inside of her nose, and the wind prickled against her skin, every hair reacting. She tensed, crouching a little as the metal-plated face of one of the turian husks appeared, coming in alongside the hand. It must have climbed across from the cliff, or down from above.

"Do not fear," the thing said, its voice low and garbled as organic tones escaped an electronic voice box. "Talk."

Shepard backed toward the dresser and her sidearm, her heart slowing as her muscles coiled, ready to spring. "Then talk."

It climbed the rest of the way in, slipping silently onto the floor. Damn, so much for it making enough noise to alert the others. She'd have to call out to get any help, which meant going it alone. A tight snarl curled one corner of her mouth. It didn't stand a chance, and if its puppetmaster did want to talk, she might get a chance to learn something about the shadows orchestrating the damned war.

"The echoes possess what is needed to complete a viable Catalyst," the thing said, it's voice a low, grating noise, but becoming more understandable as it continued. "They must not succeed."

Shepard's heel smacked into the bottom edge of the chest of drawers, the skin letting out a yelp that she dismissed as quickly as it appeared. She reached for her sidearm. The thing didn't look armed, but she didn't intend to take any chances. She was wearing her damned wedding dress, and her verro-to-be was not going to find her lying on the floor bleeding out in it. No fucking way. Heart pounding strong and angry, eyes riveted to the monstrosity, she groped along the wood.

"What are the echoes?" she demanded. "Who am I speaking to through this thing?" She swallowed, forcing her brain from reaction mode into logic mode. "Stop with the esoteric bullshit. I'm not in your little cryptic, mystery mind control club, so just talk to me." Her hand closed around the pistol's grip. "Are you a Reaper? Like Sovereign?"

The turian husk backed toward the window. "They are only echoes. We existed long before."

Advancing on the thing, she kept the pistol by her side, ready but not wanting to scare it off. "So what does that make you then?" A light sparked in the back of her head. "Oh! You're the suzerain."
One eyebrow began a pilgrimage for her hairline. "I've got that right, don't I? You're the ones who enslaved the chia?"

"The echoes discovered what they need in the suum." The husk stopped at the open window. "If the empty ones, the ones you call Collectors, complete the Catalyst, the echoes will begin the Crucible. If they complete the Crucible, they will destroy all life."

Finally, something almost like an answer. Shepard closed the distance a couple of steps, the floor suddenly chill beneath her barefeet. "So, the echoes are the Reapers?" She nodded, speaking out loud more for herself anyway. "And they're building a new Vanguard, right? That's what you mean
by the Catalyst? They're taking the colonists and turning them into a new Reaper?"

"Yes, but not the Vanguard. Sovereign failed. The Catalyst is the culmination of all cycles. It is the answer to the question."

Shepard felt the room tilt hard to starboard. One arm snapped out, reaching for the bedframe, her pistol rattling off the wood as she steadied herself. "They've figured it out?" Recovering at FTL, she rushed the husk, bare feet squeaking to a halt when it moved to jump out the window. "No, wait. Don't go. I need answers to fight them. Have they discovered a way for a Reaper to have a soul?"

The husk began to twitch, its limbs jerking as if varren had taken hold on all four limbs, each fighting to get it away from the others.

No! No, no, no. She needed more answers. "Are you creating these abominations? If you're working against the Reapers—fighting them—why not just contact me directly?"

"It is not our time. We use the tools of the echoes. Domination failing." The turian husk staggered, but then straightened. It let out a stream of growled jibberish that sounded a lot like Garrus cursing when he stubbed a talon, then turned and leaped out the window.

"Fuck!" Shepard's pulse kicked back into overdrive as she raced to the window and leaned out. The turian husk scrambled down through the branches and vines of the tree next to her window. She hesitated, looking back over her shoulder toward the door. The husk might be able to lead her to the Collector base. Damn. Looking down, she saw that the thing had nearly reached the ground. She didn't have time to go the sane path and get backup.

"Fuck!" She gathered up her skirt and climbed up onto the window sill. Ducking out, she reached over for the tree, catching hold of a thick vine of some symbiotic plant. Hand over hand, feet braking her a little, she clambered down. Chasing after the damned thing amounted to madness. Anderson would return to get her and find an empty room.

She heard the machine hit the ground, a mechanical roll of sound chattering from its mouth as it took off running. Damn it, the thing was going to get away. Throwing caution to the wind, she let go, dropping the last three metres to the ground.

Shepard's ankles let out a holler as they hit the lawn, one rolling a little. Pulling just about every muscle she owned, she managed to hit on all fours, and avoid falling. Grabbing the long, back ruffles of her dress, she pulled them up between her legs, tucking them into her belt even as she took off toward the back fence.

"Shepard?" Martin called from the back doors. "Shepard, where … ?"

The husk jumped up onto a boulder, then hurdled the fence. Taking a deep breath and offering the Enkindlers her most heartfelt prayer for coordination and dress preservation, Shepard gathered herself into the leap and followed.

"Garrus," she heard Martin shout, "your bride is making a break for it!"

(A-N: What is this? An update already? Yup ... They're talking to me, so keeping my fingers crossed that they keep it up. Thanks for your support! *hugs* )
"Holy blessed Enkindlers shitting in their glowing panties," she said, the words barely hissing out between her teeth. "That's … kilometres worth of stasis units. Hundreds of thousands of husks." Her gut dropped into her feet, growing just as cold and numb as those appendages. Once the tunnel reached the other side of the river, it honeycombed up through the cliff, hundreds of tunnels, thousands of chambers, all of them containing what looked to be about thirty stasis pods.

This isn't going to be an easy fix, Janey. Not like dropping the mountain on Thessia.

**Quirte -- Applies to both genders equally. The equivalent of Mister or Miss, Missus.**

**Gloranumis** - (feminine) One who holds a state of royalty or majesty. Ancient turian royal title.

**Caris** - Beloved, precious

**52 Days ASR**

Shepard stopped and activated her omnitool—thank the sweet baby Jesus that she hadn't taken it off yet—and checked the husk's position. It remained about two hundred metres ahead, moving steadily, but not quickly through the upper sewer tunnels. Letting out a sigh, she closed the scanner. At least it was sticking to the tunnels just beneath the streets rather than delving into the lower levels and their more questionable contents.

She froze, hearing something … the sounds of running footsteps in the dank tunnel. Two sets, approaching her from behind. Damn. It would be nice to have backup, but did she dare wait for them? How long would explaining everything take? Would the husk escape beyond scanner range?

*You can't risk losing the damned thing. Move!*

Keeping low, she moved forward, dogging the muffled, quick splash echoing from the sewer ahead. She stayed on higher, drier ground, her feet really not happy about her lack of boots. The footsteps coming up behind her moved fast. Good. They could damn well chase her. Sounded like only two pursuers, and judging by the length of stride, they were either turian or Martin had brought his frame armour to the wedding.

The pale, schmung-covered lights along the roof of the sewer tunnel cast a wan, yellow light over the water flowing along the lowest portion of the brick floor. Definitely not a flattering effect as it turned everything the colour of—

*Shit, it's just storm drain run-off. It's surface water from the rain last night. Stick to high ground and your feet will come through just fine.*

The tunnel ended at a T junction, forcing Shepard to stop again. The husk's footsteps sounded as though they came from both directions. Damn. She hated to keep using her omnitool in the dim light, the orange glow carried too far. Activating the scanner, she saw that it had taken the tunnel to
her left, but was quickly reaching the limit of her IFF scanner.

She took off down the left tunnel, sprinting to make up the distance. If she lost the husk, the entire mess amounted to nothing … no, worse than nothing, because thanks to Martin only seeing her go over the fence, everyone thought her some sort of runaway bride.

The echoes from behind closed in. She heard them stop, talking in low, deep, dual-toned voices. It wasn't Garrus or Nihlus. Maybe Herros, but she didn't think so. Who had Garrus invited? Maybe he called Internal Forces to help search? That was a call she'd love to overhear.

"Yes, I'd like to report a disappearance? Who? My dilan. Where was she last seen? Leaping over the back fence at our bonding ceremony. I'm sorry, quirte, we can't arrest her for cold feet."

She caught sight of the husk at the far end of a long, flat stretch of tunnel. It stopped and started as if still wrestling the override. Apparently, the suzerain wanted her to follow, and were trying to slow the thing down. Never one to turn down help when it appeared, she kept to the shadows, moving forward but slowing a little. If the Reapers knew she followed, the thing would probably self-destruct or charge her and blow up in her face.

_Bloody shreds of Shepard and wedding dress. Another thing we don't want Garrus to find._

"Captain Shepard?" When the voice called her name, Shepard recognized it as belonging to Garrus's new friend, General Victus. She winced, frustration flaring as the husk whirled around, searching for the source of the sound. Again, it flailed, looking as though angry varren tried to tear it limb for limb. After a second of frantic back and forth, it took off.

"Sh," Shepard whispered behind her, hoping the echo carried it. Starting forward, she trusted the faster moving turians to catch her, and set as fast a pace as she dared on the wet stone. They caught up with her two tunnels later, after confirming her belief about omnitool light travelling really well in the low levels of light. Every time they activated their tools, the walls glowed brightly enough to be a clear tip off. Hopefully the suzerain kept the husk confused enough to lead her along the right path.

"Captain Shepard?" The call came in a low whisper from just a few metres behind her as she hesitated outside what looked like a solid section of the tunnel wall. Checking her omnitool confirmed that the husk had passed through the wall, but she couldn't see how.

Hand over hand, she felt her way down the wall, almost falling flat on her face when the wall stopped. Grinning she reached forward a half metre, coming in contact with another wall, a narrow passage hidden between them.

"That's one hell of an optical illusion," she whispered, edging her way forward. If someone didn't know the entrance was there, chances were that they'd never find it. Past the series of overlapping walls, all signs of turian public works disappeared. The light vanished along with the stone brick walls and finished, slip-resistant floors, leaving not even a wan, poopstain-yellow glow to break the black.

"Captain Shepard?" That call came louder and sounded more like angry boulders grinding together than Victus's smoky tone.

Glancing back, she held a finger to her lips, then focused ahead once again. Careful to avoid touching the walls in the narrow space, she pushed into the black, listening for the husk's footfalls. Cold emanated from the chiselled stone walls and floor, quickly making her feet numb. What stretched before her probably dated back as long as turians occupied the canyon.
She set out into the dark, never doubting that the turians would follow. One hand trailed along the wall to keep her oriented as she lifted into a jog, praying the floor didn't just quit on her. A pale light appeared, but from the tunnel at her back rather than a hopeful beacon ahead. She almost turned to hiss at them to turn it off, but they remained too far behind the husk for it to make much of a difference. Besides, it allowed her to move a whole lot faster. Grumbling under her breath, she let them have their flashlight.

The pair of turians caught up with her less than five minutes later. She didn't need to see Victus's companion to know who it was. Fedorian took up the entire tunnel, and not just with his sheer bulk, which remained poised like a landslide set to bury her, but his smell. Holy musky cologne or soap or … something, Batman. It would alert the husk before the light did. Wow. She breathed through her mouth, the tunnel far too snug for that much male.

It didn't help.

"Why are we chasing you through the sewers and now these old tunnels, Captain?" Victus asked, moving up beside her, able to walk and maintain her pace. Damn them and their long legs. "Aren't you supposed to be wrapping coillasi around someone's wrists right about now?"

She gave him her best imitation of a throaty little chuff. "I'd much rather be there than here, destroying my dress. One of the talking husks climbed in my window, said a bunch of cryptic crap, and leaped right back out. It didn't leave me time to explain where or why."

Victus stiffened, his entire posture suddenly lunging forward into the darkness. "It could be leading us back to its base." He covered part of the flashlight lens with a talon and aimed the light at the floor. "Not exactly good tunnel crawling attire," he said, the light skipping over to shine on her bare legs and feet. "There are some pretty aggressive animals that live down in tunnels like these. A lot of them bite, and a few sting."

Shepard sucked in a quick, sharp breath. "I think I was happier without that PSA, thanks, General." Suddenly the darkness seemed to be filled with eyes and teeth and stingers. But then … she'd just climbed right into the dark without thinking twice about it. She grinned, glancing back as if she needed to confirm it. She hadn't hesitated for a second. Huh, maybe she hadn't just lost her fear of dying.

A sharp black line appeared on the floor ahead of Victus's flashlight, and she reached out, grabbing his arm to stop him. "Really big drop off," she said, and crept forward, crouching to get a good look at it. "It's about four, maybe five metres."

Shepard straightened and looked from the lip of the drop to Victus and back, a combination of annoyance and amusement sending her eyebrows climbing her brow as he just stared back, completely clueless.

The turian general shrugged and leaned in to look down. "What? Go ahead."

"Seriously?" Gesturing toward the white, gauzy material gathered around her waist, she decided to spell it out for him. "White wedding dress and rolling around on tunnel floors do not go together, General." An incredulous laugh bubbled up as he continued to stare. Apparently it had been a very long time since he needed to perform any sort of gallant gesture. Of course, it might just be that he'd never crawled through the sewers with his bond-mate when she was wearing clothes she didn't want to spoil.

"Oh for the … . The husk is getting away." Fedorian stomped by, peeling off his suit jacket to a chorus of cursing that remained almost entirely subvocal. He threw the gorgeous emerald and
black *tussat* silk down on the edge of the ledge and swept his arms toward the path ahead. "By all means, *gloranumis*, go ahead."

Grinning at Victus as the general clued in, she nodded to Fedorian. "Thank you, Primarch. Your sacrifice is appreciated." Shepard plunked down onto the fabric and flipped over onto her belly, hands held out for one of them to lower her down to where landing wouldn't shatter both ankles. That time, Victus took the hit, getting down on his belly before holding out his hands.

"Humans," he said, his mandibles twitching in an all too familiar manner, "so fragile."

Shepard grinned at the sparkle in his amber gaze, but didn't bother with a retort about how she could have done it in her armour. Instead, she grabbed hold of his talons and swung down, dropping once she hit the extent of his reach. She landed, her feet squelching into about fifteen centimetres of muck. "Dear sweet lord, jump out away from the base. It's a lot of sludge and … " She winced. "I don't even want to think about it."

"No, you don't." Victus landed a metre or so away, slipping a little before he gained his footing. He held out a hand, taking her fingers in a tight grip as he helped her wade from the muck.

Fedorian followed, his jacket draped over one arm. His omnitool flared bright orange for a second. "The husk is one hundred and eight metres ahead, and moving straight east." He frowned and shook his head. "It doesn't make sense. It's moving toward the river. That's a dead end."

"Unless the tunnel goes under the river." Shepard shrugged and whispered, "Well, we'll figure out what's going on when we get there." Shepard pushed on, her arms held out, trying to keep her balance on the slippery stone.

Sliding like a drunk space cow, she started down. "Oh crap, this is slick and steep, gentlemen. Hang onto your butts," she whispered over her shoulder. The floor angled down on a twenty degree slope. Why did she have to mention the tunnel going under the river? Genius. Well, at least the grade made for a detritus-free descent. Any and all crap just rolled downhill.

*Concentrate, or in five seconds, you're going to be detritus rolling downhill.*

Shepard clung to the wall, fingers digging into cracks in the stone, Victus now keeping vigil at her side in case of disaster. The *torins'* boots definitely gave them an advantage in the grip department. She stumbled on occasion, stubbing her frozen toes on the rock, or just taking a bad step because of the lack of sensation. Glancing down, she saw bright red leaking through the filth. Oh well, Chakwas would fix them up as good as new once she got out of the damned tunnels and home. The path levelled out about twenty metres down and the three of them sped up to a quick jog to close the gap. Not that the husk had anywhere to go. The path continued in an almost straight line, no side tunnels along its length. Time lost meaning in the near darkness, but they must have covered at least two kilometres before a heavy hand thumped down on Shepard's shoulder, pulling her to a halt.

"Husk is fifty metres ahead," Fedorian whispered, right next to Shepard's ear. "It's slowed, and I'm reading a massive cluster of energy signatures." He slipped his omnitool between Shepard and Victus so she could see the ants' nest of energy signatures.

"Holy blessed Enkindlers shitting in their glowing panties," she said, the words barely hissing out between her teeth. "That's … kilometres worth of stasis units. Hundreds of thousands of husks." Her gut dropped into her feet, growing just as cold and numb as those appendages. Once the tunnel reached the other side of the river, it honeycombed up through the cliff, hundreds of tunnels,
thousands of chambers, all of them containing what looked to be about thirty stasis pods.

*This isn't going to be an easy fix, Janey. Not like dropping the mountain on Thessia.*

No fucking kidding. She just shook her head and pressed on, the tunnel beginning a steep climb up to the first chamber. They climbed until her thighs burned and the soles of her feet began to feel as though they'd been worn clear away. Next to her, even Victus showed the rigours of the climb, letting out a low sigh of relief that matched her own when the path flattened out.

Light returned, slowly enough that she didn't realize it until a flash of white from her dress startled her. Still, she didn't see the edge of the pit until Victus reached out and yanked her back. She spun to glare at him, but then saw the massive hole in the floor. She breathed in, a hand reaching up to clap over her nose and mouth as the stench overrode Fedorian's cologne.

Shepard sucked the next breath in through her mouth, immediately regretting it. The sweet stink of decay coated her tongue, tweaking her gag reflex. Plucking Victus's flashlight from his hand, she crouched at the edge of the pit to shine it down onto a pile of dead bodies. "There are just … " Shaking her head, she glanced over at the general, unable to properly process what she was seeing. "… thousands of bodies. Maybe even hundreds of thousands. How do this many people disappear without anyone realizing?"

"Fifty thousand cycles," Victus replied, looking as sick as she'd ever seen a turian look. He straightened and nodded toward the path. "Let's keep moving. If these are just the cast offs and failures, a whole lot worse—"

Shepard sliced off the rest of the general's sentence with a sharp nod. Taking the narrow path, she skirted the pit. Another long climb awaited them, this one littered with bodies that had failed to roll all the way down. Most amounted to no more than a few bones scattered against the wall, but a couple hadn't been there more than a few days. Shepard choked down so many throatfuls of disgust and rage that her gut felt bloated with horror and death.

"How many crews of missing ships, how many family members who left home and never returned?" Fedonian asked, the demand furious and brittle, his thoughts and emotions clearly tracking a parallel course to her own. She glanced at his face, seeing there the helpless fury of a dedicated and passionate leader realizing that his people had been preyed upon for thousands of cycles. She reached out, gripping his arm, a gesture of understanding and solidarity, but he tore it from her grasp.

She took a deep breath and nodded, concentrating on the climb. Why would he accept anything from her? They didn't know one another. Victus, however, squeezed her shoulder, as if apologizing for the primarch. She smiled and nodded, grateful, but letting him know there was no need. They just needed to pack all their emotions down, find the damned stasis units, assess the threat and get the hell out.

A long shudder rolled up her back, the chilled muscles threatening to tie themselves into knots for a moment before they relaxed. God, she wished that Garrus and Nihlus had found her. Their presence always made facing the horror easier. Oh well, no point lamenting what she lacked, best to focus on what she had: two solid warriors followed at her back, and the light continued to get brighter until she could see clearly.

The tunnel floor evened out again, that time opening into a chamber, the walls lined with stasis units on both sides.

Fedorian strode past her to look in the nearest stasis unit. He scanned it then let out a low trill of
sound unfamiliar to Shepard's experience. "This is one of our ancient ancestors. He's been in stasis for over thirty thousand cycles." Awe tinged his tone. "Spirits, just think … one day he left his clan's cave to hunt with the rest and never returned. His family and clan mourned him, and here he is.

"Turned into a nightmarish machine husk." Shepard walked to the end of the line of stasis units. A long, steep ramp descended to another layer and another small floor of stasis units, below that, more and more. "He's just as dead as if some big cat had eaten him." The silence crawled along her spine. She didn't hear a single sound other than the low hum of the stasis pods. Where were the Collectors? They wouldn't just abandon that much work. "This place is a massive maze. We can't just blow it like we did the cavern on Thessia."

Victus stepped up behind her, looking down over the floor below. He nodded and let out a sigh that sounded as exhausted and overwhelmed as she felt. "This is insane. How have they kept all this a secret for so long?"

"It's the entire history of our people, Adrien," Fedorian said, his voice filled with far too much wonder and far too little fear for Shepard's comfort. "It's a find of unimaginable importance."

Shepard whirled to face him, searching his face for signs of indoctrination. "This is a find of unimaginable danger, Primarch. If these discoveries of yours wake up, this entire city is dead or harvested within hours." She took a step toward him, trying to keep her tone even despite the acidic burn of panic that flooded her veins. "You've got to destroy every single one of them."

Fury flared in the violet depths of the primarch's eyes as he spun on her. "This is not Earth or any land belonging to humanity, Shepard. I'm Palaven's primarch, so watch who you're spitting orders at."

She backed away from him, not sure if what she saw was just arrogance or indoctrination. She held her hands out. "You see what the Reapers and Collectors have done to these people, Primarch. These are no longer even alive, let alone turian, sir." She glanced toward Victus, searching to see a glimmer of hope in his eyes. Garrus held a lot of faith in the general, but he knew the torin, he'd fought beside him. All she had to go on, there, under the cliffs and surrounded by enemies and the unknown, was her dilan's faith.

"Primarch … Fedorian … ," the general called, pulling the primarch's attention from Shepard, "you have sworn to protect the people of Palaven. You saw what Sovereign was, what it did … a single Reaper." Victus closed on Fedorian, apparently not liking the sort of 'wild animal being backed into a corner' look in the torin's eyes any more than Shepard did. "We don't have to decide what to do with them right here or now, but we do need to address this threat."

Fedorian took a breath and nodded, his shoulders falling into a far more relaxed position. "Where are the Collectors?" he asked, the question coming out as a demand. "You faced a great deal of resistance on Thessia, did you not?"

Shepard nodded. "A strong resistance, yes." She activated her omnitool. "And where has our husk friend gone? If he's still running, he could easily give our presence away." She backed up a couple of steps, dread closing in, a noose drawing tighter and tighter. "I'm going to go down a couple of levels, see if I can pick anything up on scans." She faced Fedorian until the primarch turned away from her to examine the stasis unit with the ancient turian encased inside. "They've been experimenting with your people for so long, and keeping them all."

Victus turned away from the primarch to follow her. "Wait for me. You don't even have a sidearm." He followed, an arm's length behind, as Shepard started down toward the first chamber.
The tunnel dropped for about ten metres into a room identical to the first. But the next one down opened into two tunnels, one leading them on, the other branching to the right.

"Which way?" Victus asked, shining his flashlight down one path and then the other. "Scan showing anything?" His rock solid energy began to change like a rubber band stretched to the point of where even the slightest breath sent shocks rocketing down its length.

Her scans showed nothing, not even the husk, although with the amount of energy the stasis pods gave off, the husk's signature could easily be camouflaged. Shepard shook her head, but tossed in a shrug to go along with it. Something crawling in her gut said that to see the base's true scope, they needed to take the right path.

She jerked her head that way, then set out, descending down yet another tunnel. "Let's mix it up a little."

"Why haven't we seen any Collectors?" the general asked, as if she'd suddenly come up with an answer, or just hadn't shared her thoughts with Fedorian.

"I don't know. Maybe because there was something about the asari that sparked the Reapers' interest. From what I got from the beacon, the protheans were preparing the asari to take a leadership role, whereas they just watched humans. Maybe the Reapers only consider humans and turians worthy of being footsoldiers, animals without real souls that offered them nothing."

He chuffed, the sound like a warm hand on the back of her neck. "I don't think I've ever been so grateful to be undervalued."

Shepard opened her mouth to agree, but then, at the bottom of the tunnel, instead of stepping into another enclosed chamber, she emerged onto a wide platform overlooking a massive cavern. Shepard staggered to a stop so suddenly that the general ran up her heel. She tried to look up, tried to look anywhere, but shock froze her in place. It had to be fifty metres across, rising storeys above their head and dropping twenty, maybe more storeys below them: the levels disappeared into the gloom. Ramps descended the outer wall in a spiral, linking together hundreds of chambers, each containing ... . She looked behind her to count the units ... twenty. So each of those open platforms contained twenty units.

"We've descended into buratrum," Victus whispered. "Good spirits preserve me." He walked to the edge and looked down.

Shepard just nodded, unable to get enough air in to force words out. When would the sheer scope of the Reapers' capabilities and capacity for creating nightmares stop surprising her? She turned to examine the stasis pods. The husks within looked very much like her guide. Modern turians with invasive metal and circuitry erupting through their bodies. In places it looked like armour, in others ... perverse tumours.

Making her way down the line toward the path that led to the next cluster, she forced herself to look into the mockery of eyes ... diodes and sensors where once bright blues or greens or golds had prompted smiles and tears. She lifted her hand to press against the glass, tears burning in the back of her throat at the opal wink of coillasi around the creature's wrist.

"And whose were you, then?" she whispered.

"Captain!"

She spun toward Victus's shout, catching a flash of movement from behind a stasis chamber, but
didn't get turned around before whatever slammed into her. Arms like steel bands locked around her, pinning her arms to her sides as it bore her to the ground, aiming for the void at the center of the chamber. Digging her feet into the rock, Shepard shoved backwards, throwing her attacker off-balance.

The husk dragged her to the ground, and for one perfect second, Shepard saw Victus coil, lunging toward her. She strained against the arms holding her pinned, stretching her hand out to grasp the one the general extended toward her. His talons touched her fingertips, and then the husk clinging to her jerked back, rolling her over its body. That one perfect second of salvation hung in the air as she tipped over the edge of the ramp down, and then her world turned into a maelstrom of crushing weight and rock smashing into elbows, shoulders, hips, knees, and head.

She saw the edge of the abyss coming through the maelstrom. Flailing even as they rolled, she finally broke one arm free as they reached the next platform down. Slapping her arm out, her fingers scrabbling at the stone, Shepard tried to catch a hold ... any hold. A breath of relief blew through the frantic scramble as she halted their tumbling, but momentum ... that implacable bitch grabbed hold and pulled both she and the husk toward that edge.

_Do you think there's water at the bottom? If it's a drop of say seventy metres or less, you might survive if there's water at the bottom. Just keep your legs straight and point your—_

"Shut up, Bunny." Twisting, writhing, she broke her second arm free and flipped over onto her belly, arms stretched out. Maybe friction could stop her.

The marauding damned husk slid over the edge first, its arms wrapped around her waist. The world slammed to a halt as she felt that lurch, the sudden haul of gravity without the support of floor. She clawed at the slick stone, keen slivers of pain stabbing under her fingernails as they peeled back. Slivers turned to knives at the cheese grater grinding of the stone against the wounds on her legs. And of all the fucking things ... as her belly folded over the sharp lip of stone, she worried about the damage the marauder had done to her dress.

Her fucking dress. No, it wasn't the dress, it was Garrus finding her at the bottom of that hole in the tatters of that dress.

"Captain." Victus hit the ground, belly down, in front of her, and then blessedly strong talons wrapped around her wrists. "Grab hold, come on!"

She wrenched her arms within his grip, latching her fingers around his wrists, and with a spine-elongating jerk, the sliding stopped. Victus pulled her up even as she climbed his very fine suit, as irretrievably damaged as her dress. The husk clung to her, dragging her down almost as fast as she climbed.

"Grab my neck," Victus said, his words little more than a grunt. Heaving herself up that extra few, precious centimetres, Shepard got an arm around his neck and hung on for dear life. His hand free, he pulled his sidearm. Two shots rang out and the terrible weight dragging from Shepard's waist fell away.

"Okay," the general said, the words a sigh of relief, "up you come." Setting his pistol aside, he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her up.

When Shepard scrambled up to collapse on her side next to him, she let out a long, slow moan. "Ouch." It took a couple of seconds for her body to realize she was safe on solid ground, her heart pounding hard and fast, the adrenaline suddenly burning like ice in her veins, her entire body trembling with it.
He chuckled, then ran a gentle hand over her hair, his touch as tremulous as she felt. "That was far too close."

Shepard just nodded, lying sprawled there until the screaming eased back to whining, and her muscles stopped trembling. She sniffed, realizing that she'd given her nose a couple of good smacks when her mouth flooded with blood and mucus, thick and tasting of iron. She turned her head and spat, then flushed, embarrassed. A harsh chuckle greeted her worry about appearing crass.

Heavy footfalls ran down the ramp, sliding a little as the primarch braked at the bottom. "What in the pits … ?"

Shepard looked up and shook her head then collapsed back onto the stone. It felt so wonderfully cold against her cheek. "Long story, Primarch Fedorian. Long story." Letting out a long sigh, she tested her limbs, just sliding them over the floor, not ready to do anything crazy like lift them. They seemed mostly intact, abraded and bruised, but nothing broken. A nice development.

Victus sat up. "Are you all right?"

Complaining vocally the entire way, Shepard pushed herself up onto an elbow. "Yeah, just letting the adrenaline wear off before I try doing anything really radical, like standing."

When they both made it up into a sitting position, she swiped at the blood pouring down her face, grabbed hold of his cowl, and hauled him close enough to kiss his cheek. "Thank you, General."

"You're more than welcome, Captain." He pushed up onto his feet then reached down for her hands. "Come, let's get you back to your dilan. This place will keep until tomorrow. We know where to find them now."

"I've called in a battalion to sweep through, clear out any Collectors and secure the base," Fedorian told them and turned toward the path up.

Shepard grabbed hold of Victus's hands and clambered to her feet. She opened her mouth to say something to Fedorian … a warning maybe to beware of indoctrination, or to insist that he destroy them all, but then she just let out a long breath and shook her head. In the end, Fedorian was right. Palaven wasn't hers. She held no sway there, and if they mismanaged the site and got people killed, that responsibility lie with them.

"Don't worry," Victus said, wrapping an arm around her back to help her up the ramp. "This place will go up in flames, I promise you that."

Pressing her lips together, she nodded, believing him. Garrus's instincts about Adrien Victus had been right on the money. "I know you will," she replied, then groaned as she recalled the length of the road in. "Oh sweet baby Jesus, we have to walk all the way back. The Collectors have to design their dungeons better." She leaned into his support a little as her left ankle complained when she put weight on it. "They could learn a thing or two from Galaxy of Fantasy's level devs. They always have an exit at both ends of the dungeon."

Victus cocked a brow plate at her. "They're right about you," he said. "You're mad."

Shepard let out a weary breath, her nod a scant tremor. "Only on my good days, General."

Garrus, Nihlus, and Martin met them in the sewer tunnels, Garrus earning himself a big kiss when he knelt to wipe her feet clean and ease them into her boots. Still on one knee, he pulled her into a tight, almost frantic hug, not letting her go until she begged for mercy and the ability to take a full
breath. As much as he tried to convince her to let him carry her, to rest her ankle, she insisted on walking all the way back.

"How long has it been?" she asked, as they emerged into the alley behind the Vakarian home. The sky above was full black, the moons both risen.

"Nine hours, Kahri." Garrus squeezed her tight against his side. "Next time, run through the house, screaming on your way out? Please?"

Shepard gave him a weary smile in response to the worry in his voice. "Okay, Callor. The next time our wedding is interrupted by suzerain-controlled turian husks, I promise, I'll do just that."

The domin wrapped around her, comforting, warm, and soft, as she stepped through the front door. She stopped, looking around at all the decorations and party preparations, an entire truckload of bricks tumbling down to bear her to the ground as she realized … she'd destroyed her wedding. She'd had one thing to do that morning, one person to avoid disappointing … and she'd disappointed him. Through the joy at her coming home, she could see it … the question that had been there ever since she came back.

*Am I going to have to spend my entire life worrying that you're going to do something crazy and get yourself killed?*

She swallowed the single brick that lodged in her throat and pulled away from Garrus's side, her eyes glancing at each of the faces staring at her, expectant and shocked. "I'm sorry, everyone," she whispered. Wrapping her fingers around Garrus's hand, she peeled his arm from her side and stepped out of his embrace. "I'm so sorry."

Bolting, she ran up the stairs, her untied boots flapping loose on her feet, one flying off as she reached the top and turned toward Garrus's room. She'd taken what should have been a beautiful day and in her usual, spectacularly insane fashion, completely trashed it. Garrus deserved so much better than a day of worry and racing around trying to find his scatter-brained dilan.

Heart feeling as though it bled out through a hundred holes, Shepard stripped off the shredded dress, leaving it puddled on the floor. She'd ruined everything, and for what? Victus promised to make sure that the husks were destroyed, but the fervour in Fedorian's eyes when he saw the ancient varieties … that fervour told her everything she needed to know about how dedicated the primarch would be to ensuring their disposal.

Picking the beaded belt off the end of the bed, she held it up between her hands, a vague sorrow greeting the lovely gold and cream design. "Well, at least you survived the nightmare." She flopped down on the side of the mattress and stared down at her feet. Despite Garrus cleaning them off, they still bore the marks of having travelled long and hard through more things she didn't want to think about. Small red patches marked the places where she'd worn away the skin or snagged them on the rock.

A soft knock drew her eyes and attention to the door. She winced as she saw all their eyes as she'd walked back into the house, all questions and disappointment and … . "Come in." Might as well get it over with and face the music.

The door opened and Trea stepped through, something draped over her arm. "May I come in? I had to sneak this past everyone downstairs, so I need to rest for a moment before attempting to get it past them all again."

"Of course." Shepard stood and gestured at the bed. "My bed of shame is open to all who need a
Trea paused to look down at the remains of the dress. "Oh my, it didn't come through the adventure very well, did it?"

"It was doing all right until the husk tackled me and we rolled down twenty metres of ramp and then slid across a platform and over the edge." Scalding tears that felt as though they originated at the center of her heart forced their way up her throat into her sinuses, finally escaping out her eyes. "I ruined everything. I … ." She dissolved into a puddle of misery.

Trea chuffed, the vocalization rumbling low with anger. "Stop it, now," she said, the words a sharp order. When Shepard looked up, startled out of her self-pity and remorse, the tarin softened her harshness with a smile. "You've ruined precisely one thing today." Her mandibles twitched in a cheeky smile as she nodded toward the pile of gauzy silk on the floor. "That poor, innocent dress."

Shepard nodded. "It's definitely dead, Jim." She smiled through her tears and shook her head at the confusion in Trea's eyes. "Sorry, obscure human reference." A sigh that felt as though it started in the weeping soles of her feet, whispered out, carrying a wave of exhaustion along with it. "Sorry … again. I've reached the babbling nonsensically portion of the evening."

Trea strode over and ran a loving hand over Shepard's matted, filthy hair, then looked at her hand. "I shouldn't have done that for a few minutes." She chuckled and set down her burden on the bed, then reached for the tissues. Once she seemed satisfied that she'd cleaned away the filth, she picked up the bundle. After sorting it a little, she held up a simple, but gorgeous gown made of a creamy, shimmering material.

Shepard jumped up, looking from the dress to Trea's eyes and back. "Oh my goodness. It's beautiful," she whispered. The fabric begged her fingers to reach out and caress it, but she balled her hands into fists. She drew the line at ruining one dress per twenty-four hour period.

Trea smiled and laid it out on the far side of the bed. "Well, about the same time you leaped out of the tree, ran across the yard, and hurdled the fence, I had a feeling you might need a replacement for that poor, innocent victim of violence." She walked around the bed to sit on the side, patting the mattress next to her. "Sit down, Jane. Relax. Everything's going to be fine."

Shepard gripped the bedpost so hard her knuckles ached, tears streaming over her face. "Oh my," she whispered, swiping at her face as she stared down at the dress. "You made this?" She lowered herself onto the bed next to Trea, her entire body trembling. "For me?"

Trea held out her arms, folding Shepard into a hug that probably should have been awkward, but the emotion behind it transcended the mechanics and any social awkwardness. "I knew I'd done the right thing the second I saw you walk through the door. State of the dress or no, I'd never seen anyone look that sad or worried about disappointing everyone." She pulled back. "The fact it was Garrus you were worried about disappointing … . I know my pahir wouldn't care if you were wearing a refuse sack, but anyone who loves my Betru that much deserves to feel as beautiful on the outside as she is on the inside."

Shepard pressed her lips together, fighting to get her emotions under control. "Thank you," she whispered, gripping Trea's talons in her hand. "It's amazing. I've never seen anything more beautiful outside of your pahirs." She sniffed, then turned, fumbling across the bed for the box of tissues. Chuckling self-consciously, she wiped her face. "He deserves a much better day than I've given him."

Trea shook her head. "You exposed a threat that would have destroyed this city within moments of
being unleashed, and the rest of Palaven within short order." She pulled Shepard into another hug, one that settled the last waves that tossed the stormy sea inside the captain's gut. "I'd say you've given him a day he will never forget, and a pretty great one at that."

Slipping her arms around the tarin, Shepard clung to the slight, impossibly strong frame. "I love him so much, Trea. He's the rock solid center of me, and I can't imagine trying to do any of this without him." For a moment, she felt that cold, hard floor tumbling away under her. The whole adventure had come down to making sure Garrus didn't find her body in a variety of grisly manners.

"I don't know a lot about the future, but down there, I knew only one thing mattered. War; no war. Victory; defeat. None of it matters. I'll fight like hell to make sure we win, but I will do it because of them."

Trea pulled away, her hands wrapping around Shepard's. "Wait until you have babies. They have a power that's almost magical, and they'll pull the three of you tighter than you can even imagine now." Her mandibles flailed a little as they eased into a smile. "But for this moment, I suggest getting cleaned up. I'll go pour you a hot bath and find someone to help me fix you a meal that won't make you sorry you ate. We'll try the dress on, I'll pin it, and then finish the alterations for the morning. Tomorrow, we'll relax and spend your bonding day celebrating." She patted Shepard's hands and stood, then brushed the tears from Shepard's cheek. "Only happy tears allowed."

Shepard nodded and took a deep breath, her lips still trembling, the traitors. She stared at the beautiful dress laying out on the coverlet, tears burning in the corners of her eyes again. How had she created something so gorgeous, so intricate, in a day? And that Trea had done it for her ….

The door knocked again. Wondering how many times it would, and if they all intended to come in with her dressed in her undies, she chuckled and took a deep breath. She let out a long sigh of relief when Nihlus peeked through, and lifted a hand, stretching out to him. He shut the door, then hurried across the floor to pull her up into his arms, lifting her right off the floor.

"Are you all right?" he asked, whispering the words into her ear. One arm slipped down to support her, the other holding her tight against him.

"Yeah, I'm fine." She flung her arms around his neck. "How is everyone dealing with my adventure?" Nuzzling into the warmth of his neck, she relaxed, savouring the strong comfort of his arms around her.

"Garrus had everyone out on your heels within a couple of minutes. Mostly everyone was just confused when you jumped the fence and took off." Nihlus rested his head against hers. "But we knew there had to be something going on." Pulling away, he frowned. "We'd better get Dr. Chakwas to have a look at that nose before both your eyes go black."

Shepard pressed her palm against his cheek. "How was Garrus?" Nihlus shrugged, giving her the answer, but she pushed, staring at him until he let out a low grumble through his subvocals.

"You know Garrus. He wouldn't quit, pushed until Fedorian called and said they'd found you." He set her down, taking her bloodied fingers in his. "Look at you. Can't even get bonded without getting into a scrape." Gentle nuzzles felt like blessings against the broken skin. "When we do this, I'm taking you to a deserted beach, and strapping everyone into life vests, and probably packing bubbles as well. I'll build safety fence around the entire beach and probably install lifelines."

Shepard laughed. He nodded and nuzzled her lips. "Better."
More knuckles rapped against the door, but Trea stuck her head through. "Your bath is hot, caris. I'll bring food up when you're done."

"Thank you, Trea." Shepard drew Nihlus down for a kiss. "I'm going to suck all the heat out of that bath and then see you a little later, cikabeknai."

He nodded and slipped out the door.

Five minutes later, Shepard eased her way into the roasting hot water, a low whine of pain escaping between clenched teeth. Lovely, gentle wafts of fragrant steam billowed off the surface, but rather than stinging like hell as she'd feared, the herbs Trea added to the water actually soothed the pain, allowing Shepard to melt down into the tub's embrace. And what a tub. Made to allow turians to soak, four of her could have easily shared.

When a knuckle rapped against the bathroom door, she didn't need to guess who it was. "Come in, Callor." Happiness rushed through her when she looked up into his eyes, the reaction as strong as a hit of adrenaline, but warm, soothing, and a little giddy, where adrenaline bred only a sharp, frozen vigilance.

"How did you know it was me?" Garrus smiled and strode over to crouch beside the tub. "It could have been anyone." His talons lifted to rake through her hair, then caress her jawline, his hide rough, but his touch gentle and loving.

"When I'm in the bath?" She chuckled and closed her eyes, leaning into the contact. "Only a few would dare enter the realm of nekkid Shepard."

"So basically me and Wrex?" he said, the warm teasing so close that his breath curled around her ear.

"I'm not sure even Wrex is brave enough for that battlefield." A wide grin spread across her face as she tipped her head until her temple rested against his mandible. "Your mari, however, has seen me in my undies now, so it's not that big a stretch, and Karin, of course. She's clocked more nekkid Shepard hours than the rest of you combined." The grin tilted a little, a bemused hum sliding beneath it. "Huh, I think she might have a crush on me."

Garrus nuzzled her ear. "Or you're a disaster in small, humanoid form." He pulled away, releasing her to remove his tunic. "I don't trust you to keep your bath water to yourself, and this is my favorite suit," he said, mandibles flicking playfully. A moment later, he returned, his hand cradling her neck. "Keep sliding down. I'll wash your hair."

Shepard did as she was told and closed her eyes, able to immerse herself until only her nose remained above the water. One hand supporting her neck, Garrus raked the filth from her hair, then applied her shampoo and massaged it into a lather. She relaxed completely, letting herself float loose and lazy in the water, her every nerve focused on the glorious sensation of the water lapping against her skin, and the slow, sensual music of her Callor's talons on her scalp. Breathing long and deep of the floral and herb scents, she felt the day begin to fall away. All the craziness and pain began to melt into the steam. All of it, but for—

When he helped her sit back up, Shepard swept the hair off her face, then grasped both of his hands in hers, and stared up into his eyes. "I'm so sorry, Garrus," she said, scarcely louder than a whisper. "I really wanted today to be amazing, and then you spent the entire time worrying about crazy Shepard." Squeezing his talons, she shook her head, struggling to put words to how much she wanted to be sane and stable and worry-free for him.
Her *torin* saved her the trouble, letting out a sigh that sounded like it began in another life. "*Kahri*, my fears about losing you are just that, mine. They're my issue, not yours, and you never have to apologize for being who you are." Lifting her hands to his mouth, he nuzzled her bruised and peeled fingers. "I don't want my fear to change you. I fell in love with the woman who drove makos through thresher maws and picked fights with ambassadors and trash talked Reapers. I knew what I was getting into."

Shepard leaned in to rest her forehead against his. "I didn't come back the same, Garrus."

His brow brushing hers, he nodded, then drew back, retrieving a small, soft sponge and a container of pearlescent blue stuff that smelled like paradise in a jar. "We all change over time and with the punches life throws, but the woman hacking mechs and saving Blue Suns on Korlus … she was amazing, full of passion and fire and love." He worked the sponge into a lather and washed one arm and then the other.

"You weren't sure it was me at all in the beginning," she said, not sure where she intended to go down that path.

Garrus shook his head. "That's not true. I knew the moment I saw you. Everything after that was fear." He turned his attention to her back, sweeping the filth away with gentle strokes. "It felt easier to drive you away than face what it all meant … to face the risk again." He stilled, then he pressed a talon pad under her chin, turning her head until she looked into his eyes.

"I love you, *Kahri*. You, not some less crazy, more careful version. I want you to really hear me about this, not just nod and agree, but then spend the rest of our lives feeling as though you need to be someone else." He leaned in, kissing her softly. "You're my beautiful, brilliant, costly, precious light, and you're worth risking my heart a million times over." He kissed her again. "Do you understand me?"

Heart feeling too large to be able to beat properly within the cage of her ribs, Shepard sniffed back her tears, trying to bury them under a smile and 'I'm fine'. But then he shook his head, brushing away the slow tracks of emotion with his thumb. "All of you, even the tears. That's the deal, remember? Everything you are and everything that flows from you," he whispered, "I accept as part of me."

Shepard kissed him, wrapping an arm around his neck to pull him in. "And everything you are and everything that flows from you, I accept as part of me." Sliding around, she knelt, pulling him in. "Always."

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(A-N: And the streak continues. Not sure I'll have another chapter for Monday ... might be a day or two later, but YAY for words! And adventures! Thank you ... all you glorious readers! *baskets of Cadbury Mini Eggs*)
Future Continuous Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Garrus took them out of the box and passed them over. A single glance at both his patrem and his fratrin, a deep breath, and he was ready. Nihlus leading the way, they descended to a chorus of whoops, compliments and well-wishes. As he passed through to the yard, he spoke to everyone, joking and snapping back with the wit, but it felt as if his entire attention was fixed on the closed door to his parent's bedroom.

He lost track of time as Martin and Kaidan stepped up to congratulate him and wish him good luck, but it couldn't have been more than five minutes before his mari appeared in the large glass door, her smile wide and bright. "She's ready. How about out here?"

**Disignatus** - Official who conducts traditional ceremonies.

**Famila notas** - The colony markings that turians wear on their faces.

**Cohamentum** - Dance of the elements. Performed during turian bonding ceremonies. How well the two bond-mates stay with one another and perform the dance despite never having danced it together prior is said to predict the longevity and success of their mating.

**Harediarcha** - The box of paraphernalia used in family ceremonies, passed down through the maternal line.

**Mensacra** - The short table and two stools used in traditional turian ceremonies such as the naditatem and bonding ceremonies. The wood is rough and unfinished, but soaks up so much ink and is polished through centuries of care until they become singular works of art. Passed down through the paternal line.

53 Days ASR

Garrus awoke the next morning to a very early, very pale sunrise, and crunchy-feeling eyes. Blinking rapidly to try to clear away the dry blurriness, he checked his chrono and groaned. Twenty-seven hour days were hard enough to acclimatize to without waking at 0530. He yawned, stretching out until all his joints popped and his muscles threatened to cramp. Too early. He needed to go back to sleep.

Shepard stirred, her lips smacking softly as she shifted against his side, her bare skin creating a delicious friction against his plates. Careful not to wake her, Garrus turned over, curling around her a little, his head on the pillow just behind hers, her tousled hair silky against his face. After Shepard finished her bath, Dr. Chakwas had cared for her injuries, grumbling about the fact that the captain had worn away most of the soles of her feet and broken her nose yet again. His mari then served Shepard grilled cheese and canned soup, before they disappeared upstairs to do something that they insisted on keeping a secret.

Finally, after the rest of the family and friends retired to bed, he, Shepard, and Nihlus had been able
to just sprawl along one of the couches and relax. Garrus spent the time too absorbed in the silky hair and smooth, sweet-scented skin of the woman lying curled in against his side to notice much of the movie. It involved a lot of things blowing up—he heard that much—that and Nihlus needing to explain most of the jokes and turian references.

But, in the end, it amounted to a wonderful, quiet first night as a family unit. Shepard cradled in against Garrus, his arms wrapped around her, her legs draped over Nihlus's lap. A very good end to what had been a trying day.

"Why are you waking me up?" Shepard murmured, rolling over to snuggle in against him. She tucked her face in under his chin. A long, yawn interrupted her words. "It's not even really morning yet."

He wrapped his arms around her and closed his eyes. "I'm trying to go back to sleep. Everyone else won't be up for a couple hours yet." Inhaling a long breath of her warm, floral scent, he wriggled in a little closer. "I had a dream about you," he whispered.

"Oh?" She pulled away just far enough that he could focus on her eyes, the green barely visible through her heavy lids. "Was it sexy?"

Chuckling, he reached out to brush her hair off her face. "Well, it was about you, so naturally, it was sexy, but it didn't involve sex." He let his eyes drift closed again, his hand nestling into the curve of her neck. "I dreamed that we were getting bonded in a turian ceremony, and the adventure yesterday was the great hunt. Normally it's a *hideth turram* match, but we were all out in our clans, hunting down the turian marauders that dared interrupt the day." Fingers drawing lazy lines over her skin, he let out a long sigh. "Naturally, your clan came back victorious, and everyone kept talking about what a great omen it was for our life together."

Shepard remained silent so long that Garrus thought she'd fallen asleep, but then she said, "Tell me a story," voice soft, tone pleading.

He smiled, chuckling when she let out a smartass cackle. "What about, *Kahri*?" He didn't know if he'd make it very far into a story, but neither could he resist her request.

"Turian bonding ceremonies." She burrowed back in against his neck. "What are they like? You said they can take a few days?"

"Depends on how drunk everyone gets, but yes." He wrapped himself around her, savouring her warmth and softness. "The first morning, both families and all the guests gather for a morning feast held by the female's clan. After everyone has eaten, the *disignatus* calls up the pair being bonded and they declare their intention to bond. The *disignatus* asks who will support them, and the families and friends stand behind them to show that support."

Shepard hummed low and deep. "Might be sad for those who don't have many relatives."

Garrus shook his head. "Usually their friends and family make sure that the number on both sides is pretty even. It's supposed to be a happy occasion" He paused, reaching up to rub one eye, the lid feeling dry and stuck to his eyeball. "Then there is the great hunt … a *hideth turram* match with both clans competing. Afterward, everyone gets cleaned up, patched up, healed up, and rested for the testimonial feast that night."

"Patched and healed?" Soft puffs of air caressed his skin. "They're drawing blood during their wedding?"
"It's supposed to be good luck for both partners to spill a little blood," he whispered, pressing his mouth against the top of her head. "That's what being bonded and having a family is about, right? It all comes back to blood." After stifling a yawn, he nuzzled her hair. "Now, shush." Grinning when she grunted, Garrus continued, "The testimonial feast is put on by both families, symbolizing a prosperous hunt and sharing resources."

"I love that. Everything is about the combined families, not just the two bond-mates." Shepard reached around her to take his hand, then held it between them, their fingers laced. "Doesn't get much more blended than our clans." She wriggled a little. "Sorry, I'll shush."

"During the testimonial feast," Garrus said, "the guests tell stories about the bond-mates. Once the stories were meant to impress the other clan about how solid and useful a clan member they were inheriting, but these days, they're mostly just meant to embarrass everyone."

"I can just imagine the stories people would say about me," she said, and he thought her tone sounded sad. She pulled away and looked into his eyes, her brow furrowed with worry. "We have good stories, though, don't we?"

Garrus lifted himself up onto his elbow, leaning over her. "All the best stories have good and bad in them, Kahri, and we have some of the very best stories. We've fought krogan battlemasters and been trapped in exploding volcanoes, and kissed for the first time under an avalanche." He leaned in to nuzzle her lips, his heart straining against the impossibly tight bars of his ribcage. "And when you add up all those stories, you have our story, all three of us, and a love that pulled us through nearly two cycles." He paused, melting into her kiss as she pressed her soft lips against the top plate of his mouth.

Shepard pushed him away, then back onto the mattress, leaning over him to look down into his eyes. "Do you want to include some of the turian customs, Callor?" She pressed a soft kiss against the end of his nose.

Reaching up, he drew a line across the bridge of her nose with the pad of his index finger. "I have to say, watching my parents trace our familia notas on your face has a certain appeal." A slight frown dropped his mandible. "It would dye your face blue for a while, though."

And then his Kahri smiled, wide and genuine and more beautiful than the sun, and again his heart railed about the confines of his chest. "I think I'd look spectacular in blue." She kissed him then nestled in, half draped over him. "What else?"

Garrus let his eyes drift closed. "Well, there is a gifting, and dancing, and … ." He let the sentence die. The cohamentum. No, it wasn't fair to even mention it. Shepard hadn't had an entire lifetime to prepare. "And then our family and friends wish us well as we retire to take care of the private parts of the ceremony."

Shepard nuzzled under his jaw. "Are they sexy parts?" Her laugh rang brightly, filling the room with joy as he rumbled and nipped her shoulder. She pushed herself up, leaning with her forearms braced against the plates of his chest. "Let's do it. We don't have days and days, but let's bring as much of the turian ceremony in as we can."

Garrus lifted his arms up behind his head, watching her under eyelids that still insisted on another hour or two of being blessedly closed. "Well, when the rest of the house wakes up, we'll talk to Mari and Pari, and see what they can come up with. Okay?"

Shepard threw her leg over him and straddled his waist, the muscles along the insides of her thighs playing against his sides. The pressure behind his plates upped from inconvenient to maddening as
she stretched out along his torso so her breasts just brushed his hide on either side of his keel. A wicked little smile played over her lips as she swayed just enough for the silk-soft skin of her hardening nipples to tease his plates.

Needing to feel the hot, wetness of that mouth on his, he leaned up to try to capture them, but she ducked back, less than a centimetre out of reach.

She grinned, the pink tip of her tongue darting out to skate across her top lip, leaving it shining. "Okay," she replied at last. Her smile broadened as he moaned with longing, his hips lifting into her as his plates loosened. "Oh, now what's this I feel?" she asked, wiggling a little so that her sex moved his plates. "I thought you were tired."

Garrus held his mandibles tight against his face, willing to play her game. "I am. It's going to be a big day, we should probably both get some more sleep." Lowering one arm, he stroked his fingers through her hair. Shepard sat up, and captured his hand in hers, lacing her fingers through his. "Yeah, we should probably sleep." Lifting his hand to her mouth, she kissed the pads of each talon, before slipping his first digit into her mouth. "I thought you were tired." Sucking strongly on his talon, she withdrew, dragging the pad over the flats of her teeth. "That's a shame." Leaning down over him again, she reached up, tracing the pattern of his familias notas. "Do you know how much I love you, General Garrus Vakarian?"

Lifting her with his hips, her weight still as surprisingly light as it was the first time, he shifted up the bed until he reclined against his pillows. He smiled, knowing she'd be able to feel how hard his heart thundered as it shoved his blood through his veins, and answered her with a slight nod. He opened his mouth to speak, but she silenced him with the soft pressure of her fingers. His eyes drank her in, the soft new light bathing her hair and skin in a creamy glow. The moment froze, suddenly seeming too perfect, too beautiful. A chill ran down his spine dragging him back to the dark, freezing prison beneath the surface of Haestrom.

"I quite literally can't imagine how I managed to exist before you," Shepard whispered, leaning in to replace her fingers with her lips. Her words and kiss pulled him back from that darkness, dispelling the chill and easing him back into the watercolour glow of morning.

As she kissed him, all floral samite and sweet, maddening suction, her lips and tongue making love to him, he pulled her in tight, trying to form the embrace into some perfect expression of his emotions. An effort doomed to fail, he'd nonetheless never stop making the attempt.

She lifted off his plates a little, and whispered against his mouth, "I want to feel you inside me."

Letting out a long, low subvocal of adoration and longing, he loosed his control. His head rolled back, entire body straining up into Shepard as she cool, gentle fingers wrapped around him, guiding him into place. As much as they had joked about 'his spot' their first night together, as he slipped into her, he knew that it was exactly that. Odd maybe, to think that someone of another species had been made to fit him perfectly. Still, as his hands skated up her sides and around her back to pull her back in and she moved around him, he just knew that he'd found the one.
Garrus helped his mother down onto the low stool on the living room floor. Trying to talk his fiercely traditional mari out of using the mensacula had proven useless. "Do you remember how to make the ink after all this time, Betru?" she teased, a smile snipping at him from her eyes.

He offered Shepard a hand to help her sit on the stool opposite his mari, then seated himself cross-legged on the floor next to the low table. "I think I recall. It hasn't been that long since I last sat where Kahri is and Pari told me how to prepare it." He turned toward Shepard's quizzical, raised eyebrows. "When we're eight, we choose whether we want to take the familia notas of our mari or pari or birthplace."

Shepard curiosity melted into a frown. "Your mari and pari both have the same."

Chuckling, he set the harediarcha on the table and opened the lid. "Made the choice nice and simple." With precision, he set out the small mortar and pestle, and the clay jar of oil that formed the base of the ink. He wrapped his talons around the cylinder of dry pigment, but turned to his mari before he whacked off a chunk and started the process. "Do we have herbs for the tables at breakfast?"

Reaching out for Shepard's hand, he wrapped his talons around her fingers, finding them cold. "It's tradition to place a centerpiece in the middle of the table at the testimonial supper. It supplies a variety of herbs."

"Mix the ink, or it'll be lunch before we get this done," his mari said, her grin stealing any sting out of the words. "I'll explain." She took Shepard's hands in hers. Garrus did as he was told, breaking off the pigment, then grinding it into a fine powder as he listened to his mari speak.

"Your guests choose from the herbs, adding to the center bowl, one pinch of the herb that they feel represents you as you are, then one that represents what they wish for your future. After the meal, the herbs are collected, crushed, and added to oil that you use in the more intimate part of the ceremony."

Shepard perked up. "Oooo, the sexy parts." A wicked chuckle escaped when Garrus arched a brow at her.

Instead of commenting, he added oil to the powder two drops at a time until the ink reached paintable consistency but wouldn't run.

His mother dipped a talon in it and nodded. "Very good."

Garrus placed the short-bristled outlining brush next to Trea, then looked to her in concern when she stared at it rather than picking it up. "Mari?"

When she lifted the brush, Garrus saw the reason for her concern. His heart shattered, the shards tumbling into his gut as he watched her hand jerking wildly with tremors. He braced his elbow against the table, and cupped his talons, angling them to the correct height. "Will this help?"

Trea rested her hand in his, the motion not abating entirely, but definitely enough for the task. She smiled. "Thank you, Betru." Turning to Shepard, she said, "Lean in, caris, the shorter my reach, the better."

Shepard took his mari's hand in both of hers and leaned in to press a kiss against the trembling talons before she lowered her arms to brace herself. "I can lean in as close as you need."

Dotting in the key points for the markings took his matrula less than five minutes once she started, and fell into the familiar task. Spirits, she must have redone his fifty times over the cycles. Feeling
Shepard had been right their last visit: the best thing for his *matrula* was to keep busy and feel useful.

"There," Trea said, a broad smile greeting her handiwork. "Beautiful, even if you do look as though you have a bad case of blue freckles." She leaned in to touch her brow to Shepard's. "Welcome to our family, my lovely *filiam.*"

Garrus pushed himself up off the floor, carefully lifting his *mari* to her feet and holding onto her until she stood solidly balanced. Grinning, he looked down at Shepard, then nodded to the passage into the *caman.* Outside the doors to the garden, Lucille, Bunny, and the crews of both ships stood clustered, trying to watch.

Shepard turned, then glanced up at him. "Does it matter if they watch?"

"No." He waved them in. "Come and sit down before you break the glass." He wouldn't have wanted their presence to add more pressure for his *mari,* but he knew Herros wouldn't flinch having to perform for an audience.

Shepard held her hand out, snagging Nihlus's as he stepped past her. "Sit with me?"

Garrus appreciated the consideration behind the glance that his *fratrin* sent his way, but hated that Nihlus felt the need to seek his approval. Hopefully, once she wore both of their *coillasu,* Nihlus would feel just as entitled to show affection and ask for Shepard's time. Garrus nodded and then sat back in his position beside the table.

Nihlus settled so that Shepard's stool sat between his legs, then leaned in, wrapping his arms around her waist. When he rested his chin on her shoulder, she grinned and turned to kiss him.

"Don't smear me dots, buster."

"Ready for me?" Herros asked, entering the room, one arm supporting Trea, holding her against his side. The hierarch sat his bond-mate down at the end of one of the couches, then assigned Joker and Kaidan to making sure everyone got fruit juice, coffee, tea, or *amarcero* to drink.

Satisfied his guests were taken care of, Herros seated himself across the table from Shepard. It took him only a few moments to fill in Shepard's dots, leaving outlined markings that Garrus knew he would fill in with far less assurance and skill after he and Shepard spoke their pledges that afternoon.

As Garrus watched his parents preparing his *dilan* for their bonding, he once again felt the strange dissonance between the life before his eyes and reality, as if something pulled them away from one another. Pressing his eyes closed, he focused on the knowledge that he'd climbed out of that darkness. He survived.

Soft fingers wrapped around his hand, squeezing tight. "Callor?" Shepard whispered. "What's wrong?"

Despite opening his mouth to answer, he couldn't bridge the distance between, the cold holding him just outside her gravity and warmth.

Then her arms slipped around his neck, her cheek pressed to his, her breath warm against his hide. "I'm here," she whispered. "We're both here. Maybe not entirely whole, but both most definitely here."
He pulled his dilan into his arms, fitting her in against him as she dispelled the cold once again, pulling him into his body and anchoring him there. Strong talons wrapped around his other hand, and he opened his eyes to see Nihlus kneeling beside him. His fratrin smiled, one brow plate cocked, a low subvocal susurrus asking if he was okay. Garrus nodded, then looked over at the empty couches.

"Did everyone go to breakfast?" he asked, keeping his voice soft.

Shepard snuggled in, letting out a loud, contented sigh. "Yes. Joker just asked which of the herbs represents cranky lunatic." She chuckled and kissed the wing of his mandible. "Should we go make sure none of them get into trouble?"

"In a minute." He leaned into her embrace. "I'm good right here for the moment."

"Sweet baby Jesus, Vakarian, if I'd known that getting hitched would turn you into such a huge sap …." She let out a deep, aggrieved sigh. "I don't know, I might not have agreed to this whole thing."

Letting out a low growl, Garrus clambered to his feet, swinging her over his shoulder once he was up and balanced. "Impossible woman." Smacking her backside to still her half-hearted, giggling protests, he hauled her out into the yard to join their guests for breakfast.

"Has anyone seen my dilan?" Garrus called from the bottom of the stairs. "And why is the door to the side garden locked?"

"Pari kidnapped her," Sol grumbled, leaning down over the armilateria board, her fist digging into the underside of her jaw as she scowled with concentration. Nihlus must have been presenting a challenge because the sleeves on her fancy copper and emerald tunic were rolled up past her elbows, a sure sign of trouble.

Nihlus made a move, then looked up and shrugged. "After lunch, Jane pulled Pari aside, they had a short, intense discussion, and then disappeared, probably into the side garden since everyone else is accounted for." He smiled. "Don't worry, they'll be back out in plenty of time. She hasn't run off again."

"Hey, senux, eyes and mind on the board," Sol snapped. "I could have cheated in twenty three separate ways while your head was turned." She cackled. "Luckily for you, I only took advantage of three."

Nihlus sorted the tiles. "Don't even try to pull that crap with me, inluvis. I'm wise to your ways, and you took advantage of five, in fact." He moved another two pieces. "I was going to let you get away with those until you lied."

Garrus looked around. "Where's Mari?" Frustration and worry tugged at him, begging him to give in. That fact that he found solace in worry and staying busy didn't bode well for things like trying to raise a family, or just find peace and rest in his relationship with Shepard.

"She's in her studio working on something top secret," Sol answered, then cussed, slapping a tile down as if she hope the sheer impact would take out some of Nihlus's units. "Go play basketball with the crew. I'm going to join in as soon as I finish obliterating Nihlus's artillery."

Nihlus chuckled. "Good luck, because it just obliterated you. Farewell fourth and fifth infantry brigades. Your sad, ignoble deaths will be remembered and used as ammunition for all occasions." He turned back to Garrus. "And don't listen to her, you don't have time to get all grimy; you need to get dressed."
Garrus checked his chrono. Forty-five minutes until Anderson was due to hear their pledges.
"Yeah, I'll head up. You coming?"

"Right behind you." Nihlus stood, then bent to touch his brow to Sol's before turning and fleeing for the upstairs while Sol remained stuck in silent rage. Smart move. Garrus knew that once things got vocal, the Spectre might never escape.

Shepard met him halfway up the stairs, her hair matted to a sweat-streaked forehead, t-shirt soaked and plastered to her body. Greeting his concern with a bright smile, she stood on her toes and kissed him, the contact rushed and leaving him trying to follow her to kiss properly. Instead, she pushed him away. "Sorry, I'd hug all up on you, but I'm stinky and disgusting."

He blocked her when she attempted to squeeze past, his stare trying to capture hers. "Where have you been?" Grasping her upper arms, he managed to keep her from bolting. "What's going on?"

Letting out a soft sigh, she met his stare. "There's nothing going on, Garrus. Pari and I were just sparring, and I'm not used to the heat and humidity after climate controlled ships and space stations." He allowed her to tug free of his grip, squeezing her fingers when she took his hands in hers and smiled up into his confusion and worry. She was leaving something out, but what could it possibly be?

"I'm fine, Callor. I'm sorry if you were worried, I just wanted to talk to Pari for a bit, and then that turned into the workout from hell." She stood on tiptoe, waiting, until he bent down to kiss her. "Just ignore the fact he didn't even break a sweat." Another kiss brushed his upper mouth plate. "And now, I have forty minutes to shower and get dressed."

Garrus released her and stepped out of her path, watching as she kissed Nihlus, and then hurried across the living room to his parent's bedroom.

"Come on, let's go," Nihlus said, giving him a shove from behind. "If we don't get moving, she'll be standing there, waiting for you."

Garrus nodded, numb with the unfamiliar feeling of not knowing what Shepard had been doing. It didn't make sense. They trusted one another with everything.

"Garrus."

He stopped one step down and looked up at Herros. "Pari." He took a breath and opened his mouth, needing to know why Shepard wasn't telling him the whole truth, but his patrem shook his head, silencing him.

"Go get dressed." Herros smiled and reached out to grasp the back of Garrus's neck. "You trust the woman you're taking as your bond-mate, don't you?" His brow plates rose when Garrus choked on the answer. Of course he did, but— "If you trust her, act like it, and go get dressed, or are you going to tell me that you believe she'd do something to deliberately hurt you?" Herros pulled him into a tight, almost painful embrace. "Go get dressed before you stain what's been a perfect day, and hurt her feelings."

Put like that ... Garrus pulled back, meeting his pari's stare with a tight nod, and brushed past. Cold feet? Was that what it was? He hesitated, wanting to run down and apologize. Of course he trusted Kahri. Of course he did. The night before, Shepard had told him about her moments of panic before their husk visitor arrived. Cold feet, she called it. That's all it was: nerves.

"Keep moving, General," Nihlus said and chuckled. "You can apologize for your moment of idiocy
later." He set his hands against Garrus's cowl and pushed him into his bedroom, shutting the door behind them. "You're just nervous. It'll all be fine once you look into her eyes, and the way she looks at you washes all the moron away."

Garrus chuckled and turned to embrace his fratri. "She does seem to have done a respectable job of clearing away all your moron."

Nihlus shrugged and turned to where his suit hung on the back of the door. "Jane does her best. It's not her fault that there's just so much of it to wade through."

A half hour later, Garrus took a deep breath and nodded at the image of the two of them standing side by side. "Not bad for a couple of washouts." He gripped Nihlus's elbow. "Thank you for being here for me the last couple of cycles." A soft chuckle answered Nihlus when the Spectre shook his head, Garrus knowing they were both recalling those first, turbulent weeks on the Normandy.

"A rough start," Nihlus said, "but I couldn't ask for a better fratri, or for a family who care more. Thank you for bringing me into the madness." He laughed, sharp and self-effacing. "Listen to us, you'd think one or both of us was dying, not taking the most incredible female in the galaxy as his bond-mate." He turned and punched Garrus in the shoulder. "When I do this in a couple of months, promise me, no heartfelt fratri to fratri talks."

Garrus laughed and grasped the Spectre's shoulders. "No promises. It's going to be a great day, and I might need to mark it with a speech or two."

Nihlus grinned and tipped his head toward the door. "Ready?"

They both turned toward the door as it opened. "Not quite yet," Herros said, knocking on the door even as he stuck his head through. "You're missing a key ingredient in your wardrobe." He entered and shut the door, a black robe draped over his arm that Garrus knew all too well. Turning back, their pari held up the family bonding robe. It went back more than fifty generations, the story of how each bearer had met his mate embroidered into the material.

"Both of my pahirs will wear this when they take their dilan's hand and pledge themselves to her," he said, stepping up behind Garrus. He draped it over Garrus's shoulders, settling it around his cowl, then held out his hand. "Where are your coillas?"

Garrus fetched them out of the harediarcha and passed them over, his mandibles spreading in a ridiculously huge smile as his pari fastened the front panels of the robe with the shell-chains that he'd fasten around Shepard's wrists later that night.

Nihlus chuckled, and Garrus reached out, punching his shoulder. "Just wait until he's fastening them on you. Trust me, it's a stupid grin worthy moment."

Nihlus rumbled his subvocals, a sound of connection, and surprise, and love that turned Herros around.

Their pari embraced Nihlus, pulling him in to touch brows. "You're my pahir. Stop forgetting what that means." Herros released Nihlus when the Spectre nodded, then returned to embrace Garrus. "I'm proud of the torins you both are, and you couldn't have chosen better." He laughed, the chuckles coming out a little bit evil. "The three of you deserve each other, and I'll leave what that means to your imaginations." He bumped Garrus's brow. "All right, let's get down there. You don't want to keep your Kahri waiting."

Herros made it two steps toward the door, before he turned back. "Oh, I need Jane's coillas as
well."

Garrus took them out of the box and passed them over. A single glance at both his *patrem* and his *fratrin*, a deep breath, and he was ready. Nihlus leading the way, they descended to a chorus of whoops, compliments and well-wishes. As he passed through to the yard, he spoke to everyone, joking and snapping back with the wit, but it felt as if his entire attention was fixed on the closed door to his parent's bedroom.

He lost track of time as Martin and Kaidan stepped up to congratulate him and wish him good luck, but it couldn't have been more than five minutes before his *mari* appeared in the large glass door, her smile wide and bright. "She's ready. How about out here?"

Garrus just nodded, letting Nihlus guide him into his spot next to the small pond, under the canopy of massive ferns. Suddenly, the air didn't contain enough oxygen, and he reached up to unhook his collar. Nihlus caught his hand, his fratrin's warm chuckle convincing the elcor sitting on his chest to ease off a little.

A moment later, a vision appeared in the doorway, her arm threaded through Anderson's, the captain beaming with joyful pride. Garrus staggered a little as Shepard stepped toward him, loose waves of ivory tussat silk rippling around her legs; tiny, bare feet peeked out between the loose folds, a delicate anklet of rylamia hugging her ankle to match the spray in her hair.

His *mari*'s bonding robe draped over Kahri's slight shoulders, the *coillasi* clasped just below her breasts. The collar stood high behind her head, the white material framing her beautiful copper hair. Spirits, he'd doubted he'd ever see anything more beautiful.

Then their eyes met, and everything else disappeared, his whole world narrowed down to that field of emerald and the love, and wonder, and delight staring back at him. When Anderson stopped next to him and held out his hand, Garrus fumbled a little, refusing to look away even for that second.
Laying Garrus's hand over Shepard's, Anderson said, "Those tied by blood and those tied by heart, be welcomed to that most blessed and sacred of occasions: the celebration of two clans joined, two lives knit together into one shared destiny." He took a deep breath. "As honorary father of the bride and disignatus, it is my honour to begin this bonding ceremony with the declaration of intentions."

Turning to Garrus, Anderson said, "Garrus Vakarian, son of Herros and Treana Vakarian, is it your intention to join your life, your family, and your clan to that of Jane Shepard?"

Garrus nodded and cleared his throat, his mandibles fluttering so hard that it felt as though they were trying to fly off his face. He sucked in a noisy breath, Shepard grinning as it whistled through his nose. And so he chuckled as he said, "It's my intention to join our lives, families, and clans. Jane Shepard will bring a beauty and depth of love and devotion that will enrich our clan in an infinite number of ways."

Anderson turned his grin to focus on Shepard. "Jane Shepard, daughter of Franklin and Lucille Shepard, is it your intention to join your life, your family, and your clan to that of Garrus"
Vakarian?

Shepard smiled and nodded as she released a long breath that seemed to steady her. For a second Garrus thought she might stick with the script, but then the grin slanted to the wicked and when she spoke, her voice snapped with teasing. "By the glowing asses of the Blessed Enkindlers, you bet it's my intention to join our lives, our families, and our clans. This *torin* brings so much loyalty, beauty of spirit, honour, courage, and pure compassionate strength to this family that it quite frankly can't exist without him. He's my cornerstone that never shifts, bends, or cracks, and I can't do any of this without him."

Anderson cleared his throat, his voice strained, but also receding as Garrus's focus narrowed even further. "Who amongst their clans will stand by them through this union, to support them through the inevitable struggles and hardships of life? Who will help them care for one another and their children when they are ill or injured? Who will support them through times of scarcity, when they need shelter or a strong arm to protect them? For it is life's greatest truth that no bonded pair can stand alone. It needs the strength and nurturance of both clans to survive." The captain, stepped closer to Garrus and Shepard's joined hands. "So, I ask again, who amongst their clans will stand with them?"

Herros, Trea, and Solana moved to join Nihlus behind Garrus, Lucille, Bunny, and Martin behind Shepard. He gave Bunny a grateful smile and reached out to squeeze her fingers as she passed him. Then, surprising him, the members of Archangel and their crews stepped in behind them both. A heated flush of appreciation flowed over him, and he turned to give them all an honoured smile.

Anderson chuckled and shrugged. "Okay, that covers that. As both clans accept and bless this union, I declare it sound." He laid his hand over their joined ones. "Jane, speak your pledge to your bond-mate."

Shepard … his *Kahri* … smiled up into his eyes and squeezed his talons. "Garrus … my *Callor*." Untangling one hand, she reached up and pressed her palm against his cheek, the contact burning like a brand. Through her touch, he felt her trembling and reached up, wrapping his hand around hers. She smiled; spirits he never tired of seeing joy light up her face or the way her eyes seemed to snap with electricity. "They told me I should write this part down because of the pressure to remember what I wanted to tell you, but there isn't any."

She let her hand settle to his chest, pressing it over his heart, the organ lost somewhere between hammering at FTL speeds and sputtering to a stop behind his plates. "You see, I promise everything, and accept everything. I've already agreed to that. So, I'll take your good days and bad days, your grumpiness in the morning and snuggliness at night. I promise to let you drink that wretched fruit pus you love, and to try very hard not to send you into anaphylaxis when I cook for you."

"This morning you told me that family came down to blood, and every drop of mine pours through my veins for the family we're building." She glanced behind him to shoot Nihlus a quick wink, then focused back on him, lifting his talons to her lips. "I promise you every single day, regardless of what they bring or how far apart we are or how crazy you're driving me." Pressing his palm over her heart, she watched his face, her scrutiny almost too intense as he felt that heart thundering beneath his palm. "I promise to send the kids straight to you when they're being impossible, to yell at you if you leave wet towels lying around, and probably to burn dinner at least twice a week. And I promise to hold you every time you need it, and to smack you every time you need that." A long, noisy breath whistled a little as she exhaled through her nose, then she nodded. "So, yeah, that covers it."
Someone in the small cluster of their family and friends blew their nose, drawing Shepard's attention, but his remained fixed on her. He cherished every one of her expressions, imprinting them all into his memory like a puer pressing their hands into the damp sand, just for the wonder of the impression that remained.

"What?" The question came out, a little frantic and a little apologetic as she faced their guests' tears. Garrus squeezed her hands to reassure her, but still, when she looked back, he saw the worry there. "Did I do it wrong?" she whispered, leaning into him.

After swallowing the Mako parked sideways in his throat, Garrus chuckled, a talon curling under her chin to lift her eyes back to meet his. "No, Kahri, you couldn't have done it better." He sighed, letting the light of her shine through every cell of his being, then bent to nuzzle her forehead.

Glancing at Anderson, he asked, "It's my turn, now?" When Anderson nodded, Garrus withdrew, smiling as he cleared his throat. "I'm probably not going to get through this, so bear with me." He stroked her cheek with his thumb, drinking in her smile even as it blurred.

Garrus cleared his throat again, sniffing a little as the sun stung his eyes, making his nose run. Yes, it was definitely the sun. "A couple of cycles ago, a praela roared into my life on a wind of such encompassing change that within moments, everything I knew spun about, completely transforming. Through the example of her bravery and compassion, she showed me who I wanted to be."

He looked down at their tangled fingers, blinking back the sting in his eyes again. Damn sun. "And then she was gone … then you were gone, and I just sat there for three days, trying to figure out how to breathe again … how to make my heart beat … how to move. But, then I realized … a love that powerful couldn't be broken by death. You weren't really gone, you lived inside my heart, and Nihlus's heart, and so I took my first breath, my blood began to flow again, and I got up and moved forward." He sniffed back a throatful of phlegm and clasped their hands against his chest.

When he sucked in a breath to speak, it rattled thick with barely checked tears and whistled with a soft keen. "And then the universe gave you back." He tried to speak past his trembling jaw and the pressure in his flooded sinuses, then gave up and shook his head. After a couple of breaths, he managed to swallow, and continue, "So, even though I can't promise that I won't have bad days, and that you won't frustrate me and terrify me to the point where I want to scream, I promise to do my best to live up to the gift of your heart … to be the torin you make me want to be."

Leaning down to touch his brow to hers, he sucked in another wet, trembling breath. "I promise to never take this miracle for granted. I promise to love you with my every breath, to cherish you with everything I am and all I possess, to be your safe place from the monsters, to be your light in the darkness, and to hold tight to your hand with my last scrap of strength." Their audience vanished as she turned her face into his, her cheek wet where it pressed against his hide. He closed his eyes, his entire world narrowing down to the space and the breath between their bodies.

"All that I am, all I will ever be, or have, or wish for," he whispered, his mouth pressed to her ear, "is yours."

Shepard's breath caressed the side of his head as she nodded, her throat working so hard when she swallowed, that he heard the cartilage in her throat click.

Anderson cleared his throat, but neither one of them moved. "By the power vested in me by the Systems Alliance, and feeling sure in the belief that no one here has any reason why these two should not be wed, I declare Jane Gwendolyn Shepard and Garrus Alox Ramirus Vakarian bondmates … husband and wife." Garrus felt the pressure of the captain's presence close in, but didn't
open his eyes, pressing his hands as far into the damp sand of the moment as he could. He never wanted to forget the scent and feel of her skin, the honey spice of the rylamia in her hair, the gentle scent and cool wash of her tears as the breeze whispered past.

"You may kiss your wife," Anderson whispered, the width of his grin evident in his voice.

Garrus swept his wife up in his arms, their mouths pressed to one another before he even settled her into his embrace. Joy—spring-scented bliss and sun-warmed felicity—filled him until he felt as though it must radiate through his plates.

Dear spirits, let this be real. Don't let me wake up alone in my bed on Omega.

Then Shepard kissed him, shattering the fine bubble of fear. Her kiss remained soft and chaste, just a hint of teasing with her tongue before she threw her arms around his neck and pressed herself tight. "This is my very best day," she whispered next to his aural canal before kissing his neck.

He pressed her tight. "And mine. Just the first of a lifetime filled with them."

Then their guests descended on them, pulling them apart into a flurry of tears and hugs, brow bumps and kisses.

His mari waited until the tide ebbed before she stood and walked over to take his face between her hands, pulling him down to touch brows. "No matrula has ever been more blessed. I'm both proud and in awe of this torin you've become, Betru. You'll be a wonderful bond-mate and patrem." She sighed. "You and Nihlus are going to have to pour every bit of love you've got into her. She's not going to be an easy road, but she's worth it." She pulled away and grasped his hands in hers. "Jane loves you so much, and she's so afraid of hurting you or disappointing you."

Garrus straightened, turning to look over the small crowd to where Alenko held Shepard in a tight embrace. "I know, Mari. We'll take care of her." He bent to touch brows again. "Thank you for making this day so special for her … for both of us. I've seen her sad before, but last night …." He took a deep breath. "Well, you've made it magical for her." He embraced her. "I love you."

His mari chuckled. "Ah, bonding day. Turns even the most stoic torin into a ball of embraces and emotion." She patted his cheek. "You're a wonderful pahir, and I love you. Now, go be with your bond-mate."

Garrus squeezed his mari's hand, then pushed through the crowd around his wife. He checked the sun, then chuckled at himself. As much as he loved his family and their friends, he really just couldn't wait to be alone with Shepard. His entire body ached to hold her and savour the quiet together as they had that morning. Since then, as beautiful a day as it had been, trying to fit everything into one day had proven busy. Very busy, especially with Shepard disappearing for a chunk of the afternoon.

"Excuse me, everyone," Herros called, stepping up onto the low wall around the pond. Garrus frowned, watching his pari with a growing feeling of dread. Herros making announcements didn't bode well. His pari grinned when their eyes met. "As you know, Jane and Garrus wanted to include turian bonding traditions into their day. The most important of these are the great hunt, which Jane led us on in a most spectacular fashion yesterday, and the Cohamentum."

Garrus drew himself taller and tried to catch Herros's attention again. No. No, what was his pari doing? He hadn't told Shepard about it for a reason. Herros blythely soldiered on, ignoring Garrus completely.
"For our non-turian guests, all turians grow up learning the Cohamentum, or Dance of the Elements, from their parents. It is a dance that bond-mates never perform together until the day of their bonding ceremony." Herros paused and looked over at Shepard, who— Garrus frowned as he looked down on the woman tucked in against his side. She was positively glowing. The nature of the afternoon's mystery began to take shape.

"After they have pledged themselves," Herros continued, "they perform the dance, and ancient tradition states that how well they move together, how they read one another and adapt to one another predicts the strength and longevity of their union."

He swept an arm toward the back part of the yard, where a raised dance floor had been erected to spare his mari's garden. "Garrus … Jane."

Garrus tightened his arm around his wife. "You spent the afternoon learning the dance, didn't you?" Shame heated the back of his neck. He was an idiot.

Instead of answering, she led him up the single stair to the middle of the dance floor, where she touched his cheek, then broke away to move to her starting position. Garrus's heart began to pound as he took his position, the drums and the treble and bass winds of the music drifting through the nervous, expectant silence. How well had Shepard learned it? Spirits … forget Kahri's knowledge, how well did he remember it? It had been cycles since his mother's last refresher.

Then it didn't matter, the Song of the Air whistled through the yard, picking him up and spinning him like a tussat seed, its parachute unfurled, the moves returning as if he'd performed it that morning. Two motes of dust on a cosmic breeze, they soared along separate paths. When he caught glimpses of Shepard, she'd transformed, no longer earth-bound or mortal, but a comet flaring more and more brightly as she neared the sun. Slowly, their orbits contracted until they spiralled into one another, hopelessly trapped.

She leaped into his arms, the difference in their heights elevating the movements into acts of aerial acrobatics so graceful that they stole his breath. Spirits … she truly was a praela, riding the wind as if she belonged there.

As the dance eased into the Song of Water, she landed, ebbing away from him to swirl with the tides back into his arms with the ripening moon. Unable to tear his gaze from the beauty of her flight, he savoured the appearance of her every cue. Moving to harmonize with her movements, he lengthened to make up for her shorter limbs, elevating movements meant to be fixed to the ground and setting them free of gravity's harsh pull. Her dress flowed about her like a cloud, and he'd never seen anything more astonishingly beautiful.

Water flowed into the earth, settling his Kahri back into his arms and the good, rich soil. Bodies entwined, eyes locked on one another, they blossomed and grew, a tree spreading its branches out to worship the light and the rain, their roots digging down, intertwining until they became one entity. Tears rolled over his face, his subvocals singing out his wonder at the miracle who'd taken his hand to create a new life, their anchor sunk deep so that they could reach out into the broad future.

The ground nourished them, springing into bloom, ripe with promise. Their bodies melded, and he lifted her into his arms, cheeks pressed together, breath panting and heated against one another's cheeks as they swayed to the waning strains of the winds. The drums faded, growing soft as her heartbeat against his chest. They ended, brow to brow, sharing that air, and somehow, in those moments, everything between them had shifted, the roots sunk deep and solid.

Garrus held his Kahri tight against him, his heart pounding with both exertion and exhilaration.
"Dear spirits, how come I didn't know you could dance like that?"

She smiled and shrugged, one shoulder tugged towards her ear. "I've never had a reason to dance like that before." Sighing, she kissed him, then pulled back, her one arm draped around his neck, the fingers of the other hand caressing his face. "Everything, Garrus," she said, her expression and voice so solemn that it's weight resonated in his bones. "Everything is what we promised. Not just the parts of what you want or need that are easy for me to give, or you think won't put me out or endanger me or any of that crap." She kissed him again. "You should have told me how important this is to your traditions, regardless of whether you thought I could learn it or would be okay performing it. Got it?"

He let out a long breath, the enormity of what they'd promised registering in a small, quiet way … in the form of his love sneaking away with his patrem to learn how to dance. "Yeah," he whispered, then kissed her back. "Yeah, I've got it."

Someone cleared their throat behind them, the utterance sounding as profoundly uncomfortable as it should. No one in their right mind would interrupt them before they stepped away. That left one suspect.

Shepard sighed and flopped against him, gentle hands rubbing the back of his neck. "I hate whoever that is so much right now."

He grumbled a wordless agreement, fury rising hot and pointed under his plates. "Yes, Miranda?"

"I'm so very sorry," the operative said, clearing her throat again, "but, Shepard … the colony on Horizon just went dark."

Shepard pulled away. "Holy crap. Collectors have the worst timing." She caressed the length of Garrus's mandible, then kissed him before answering, "Okay, get the ships ready to go. We'll need all three. The general and I will be spending the trip on the Passch, so the Ypres is under your command." She turned to meet her XO's eyes. "Does Mordin have the armour mods ready to go on the ground teams?"

"I'll contact him and let you know." The operative paused. "We've got cabs on the way for everyone."

"We'll be there in a minute," Shepard replied, the absolute professionalism and distance in her tone shoving a lump of iron down Garrus's throat. Damn the Collectors, and the Reapers, and the whole fucking war. Why couldn't they allow her just one day?

Shepard leaned up and kissed him. "We'll pick up our wedding night the second we get our people sorted for the jumps. It's three jumps, even though the one in Widow is a quick one, and I intend to squeeze in every second possible for us."

He nodded and started to answer, but then opted for kissing his wife—the thought of a long, uninterrupted wedding night pushing back a little of his attitude. As she set out for the house, he reached out, snagging her wrist to pull her in against him. "I love you, Jane Shepard-Vakarian, and I don't intend for that to get lost in this war."

(A-N: This baby has been my obsession the last few days, but it hasn't all been beta'd and a lot of it was written at times as late as 4AM, so sorry about that. It's probably going to be a little rough, but I hope you feel it does these crazy kids justice. Also, there is art! As always, I love you guys. I really do. And I wish you the very best as spring … well, springs around us. *hugs and more mini
eggs*) The gorgeous art is thanks to Artistically Amber! So lovely!
Her grin widened as she leaned back in his embrace. "Okay, when we have daughters or sons." Head jerking back with surprise, she shuddered and slapped her fingers over her mouth, groping at her lips with their tips, searching as if trying to figure out where the words had come from. "Sweet baby Enkindlers, I didn't just say that, did I? Who is this woman using my voice to talk about having kids?" One brow creeping toward her hairline, she glared at him, the heat that sharpened the stare originating deep at the center of her. "Are you mind-controlling me, Vakarian?"

**Harediarcha** - The box of paraphernalia used in family ceremonies, passed down through the maternal line.

**Mensacra** - The short table and two stools used in traditional turian ceremonies such as the *naditatem* and bonding ceremonies.

**Samitaregia** - A guiding light. A light to illuminate one's path. The *praela* used such lights set into lanterns to guide warriors into battle, and then through the dark curtain of death.

**Caris** - Beloved, precious

**Derra** - Wife. Female bond-mate.


**Dilan** - fiancee

**54 Days ASR**

"You looked breathtaking today."

Shepard smiled as the soft, cherished voice of her husband spoke from the door. She didn't turn, the smile deepening with the sound of each footfall as he approached. He leaned down to nuzzle the side of her neck and shoulder, textured mouth plates exciting her skin into a tingling, goose-pimpled bundle of nerves. A shuddering sigh escaped as she turned to brush her lips against his cheek. Leaning into him, she savoured immersion in his heat envelope and closed her eyes. "Your … our … mari is a genius with needle and thread." She pulled away a couple of steps and twirled, glad that they hadn't taken the time to change. The skirt ruffles flared, and she giggled with delight. "It's just the most beautiful dress."

Dizzy, she stumbled over to balance herself against Garrus's desk, another giggle escaping, much to her mortification. "I haven't twirled since I was … nine or ten."

Garrus chuckled and walked over, pulling her into his arms. "Pretty sure you haven't giggled since long before that." He wrapped himself around her, so strong and warm that she just melted into him.
until the dizziness eased back, and she could stand on her own.

Bending, she lifted the panels of both their robes, starring at the little Citadel with the *Normandy* sailing across the foreground that Trea had embroidered into both. Sweet baby Jesus, in a hundred years or two hundred, members of the Vakarian family would be getting married in the robes, she and Garrus a part of their day just as his ancestors … his parents were a part of theirs.

She smiled up into his eyes. "And this … it's just amazing, Garrus. And to think if we have daughters or sons, their story will be embroidered into it next to ours."

He opened his mouth, but then his mandibles did that little, helpless flail that told her that he couldn't find the words to express all the emotions that idea … the idea of his children … prompted. So, instead, he took her hand, and drawing her close, reached out to caress her cheek. "What do you mean if?"

Her grin widened as she leaned back in his embrace. "Okay, when we have daughters or sons."

Head jerking back with surprise, she shuddered and slapped her fingers over her mouth, groping at her lips with their tips, searching as if trying to figure out where the words had come from. "Sweet baby Enkindlers, I didn't just say that, did I? Who is this woman using my voice to talk about having kids?" One brow creeping toward her hairline, she glared at him, the heat that sharpened the stare originating deep at the center of her. "Are you mind-controlling me, Vakarian?"

Garrus's stare darted side to side a few times before his brow plates and mandibles lifted into a comical mask of shifty-eyed denial. "Ummmm … who me? No, never."

Laughter bubbled, breaking the surface like wishes escaping a well. "Very reassuring, thank you."

A long sigh breezed between them as Shepard let herself forget the fact they raced toward another vanished colony and slipped into the welcoming waters of the moment. "Collectors and Reaper interruptions notwithstanding, it's been a beautiful day."

Garrus rumbled his agreement and happiness through his subvocals, the sound burrowing all the way down into Shepard's gut. Loving talons whispered along the angle of her shoulder as he said, "Let's get you out of that very beautiful dress." When she nodded and stepped back, he unclasped the opalescent chains holding her bonding robe closed, then set them over on top of the *harediaarcha*, which sat on the desk just behind her. He lifted the robe off her shoulders, then hung it up. When they'd run out of the house in their wedding attire, Trea had threatened death and pain if they destroyed the five-century-old robes.

Running her hands down the front panels of the black robe, Shepard traced the gold embroidery with her fingertips. "Which one is your parents?"

Garrus lifted the panel, feeding it through until he got to the center of the right panel. He pointed a small cityscape embroidered in amazing detail, right down to tiny windows in the buildings. "It's the street where my father met my mother." He pointed to the one beside it. "My father's parents met playing *hideth turram*. She broke his first ankle." That little depiction was much less neatly stitched, but clearly one turian taking the legs out from under the other in a tackle.

"It's as good a way as any other, I suppose." Shepard chuckled. "At least that way he can't escape." She unhooked the clasps at either end of the *coillasi* holding his robe closed, setting them beside hers. She let him remove the robe, not wanting to drag it over the floor, but as soon as it hung from its hangar, her fingers set into the fasteners down the front of his suit.

"You looked very handsome, today," she said, laying the tunic open. And he had. The moment she caught sight of him through the windows, her heart had stopped, stilled by the sight of her two
beautiful *torins* standing there, waiting for her. Slipping her hands inside, she slid them along his lowest plates, closing her eyes as she savoured the smooth heat of his hide. She looked up into his eyes, the skin between her brows knitting into a frown. "Have I told you that I love you in the last ten minutes?"

Letting out a deep, dramatic sigh, he shook his head. "It may have even been a couple of hours."

Feigning horror, she gasped. "I've been remiss." She wrapped her arms around his waist. "Well, I love you, just in case you've forgotten in that time."

His talons reached around behind her, untying the ribbon lacing down her back. "Glad you cleared that up." He lifted the dress, waiting for her to raise her arms over her head before slipping it off and carefully hanging it up as well. When he turned back, he reached up, cupping her neck between his hands. His gaze wandered over her, his expression one of near-wonder. "I want this war to be over," he said, the words such a low whisper that she scarcely heard them. "I want to be done with obligation and deadlines, and just disappear somewhere … just you and me and Nihlus."

A soft smile of understanding spirited across Shepard's lips, as wistful and filled with weary hope as his words. Sighing she pressed in, fitting herself against his body. "You're still wearing far too much clothing, by the way."

"Easily remedied," he replied, removing his tunic, then tugging the light, white dress shirt out of her grip and over his head. "There, better?" he asked, his arms holding her close.

Shepard pressed her ear against his chest and nodded. "Much." After a second, she let out a soft breath. "Do you know why those lilies were all over when I died?" She felt him wince away from the question, but just held him tighter. "Anderson filled my hospital room with them after Mindoir. He said they were called Madonna lilies and were a symbol of purity, and faith … sacrifice, and redemption, and hope. They're my favourite flower because of that."

She pulled away just far enough to meet his eyes. "That's why I was surprised and happy to find that one in your room on Omega, even though I figured you didn't know the meaning." She lifted her hand to caress the length of his mandible. "I sort of see it as the symbol of us, and the hope that one day the sacrifices will end, and we'll be allowed to live in the hope, redeemed."

He moved in, but she ducked his embrace, dropping her fingers to the fasteners on his leggings. "Enough time with far more than enough between us." Making quick work of removing them, she helped him step clear and laid them over his chair.

"Time for the sexy parts," he teased, stepped around her to pick up the *harediarcha*.

"Callor," Shepard spun and caught his hands as he picked up the carved box. "I need to give you my wedding gift before we settle in to do anything that might leave me with blue streaks down my face for the next couple of months." She smiled and guided the box back to the desktop. "Come and sit with me?"

"Of course, but let's put the *coillasi* in the oil first." He released the box, and opened it, removing the clay jar of oil that they'd prepared with the crushed herbs after breakfast. Shepard stepped up beside him, watching as he poured the oil into an earthen bowl that shone with a gorgeous patina that could only come from ages and ages of use.

Garrus lifted the fine chains that had held his robe closed and lowered them into the bowl, then nodded for her to go ahead, which she did, submerging the slightly thicker chains from her robe.
Shepard grinned and dipped her fingertip in the oil. "Infusing the symbols of our bond with who we are and the wishes for our future." She rubbed her finger and thumb together, the sense of connection tunneling all the way down to sink and anchor in her soul. "I love that."

"Okay." Taking her hands, he led her to the side of the bed and sat. "I'm all yours."

She nodded toward the center of the bed. "Can I sit on your lap?" She flushed a little as she asked. "I don't want anything between us."

"Of course, but that means we'll have to get rid of these." He tucked his thumbs into the waist of her panties and slipped them down off her hips. Shepard balanced herself with her hands on his smooth, tightly muscled shoulders, closing her eyes to savour the calloused, gentle touch as it caressed down her legs, then lifted one foot and the other.

As the contact vanished, a thick, heavy longing settled in her stomach, her entire body … her bones aching with it, and she wished for a quick resolution to the war as well. So many possibilities, so many lives and hopes and options waited out there for them. The Reapers had made a very large mistake coming between her and that future with her torins, because having gotten a taste of it, she wasn't going to allow them to deny her the rest.

Garrus moved farther up onto the bed, then held out his hands, steadying her as she stepped up and settled herself on his crossed legs.

"Much better," she said, wriggling a little to find the sweet spot. "Okay." She clasped his hands in hers. "So, when you told me about the whole wedding gift tradition thing, I did a little thinking." A bright grin met the smart ass gleam that sparked in his eyes. "And, yes, it was painful … and okay … fine … smoke was involved."

His chuckle added another layer to the thick envelope of intimate comfort that suffused the room.

"There's nothing I can give you that can compare to the love of your family … our family." Her lips began to tremble even through her smile. Taking a deep breath, she managed to relax the slow tightening in her throat. "So, I talked to Mordin, and he put together a package of all the information and samples … everything we've collected from Sovereign, the Protheans, and the Collector base on Thessia and sent it to some of his contacts on Sur'kesh who are researching Corpalis Syndrome at the Helos Medical Institute. A Dr. Jelith Kieron was very excited about what we sent him, and practically jumped the light years to Omega carrying his team on his back."

Garrus stared at her, mouth and mandibles slack, eyes shining.

"He's probably already on Omega, because he wanted to see the space the labs were going in and design his environment accordingly." She reached up to take her husband's face between her hands, tears pricking the corners of her eyes as she felt his mandibles trembling against her palms. Now for the bad news. "He says Mari is too far along to put much hope into curing her, but he thinks that if his treatments work as he believes they will, we can buy her a couple more years." She pressed her lips together to still them, licking away the sudden slickness. "But it could lead to a cure someday for other families … for our family, sweet baby Jesus forbid."

A single shake of his head answered her as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in tight, his face tucked in under her jaw.

Shepard's arms snaked around his neck in a loving hug. "She'll have to stay on Omega for a while, maybe even a year, but … we're going to be there … Sol will be there … we'll just have to ship Pari to Palaven for his meetings." After a couple of minutes, she pulled away, taking his face
between her hands again. "You okay, Callor?"

He nodded and sucked in a deep, shaky breath. "A little overwhelmed, but I couldn't be better." Pulling her in, he pressed his mouth to hers, answering her with all the joy and love in his kiss. "Her treatments weren't working the way her doctors hoped, so this … ." He kissed her again. "Dear spirits, I never believed this feeling existed." He pulled back to press his palm over her heart. "Thank you, Kahri."

She sighed and rested her brow against his. "Well, it's a pretty selfish gift, considering it's as much for me as you and Nihlus, Pari, and Sol, but I just fell in love with her. She's so amazing that the galaxy needs her in it for as long as possible."

He nodded and sniffed. "It really does, and I need her. I need to make up for all those cycles of being an idiot."

She hugged him tight again. "We'll make them an apartment in Building One, bring in all the furniture and things they need. We'll give them both offices with a QEC between them, whatever staff they need. Maybe even give Pari his own ship so he can come and go as he needs."

A wonderful, timeless silence wrapped them tight, neither of them moving for long moments, loathe to break it.

"I have something for you as well," Garrus said at last, his voice muffled by her shoulder. "Sort of a variation on a theme." He leaned back across the bed to rifle through the pockets of his tunic, returning with a tiny package that he placed in her palm. "I didn't know about the symbolism of the lilies when I made it, I just knew you liked them."

Shepard's heart suddenly decided it needed all the room in her chest, squeezing the breath out of her lungs. "You made this?" Thumbs caressing the wrapping, she just stared at it, trying to remember the last time anyone had made her a gift. It would have been when she was a child.

"The gift isn't the paper," he whispered, his voice rolling with gentle teasing. He nuzzled her ear. "You're allowed to unwrap it."

"Aw, and it's such lovely paper." She shrugged then grinned so broad and happy that her cheeks ached with it. After kissing the end of his nose, she said, "I'm not sure you can top it." Unfolding the wrapping, she exposed a … necklace? Setting the paper down between them, she lifted the chain to reveal a lovely pendant hanging from the lowest part. She looked from the gorgeous piece of jewelry to meet Garrus's eyes. "It's beautiful, Callor. Put it on me?"

Gentle talons took the necklace from her hands and placed it over her head. "The chain is made from the same shell as our coillasi, so should never break." He grinned, mandibles flicking. "Just don't try to use it as a rope to swing through jungles or over ravines or to tow broken down Makos."

Shepard laughed, and slung an arm around his neck, leaning in to touch brows again. "There's a very real danger of all those things, so thanks for the warning." She lifted the long, delicate pendant, surprised at its solidity. It looked like a lily petal with the intricate runic writing of the closed dialect cut out of it in an elegant, stylized pattern. "What does it say?" she asked.

Garrus pointed to the first group of symbols. "This is me, this one in the center is you, and this last one is Nihlus." A noisy breath whistled through his nose. "The entire thing is the ancient turian symbol for light, but this time it's the word samitaregia, a guiding light … a light to illuminate your path or bring you home."
Running talon over the clear, hard surface, he leaned in, pressing his brow to hers. "I cut it out of one of the petals from the lily I kept during your funeral, and it's hard because it turns out there are chiastyllia everywhere, even Omega. I just thought my intention, reached out in case, and they came."

He let it fall between her breasts. "It resonates at a very specific frequency that I can pick up anywhere in the galaxy." He lifted his wrist to show her his omnitool sitting in its port, ordinary but for a small fixture of crystal nested into the side.

Shepard frowned and leaned back, her hand returning to press against his mandible. "Garrus?" Was he worried about her vanishing? No, the idea reached deeper than that. A vague shadow teased her, darting in and out of the light too quickly for her to grasp it. Being lost … .

"You were lost for a long time, Janey. A long time dwelling in the dark, calling out for a single ray of light. For them."

A sigh tumbled from his mouth, the sound an admission of sorrow and secrets kept. "In your dreams …" His mandibles flailed a little, the distress and pain behind his reason for the gift, stabbing into her like thousand needles, flechettes drawn through her to lodge in the magnet of her heart. "... you call out, lost and afraid, searching for me and Nihlus." He pulled her tight. "Now, you don't have to worry. There's nowhere you can get lost that I can't find you."

"Oh, Callor." She lifted into him, kissing him softly, passionate, but a passion springing from love and that very light he spoke of. Samitaregia … her two guiding lights. "Thank you. It's the most beautiful thing," She nestled in against him. "I suppose we need to move in order to get to the sexy bits of our night?"

He nodded, but then turned to lower his legs off the side of the bed. Supporting her backside with one arm, he stood. "There, now all you need to do is lower your feet." He chuckled when she shook her head.

Shepard squeezed his waist, her legs gripping tight. "I want to stay right here for … oh … about forever. Would that be all right with you?"

He shrugged. "Sure, that won't be awkward in battle. You can deafen me shooting over my shoulder, and I can paralyze you, pulverizing your spine with the kickback on my rifle."

Shepard let out a quick huff of a sigh, then nodded. "Okay, sounds good." After another couple of seconds, she kissed him, just a hard, luring press of lips, and dropped down to stand on her own feet. With a toss of her head, she spun on her toes and marched to the mensacra sitting in the middle of the cabin floor. Before she even got three steps, a long arm slipped around her, stopping her dead as Garrus stepped into her, pulling her tight against him.

"Where are you going dressed like that, Captain Shepard?" he said, his voice a thick harmony of subtones that reached all the way down into her, burning deep in her pelvis like the warmth of a strong drink. Melting into that arm, she shook her head, her heart pounding too hard, her lungs too suddenly breathless again to answer.

Completely vulnerable and completely at ease, feeling completely safe. She leaned into him, swallowing hard past the lump of love and gratitude in her throat. She couldn't remember feeling that combination of things. Maybe she had as a child, but the barians had washed those memories away.

Garrus's arm tightened around her, that sixth sense of his pulling him into sync with her. "Do you
need help sitting?" he asked, just enough cocky tone threaded through the words to let her know that he understood exactly how he affected her.

She elbowed him without any sting, her admission, "Yes," dragging out, slow and begrudging. He chuckled and nuzzled her ear before helping her sit on the low stool. She watched him sit across from her, her eyes drinking in the ease and grace of his movement. He'd been surprised by her ability to dance earlier, but no less than she. He moved like a jaguar, lithe and strong, a ferocious sort of grace to his movements that had her body insisting on jumping him right there. Miranda may have saved them both from an embarrassing turn of events.

She grinned, a wicked, mischievous grin that sent one of Garrus's brow plates heading for his fringe.

"What is that gleam about?" he asked, opening the harediarcha and taking out the covered mortar containing the leftover ink.

The tingling heat in Shepard's groin caught fire. "I was just remembering how amazingly sexy you were during the cohamentum."

As he dipped a very short bristled, sharp-edged brush into the ink, he chuckled and shook his head. "Stop trying to distract me. I've never done this before, and I don't want to leave your face some sort of abstract work of art."

"Heaven forbid." Shepard leaned in, forearms on the table, pushing her breasts up and forward. "I wanted to just throw you down right there, crawl inside your clothes and have my way with you."

She laughed as he fumbled the brush a little in shaking talons, spraying a thin line of blue dots across the table and her arms. Taking pity on him, she eased back and laid her hand over his. "All right, I'll stop teasing."

"Thank you. Although … " His greater height allowed him to lean all the way across the narrow table to nuzzle his way up her neck, nipping her lightly. "... you were incredibly sexy yourself."

The heat of his mouth, the soft drag of his teeth over her excited skin coaxed a long, low moan from her that felt as though it originated in her gut. "Just get the damned familia notas drawn on, husband, before I attempt a sitting high jump over this table, and we both end up covered in that ink."

"Yes, ma'am." Settling in, his mandibles held in the rigid concentration formation that approximated a human having their tongue caught between their teeth, Garrus obeyed her order, making far shorter work of colouring in the markings than she would have thought from his hesitation.

"Guess all that painting paid off," she said, her tone teasing, even though her brow drew down into a thoughtful frown. "Why haven't you kept up with your art, Callor? I didn't see any in your apartment on the Citadel, or on Omega."

He shrugged and wiped out the mortar with a couple of tissues. "It didn't seem like a priority. I have always had a lot of work to do."

Shepard shook her head. "That's crap. Why? You clearly loved it." She set her jaw and an eyebrow, unwilling to let him get away with dodging or deflecting.

He shrugged and put away the inking supplies. "It wasn't a priority, that's all."

She reached out, the repeated lie stabbing an icicle straight through her gut, and grasped his closest
arm with both hands. "Callor, love … tell me the truth." When he turned back to face her, she captured his hands in a strong grip and waited.

"My father came home one weekend, and I hadn't solved his mystery for the week." He gripped her hands right back, thumbs brushing along the first bone in her hands. "I was angry with him, because he'd stayed at work the weekend before and missed … " He cocked his head, a deep frown falling over his face, a cloud that made her twitch, the urge to lean across and kiss it away almost too strong to deny.

He shook his head. "... something, Mari's declaration day, maybe. Anyway, he came home, I was angry, and went out to my favourite place to draw and didn't come back to the house until after my curfew." He lifted one of her hands to his face, pressing her palm against his cheek before leaning into it.

"How old were you?" she asked, her voice barely audible. Spirits, the wound from his father's absence dug so much deeper than she imagined and had festered so badly over the years. Even though the past couple of years had healed the surface, that wounded child still hid away in there somewhere.

Another shrug. "Twelve. He was furious, said my art was a waste of time and not something a proper turian would spend time doing when they needed to concentrate on being a productive member of society rather than a drain."

Shepard released his hand and moved the table off to one side, then scrambled up to kneel in front of him. "That must have hurt like hell."

He tugged her into a hug, pressing her along the right side of his keel. "As much as I'm sure it hurt for me to have shattered our game, and stayed out rather than coming to see him." He shook his head again, but that time as if trying to shed water or strands of cobweb. "I just put the art away after that, and concentrated on getting ready for the academy, playing turram … the things good turians did."

"You know, he'd take back that night just as quickly as you would if he was able," she said, pulling back. She reached up to test how dry her face was, but Garrus grabbed her hand.

"No touching." A smile pushed back the momentary clouds. "You'll smudge." He nodded at her stool. "Get yourself back over there, derra. Now we get to the sexy bits."

Shepard clambered back onto her stool. "About time. I love all the tradition, but it needs to have a lot more sexy bits."

Garrus set the table back between them, then brought out the bowl of oil. He held his hand out for hers, placing her arm on the table elbow down, hand up when she surrendered it. Dipping his talons into the oil, he came out with one of the fine chains.

"These are carved all in a piece rather than being linked together, and are meant to never break, never be removed." He wrapped it around her wrist twice, then fastened the clasp. Smiling, he watched the oil drip down her arm, only moving in to smooth it over her skin when the little rivulets stalled.

When the oil had soaked into her arm, he pulled out the other coillas and positioned her other arm. "They're a tradition at least fifteen thousand cycles old." He wrapped it around her wrist. "Back when they were first introduced, they were a means of identification. In the case of war or disaster, they could link each person back to their clan, and even family, by the different designs of the
links." He took her arm between his hands, his touch and voice soothing as he massaged the oil in.

As Shepard watched his hands glide over her skin, steel grey and glistening, the touch firm but oh so gentle, she couldn't help but recall the way he'd taken care of her hands after she'd smashed them up that first week. From the very first, he'd just stepped up, deciding that he'd take care of her. Back then, she could have never imagined them ending up where they were. Thank the sweet, sweet baby Jesus for the things unforeseen.

When he finished, she took his arm, guiding it into the same position. The chains only wrapped around his wrists once. Watching the oil run down his arm, following the lines of plate and hide, she shook her head, the day … her entire life … suddenly losing its solid edges, reality softening into mist. Husband … a dilan … her mother and sister being found alive … being brought back to life by an evil empire … where did it all turn into some ridiculous story?

"Kahri?"

She met his eyes, concern darkening and deepening the love she saw there.

Shrugging, she traded arms. "It's been a lovely day." Rubbing the oil into his hide, she smiled. "Full of surprises." When he encouraged her with a cocked brow plate, Shepard replied, "Lucy and Bunny came into the room while I was getting dressed. Bunny didn't say anything, just sat on the side of the bed, but when our eyes met in the mirror, she nodded." Shepard frowned, trying to put the feeling that had passed between them in that moment. "It was … I don't know … like she was saying that we were both okay. I think I owe Martin a really big hug."

A muted rumble of agreement rolled from his throat. "He took good care of them while we were gone. The doc even released Bunny to live in standard quarters and train with the recruits. She still goes in for counselling every day, but she seems to be turning all that rage into something constructive."

Shepard nodded. "I think she'd be a really good addition to the Sanctuary project once we find somewhere to start it." She pulled his talons over to press kisses to each one, then to the chain encircling his wrist. "These look striking on you, verro."

"Never thought I'd wear them," he said, voice almost too soft to hear. "I thought I'd be the old C-Sec officer trying to ignore the whispers during his retirement ceremony about how sad it was he didn't have family to enjoy his retirement with." He grinned, sudden and wide. "And now I'll be the one they drag kicking and screaming into retirement so I don't have to go home and spend all my time with my impossible, ornery mate."

"Hey! I represent that remark!" Shepard protested, smacking him, the tough hide of his arm stinging her hand.

"Yes, yes, you do." Still, chortling, Garrus eased his hand from her grip, and moved the small table over to the end of his bed. Standing, he moved his stool, then reached down. "Come, derra, you know they'll have to kill me to keep me from you." Gripping her hands, he helped her up and pushed her stool out of the way with the side of his foot, all without breaking eye contact. Shepard remained pliable, allowing him to shift her out of the way, her hands falling to her sides when he released them to pull the duvet from the bed. With a strong flick, he spread it out, letting it drift to the floor, then held his hands out for hers.

"Now, nothing but sexy bits," he said, his words caressing her with loving humour. He sat cross-legged and helped her onto his lap. Once she settled, he trailed his talons down her neck and along her collarbones, his eyes trained on the path they traced. His first digit traced the edge of one of the
wounds. "I didn't think to ask if the oil would hurt you."

Shepard nodded. It could well sting a little. By the end of the day, the sealant wore thin along the edges, but spending the entire day dressed in soft clothes had prevented them rubbing as raw as usual. "Where you rubbed it in from the coillasfeels fine."

He dipped the talons of his right hand in the bowl, the left cradling her wrist, the tender part turned up. First nuzzling the skin as if apologizing in advance, he smoothed the oil on, rubbing it in along the inside of her forearm.

Shepard waited for a sting that never came. In fact, quite the opposite. "It's actually numbing the pain a little," she reported, shrugging. "Looks like all systems go." She wrinkled her nose, drawing in a deep breath. "It smells a little like my bath last night."

Garrus pressed his face to her wrist and inhaled, a fond smile spreading across his face. "Mari. The oil has torpen cortisin it. It's an herbal analgesic that isn't included in the normal variety of herbs provided for the guests to choose from."

Shepard leaned in and kissed him. "I sense Karin's influence in here as well. Although, she must have had a tempering influence, or I'd be tranq'd." Glancing over at the bowl of oil, she drew her bottom lip between her teeth, trapping the corner of it. "Are we both supposed to be using that?"

Garrus's hands slipped around her neck, his talons gliding over her shoulder blades and down her back. "Yes." He nuzzled just below her ear. "And you know, turians need to have oil massaged into their hide every other day or it dries out, so … ."

Shepard dipped her fingers into the bowl, and rubbed her palms together before smoothing it down her verro's neck. "So between the two of you, I'm going to have the best conditioned hands around? Not to mention the happiest hands around." Before he could answer, she tipped her pelvis to brush against his plates. "You know, there's one thing that could make this just that little bit sexier."

Chuckling, Garrus pulled her into a deep, long kiss. "You're incorrigible."

She reached down, tracing the seam with a fingertip, easing her way inside to tease the silky hide of his sheath. "Hey, I have a whole lot of time to make up for." She slicked up her fingers again and leaned back a little to gaze into his eyes as her fingers trickled over his face. "You were right, you know … all those months ago. I just had to trust you for a couple of seconds." Moaning, soft and throaty, as his hands moved to her chest, his thumbs sweeping over her breasts, teasing the nipples. "And now … damn … all I want to feel is you … all over me and inside me."

"Right here," he whispered, his thumb sliding back and forth between the hard, ridges of bone in her sternum and the swell of her breast. "I think the entire evolution of humanity and turians came about just for this right here." Urging her to lie back against his arm, he bent down, talons and tongue all obsessing over her slick skin and soft flesh.

Shepard relaxed back, her head hanging, entire body turning to needy, aching clay under his touch. "I thought you wanted me to tell evolution you voted for human females to evolve carapaces?" she asked, voice breathless and lusty.

He lifted his mouth from her breast, his teeth drawing a soft moan as they raked the skin, their solid, gentle pressure providing a most delicious counterpoint to his nimble tongue. "I was a fool." Turning his head a little, he brushed her nipple along the length of his mandible, sending a heavy, sweet electricity singing down through her body to feed the fire at her core. Like a drawn bow, she pulled up, straining between the grounding points of his lap and his arm, as he buried his face in
the hollow between her ribs. The rough hide of his mouth pulled long, soft oaths of pleasure as he 
nuzzled his way down to her navel, and she lifted … breathless and aching, straining to close the 
frustrating space between them. Too much air moved between their bodies.

Garrus pulled back a little, calloused palms caressing up her sides, the lush friction feeding straight 
into that fire even as she relaxed down onto his legs once more. He let out a long breath that 
whispered a lifetime of promises. "You're absolutely perfect in your softness." Strong hands lifted 
her, settling her in line with his plates, waiting for a sign from her before he slipped free.

She gave it in the form of a hard, helpless buck when the edge of his plates brushed against her 
center, her entire body grinding into him with an insistence that surprised her, and elicited a throaty 
chuckle from Garrus. Oiling his hands, he spread his talons at the base of her throat, flexing them a 
little so the sharp points just furrowed the skin. Careful to lift them over her wounds, he drew them 
them down her torso, leaving behind three searing lines of sensation that sent every nerve in her 
body straight into overdrive.

As his hand neared her sex, she lifted into him again, bucking softly against the contact. "Blessed 
Enkindlers, Callor, stop with the teasing before I explode into hormone confetti."

Pressing his hand against her overheated center, he teased the soft dusting of hair with one talon. 
"I'm almost tempted to see if I can make that happen."

Shepard dropped a slick hand to his spur, laughing brightly as he jumped beneath her, a heavy 
shudder shaking him from head to toe as her thumb slid along its length. "Oh yes, two can play that 
game, General, and I don't think you've got what it takes to beat me."

He grinned and leaned down, resting his chin between her breasts. "Is that a challenge, Captain 
Shepard?" His thumb slipped down to sit just above the 'make Shepard sing in fifteen octaves' 
button, tapping in a way that felt very much like a warning.

Fighting back her body's insistence that she respond to that touch, Shepard cleared her throat, a 
faint tremor pulsing through her, taking root in her pelvis. "Ahhhh … um, aren't we supposed to be 
doing the whole oil ritual?" she said, expression wide-eyed and guileless as she tipped her head 
toward the bowl. Pressing her lips together, she managed to set her expression into a mask of mild 
curiosity. "Yeah, pretty sure that was the next item on the itinerary."

Taking the game a step further, she twisted in his grasp, reaching out to dip her fingers into the oil. 
A loud, almost vicious sounding roar rumbled through her husband's second larynx, startling a 
sharp, effervescent bark of laughter as he pulled her into his arms. Garrus kissed her hard and deep, 
his passion snatching any thought of teasing straight out of her head.

"Sweet baby Jesus." Gasping into his mouth, she lifted into him, one hand clinging to his neck, the 
other sliding down his chest to the soft hide of his belly. Questing fingers slipped through the seam 
between his plates, finding him eager and ready, pressing against her palm. She wrapped her hand 
around him, the heel keeping him trapped while her fingers slipped along his length.

Damn, but didn't she want him with a strength near frantic.

Tongue dancing along his, Shepard greedily sucked up the handful of super-heated air that hung 
between them. Pulling back just far enough to untangle from the kiss, she pushed him back a little. 
"Lean back, verro." When he didn't move, she gave him another little shove, then leaned in, kissing 
along the groove of his throat, her body pressing into his until he was forced to brace his arms 
behind him.
Grinning, she ran her lip between her teeth, her stare meeting his with naked, raw lust. She'd never wanted to just leap on someone and discover the taste of every millimetre of him before the impossible, beautiful, magnificent torin pinned beneath her. She leaned right in, reclining against his chest as she kissed him long and deep, then reached over, soaking her hands with the oil.

"Let yourself go, verro," she said, her voice burrowing down into her chest, throaty and rich with desire. She shifted, sliding along his length as he eased free of his plates. "Mmm, much better." She grinned as he moaned, his head lolling back, his length gaining width as she trapped it between them, gliding slick and slow along the underside. Stretching out along him, careful not to put too much pressure on his sensitive bits, she reached out, oily hands shining as they smoothed over the length of his crest, then began to work their way down his body, exploring every centimetre she could reach.

When he panted, his belly heaving with each, moaning breath, she slipped him inside her. He pushed himself up hard enough to throw her back, strong arms catching her by the hips. She chuckled, the sound turning into a cry of passion and pleasure as he rolled his pelvis, thrusting into her. Hands returning to splash into the oil, they massaged and teased, their mouths locked together even as they crashed toward frantic, clinging orgasms.

Silent oaths passed between them, the ones that transcended words, as they lay tangled in one another's arms in a nest of pillows, the edges of the duvet carelessly thrown over them.

Shepard nuzzled into the tender spot just under Garrus's jaw. "So, we surface a couple of hours before Horizon?"

Her general nodded. "I've got everything I need right here."

(A-N: I was going to skip right to Horizon, but I couldn't do it. I had to give them their wedding night. :D Thanks and hugs and tasty snacks and cold beverages to all of you. You know I love you.)
"By all that's fucking holy, I'm not dying in the middle of some goddamned husk gang bang." Her bellow of rage provoked an answering chorus of roars and moans from the husks.

*Note to self: If you survive this, get a fucking pistol that hasn't been fucking well retrofitted.*

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56 Days ASR Horizon

Shepard stepped down off the shuttle and looked up at the Collector cruiser looming over the colony. "Sweet baby Jesus," she whispered, taking a couple of steps toward it. Finally, a decent look at one of them. A slow, twisting sort of superstitious terror crept through her, slithering between her ribs and curling around her spine, chill and scaled. It looked as though it had been flown straight out of hell.

"Know your enemy," Garrus said, voice hushed and subvocals flat.

Glancing his way, Shepard rumbled, a low moan of discomfort turning over deep in her throat. She reached up to rub the back of her head, a slow wave of dizziness washing over her, just a knee-deep surge of warm water and foam, gently pushing then drawing her back.

"Shepard? Are you all right?" Martin clapped a heavy hand down on her shoulder, the grip feeling like a docking clamp. The dizziness receded.

"Yeah, fine." She rubbed the back of her head again, feeling a little like the back door and all the windows had been left open, a sweet spring breeze blowing through. "It's just, every time I learn more about them, the more impossible they seem." Looking up at the Collector ship again, the fear vanished, leaving nothing but a very healthy dose of contempt.

Shaking off everything but the business at hand, she turned toward her people. "Mordin, how sure are you that these emitters are going to protect us from the swarms?" Her stare locked on the salarian.

"Only exposure will tell," he replied, moving over to stand next to Chakwas, Vincent, and Miranda. Kaidan, Thane, and Jack lurked just behind them, weapons at the ready.

A wry chuckle slipped out, riding the back of a long breath, and she nodded. Of course that was his answer. Time to push on. "Okay, science team, you'll hang back ten minutes, let the assault team clear a swath through the bad guys." Looking to Miranda, she said, "Shuttle Alpha is under your command to ferry samples or to pull you out if necessary. Don't risk the brain trust." Gaze slipping past the operative to Kaidan, she nodded toward Chakwas and Mordin. He responded with a tiny salute.

"Shuttles Bravo and Charlie. Lt. Cortez, do you read?" The colonist evacuation team sat thirty kilometres outside the colony in shuttles with geth prototype stealth drives. Hopefully with the
assault team making a lot of noise, the other two teams could do their work in relative peace.

"Cortez, here, ma'am. Reading you loud and clear. Shuttles and extraction teams ready when you have colonists to evac."

"Roger that, Lieutenant." Shepard took a deep breath, blinking a little as the alarm in the back of her skull twitched. Just a blip that didn't make sense. She felt nothing off. "All right, assault team, let's move out." She nodded to Javik to go ahead on point, falling in on his four, Nihlus at his eight.

"Anyone else feel like that thing is watching them?" Martin grumbled from Shepard's six. Despite the worry in his voice, he moved sure and steady, all honed reflexes and combat assurance.

She glanced behind her, admiring the man for a moment before she nodded. "It looks more like a hive than a ship, but it is just a ship, kid." Lifting her arm, Shepard cast a quick glance at the gleaming gauntlet of chiastyllia wrapped around her forearm. "Do you have anything that will help us? Can you sense where the Collectors are? Where survivors are?"

"Our range is limited, as is our knowledge of the Collectors. Our connection to the Cynosure has been severed just as yours have been to your vessel. We feel others, crying out in pain, the pain all they've known for cycles beyond counting." The chia went silent for a second, then a heavy jolt of panic lanced through Shepard from the gauntlet. "The suzerain are here! They're here. So many chiastyllia screaming, begging for release. So much pain!"

Shepard clapped a hand to her temple, pain riding hard behind the lightning bolts of fear and grief. "Calm down!" she said, the words a sharp, barked order. "Stop forcing your emotions on me, or I'll leave you here." Shepard focused her will into a blade that severed the chia's connection and the construct opened. Pulling her arm free of the two halves, she moved to make good her threat. "I won't be manipulated. I need to fight, so if you're going to come with me, you need to stay calm so I can focus. Stay calm."

The rush of emotion ebbed. "The Collectors were taken by the servants of the suzerain and changed over the long tide of cycles to serve their needs, to be their eyes and hands from dark space," the chia said, as if the entire freak out had never occurred. "One such race is always chosen to prepare for the next cycle."

"So, the Reapers can control them from dark space?" That thought slapped her with both dread and an odd hope. A link to the Reaper fleet could prove invaluable. What if they could find a way to tap into that signal? She slapped the gauntlet back on, and sent a quick message to Miranda to collect intact Collectors if possible.

"Now, you're meant to be here as a help, not a hindrance," she told the chia. "No more outbursts, just scan and feed me data." She nodded to Nihlus, who'd stopped to wait, a hip cocked, his arms crossed with his rifle slung across them.

He lifted a brow plate. "Ready? Or do you need to argue with your arm a bit longer?"

"Move out," she said, levelling him with a haughty glare that she completely belied with a crooked grin. The smartass face he made in return set off a sweet ache behind her sternum. Playful Nihlus was a beautiful thing, and suddenly that tiny ping went off again … the one that unleashed the woman who had agreed to kids a couple of nights before.

*Focus. Damn it, that's worse than the chia freaking out. Lock that down and now, Janey.*

Drawing in a long, cleansing breath, she settled her Mattock in her hands, the familiar heft
grounding her back into the all-too-familiar arena of life and death, bullets and things so much less sweet to contemplate than her future family.

They entered the colony from the west, the opposite side as the Collector ship. They'd hoped that further away from the vessel, they'd locate more survivors, but they found absolutely nothing. At least their armour modifications held as the seeker swarms swirled, as oblivious as leaves on the wind. The colony reminded her altogether too much of Noveria—the feeling of hostile eyes watching and waiting for the perfect opportunity to bleed them.

Her boots whispered through the tall, dry grass, each footstep sending sylphs and tiny butterflies fluttering into the air. Shepard drew in a deep breath that smelled of dust and clean, sweet meadows. The colony remained more undeveloped than she would have thought, just prefabs thrown down on the grasslands. Not that it wasn't nice to see people leaving some of the world intact, but the lack of the usual markers of life and civilization just made it feel more like a ghost town with each passing street. At least the spiders lay dormant and silent inside her head, so no black orbs awaited them.

She frowned, reaching into that aired out house inside her head. The spiders … . She prodded gently, like a tongue worrying a sore tooth, but not—

"Incoming," Nihlus called back in a soft whisper, his tone snapping Shepard into battle mode. Then she heard it. Husks howling … the frantic scramble of feet in the grass and bodies flinging themselves over obstacles in a ramshackle rush. Nihlus nodded toward one of the houses. The long building’s windows all stood open.

"Yeah, we'll need decent cover." She signaled Martin and Javik. "Take the end doors. Close and lock them. Keep them that way."

"I'll go up," Garrus said, gesturing toward a ladder with his rifle, "and try to thin the pack as they close in." Shepard nodded, watching him climb for a second before heading inside.

Shepard stood in the window closest to the approaching husks, waiting for a visual, because nothing showed on her HUD. So much for the chia being of use breaking through the Collector jamming. The garbled howls drew closer, a manic grin spreading across her face. It sounded like a lot of the bastards. Glory hallelujah, a decent fight. No fucking mind games, no eldritch monsters, just husks, and she still held onto a few IOU’s from Eden Prime. She switched her Mattock for Ingrid.

As the howls grew nearer, realization dawned: a sharp slap in the back of her head. No spikes anywhere. There hadn't been any on Freedom's Progress either. That meant experimental, factory husks brought in on the Collector ship. She didn't harbour a single doubt about a processing plant on Earth, not after Thessia and Palaven. And maybe, just maybe there might be something about these husks, something contained within them, that might lead her to the factory.

The first appeared, running through a narrow alley between buildings. Shepard checked that she had disruptor ammunition loaded, then pulled her old lady in against her shoulder, sighting the head on the second. With a boom that shook the building, Garrus dropped the first. Not to be outdone, Ingrid punched a hole straight through the second husk's face.

A third one fell, but a swarm of the frantic techno-zombies followed on its heels, the press quickly overwhelming what Shepard and Garrus could bring down. Shepard launched an overload into the thickest part of the crowd, Garrus, Nihlus, and Martin following suit before they all opened fire.

Despite corpses covering the ground so thick that they hid the grass, a heavy wave of husks still
reached the house. Grabbing hold of the window ledge, clambering over each other, they swarmed up and over, pouring into the room. Where the hell had so many come from?

What started as an orderly fight dissolved into chaos, assault and sniper rifles traded for pistols and knives, fists and boots. Bodies surged, pressing in and eventually separating Shepard from her squad.

Clawed, dessicated hands wrapped around Shepard's throat and the collar of her armour from behind, a sudden, scrambling weight sending her stumbling. Throwing herself forward, she ducked her shoulder hard and flicked her hip, trying to flip the husk over her head and out the window. For a moment, she thought the move had worked, the husk's grip sliding over her skin, its nails screaming along the ceramic armour. Then it's fingers caught a grip and the floor just disappeared from under her feet. A second later, she hit the ground outside the window, flat on her back, husks leaping on top of her like pro football players.

Gasping, the wind crushed out of her, she pulled her pistol in tight against her body and pulled the trigger, punching a hole straight up through the pile.

"Shepard!"

She heard her name shouted from all sides above the insane, garbling noises of the husks, but couldn't shift beneath their weight, not even to get enough air to yell back. Then her pistol ran out of shots.

Fucking, goddamned heat sinks. She wriggled her arm loose and bashed anything she could land a blow on, fighting to clear a path to her omnitool. A scream clawed its way from her throat as sharp-nailed fingers dug into the wounds on her cheek, tearing her open. Biting down hard, she cut it off and swallowed it down, unwilling to give them that much power. Instead, she blocked out the pain, and hammered her way to her weapon interface.

"By all that's fucking holy, I'm not dying in the middle of some goddamned husk gang bang." Her bellow of rage provoked an answering chorus of roars and moans from the husks.

*Note to self: If you survive this, get a fucking pistol that hasn't been fucking well retrofitted.*

She launched Droney, then set her overload, overclocking it enough that it could well fry the emitters, and render her unconscious. "Better than than ripped to shreds." Clenching her teeth, she hit the control, and the world exploded into white hot light and searing pain. Clawing hands stilled as electricity arced and tore through the pile, locking all Shepard's muscles into a rigor that twisted her backwards until her spine crunched like twigs underfoot.

"Shepard?"

Instead of trying to answer Nihlus, Shepard concentrated on breathing, a feat achieved fluidly thirteen seconds later. Twenty-nine seconds later, she could move, and shoved her way out of the pile of fried husks. Instead of heading back inside, she hobbled across the street, taking cover on a small balcony to whittle away at the husks from behind.

"I really need to stop doing that," she sighed, collapsing against the railing. "Sweet baby Jesus, that hurts like a sonuvabitch."

"Are you all right?" Nihlus called over the husks and gunfire.

"Yeah, just bbq'd myself a little." Her legs regaining some of their strength, she popped up over her cover and emptied her Mattock's heat sink into the backs of husk heads, the dance smoothing back
out into the familiar rhythm. Everything settled into place, the enemy falling as senseless, brainless zombie-creatures should when facing a squad of big, goddamned heroes.

The flood of husks ended, and the street hunkered still and silent in the Collectors' shadow, not even insects droneing through the air or in the grass.

Shepard leaned into the railing and pushed herself up, stretching once straight to work all the kinks out of her battered muscles. Giving herself a shot of medigel, she stemmed the slow bleeds from wounds torn open by the husks. "Everyone okay?" she called.

"Javik and Nihlus both got a couple of bites and gouges taken out of them," Martin reported.

"Nothing that a little medigel won't patch," Nihlus said, talking over Martin at the last. "We're ready to move out, Shepard."

"They know we're here now," Shepard said despite knowing she didn't need to. She picked her way through and over the twice dead corpses, aiming for the alley from where they'd come. "If you're up and functional, let's keep moving."

"I need another minute," Martin said. "Need to bandage Javik." A muttered tirade from the Prothean followed, but Shepard couldn't make out any words until Martin replied, "Oh, stop grousing."

Shepard grinned and shook her head, then crouched down next to one of the husks, rolling it over on its back. The Collectors had definitely upgraded them from the Eden Prime variety, making them larger, heavier, and stronger. She reached up and rubbed her neck, the muscles all torqued from tossing the one that had dragged her through the window. She stood, her hand migrating back to her head, fingertips lingering over the massive scar.

"You all right?" Garrus asked, striding up behind her. He gripped her shoulders, turning her to face him, then looked over her scrapes. "That overload couldn't have felt very pleasant." He nodded at her hand. "What's going on with the back of your head? That's got to be ten times you've reached up and poked at it."

"Really?" She dropped her hand to her side, then grinned and shrugged. "Yeah, the overload stung a bit." She smiled, hoping the expression didn't look as weary as it felt. When he released her, she turned toward the rest of her squad. "All set?" she asked, levelling Javik with a 'don't give me any BS' stare.

"I'm fine, Captain." He strode past her, taking point up the alley. "The primitive child overreacted."

"Okay, then." Shepard tossed a grin over her shoulder to the 'primitive child' and winked before setting out after Javik.

Three streets further in, they began to find paralyzed colonists scattered between buildings and hiding within. A good sign, but for the complete lack of Collectors. The further in they got, the more she felt something missing. She prodded the sore tooth, but couldn't nail down what kept pinging her alarm. Still, it kept buzzing like a wasp at the very top of her spine.

"Where are the Collectors?" Martin asked, his mutter giving her wasp a stinger. The kid leaned over a strange, almost cocoon-shaped pod. "This is what they transport the colonists in?" He sounded on the verge of turning the pod into a puke bucket. "It would feel like being nailed into a coffin and forced to watch as they buried you alive."

Shepard crouched next to him, giving the pod a once over. A second later, she stood and clapped a
hand on his shoulder. "Come on, let's make sure these bastards don't stuff anyone else in these things."

They spread out across a long, wide street that led between homes and warehouses to a large, permanent structure. Judging by what she could see of the doors, Shepard figured garage, and probably the way into the spaceport and secure part of the colony. If the colonists managed to mount any sort of defense, it would be further in.

A gleam of opalescent greens, browns, and silver drew her eyes to a strange, almost insectile shape propped up against one of the pods, that one occupied. Shepard forced herself to look past the woman's expression of terror, her eyes wide and staring ... murky beneath the amber-like shell. She placed a hand on the pod. "Is this made of corrupted chia?"

"Yes, partially," the gauntlet replied. "The main casing is made up of a resin created by the Collectors similar to the construction of the computer on Thessia. The pods are biomechanical/electrical in nature and are meant to be slotted into a larger construct."

Processing chambers. Shepard bit down on her response, not wanting the poor soul trapped within to overhear them discussing her fate as grey paste.

Instead, she plastered what she hoped was a reassuring smile on her face; it felt like a grimace. "Just hang in there," Shepard said to the trapped colonist. "We'll get you out as soon as we can." Swallowing the urge to tear the thing open with her bare hands, she picked up the object that had grabbed her attention in the first place. "It's a weapon." She aimed it down the street and pulled the trigger. A heavy beam tore down the empty street and burned a hole through a low fence. "Blessed fucking Enkindlers, it's a hand-held particle beam."

Garrus stuck his head out an upstairs door. "I think you'd better let me take that," he called down. Shepard shook her head and cocked an eyebrow as she hung it from her back, her Mattock settling into her hands. "It's always the biggest gun with you," she said. "Somethings never change." She looked down at the pod again, hoping its inhabitant could hear her. "We're going to push ahead, clear out the Collectors, but I promise you, a team is on its way to get you out and take you somewhere safe."

The pod pulled at her with the gravity of a super-massive black hole as she took her first step down the street, but each step grew a little easier. The extraction team would rescue all the paralyzed. Her duty lie in securing the colony and killing every Collector that crossed her sights. And so, she pushed on, heading toward the garage at the end of the next block.

When Garrus fell in at her four, Shepard stopped and cocked a shoulder toward him. "Go ahead, Callor, you can take the big gun." She chuckled as he took the weapon, a rolling purr of pure gun-porn pleasure vibrating in his throat.

"Shepard!" Martin stuck his head out of a top floor window. He vaulted through the open portal, dropping easily the five metres to the ground. "What about the rest of us?"

Pointing to the path ahead, Shepard squinted against the brightness and said, "Go, find some Collectors, kill them, and take theirs." The sun's glare stabbed straight in from above the garage roof. "And keep your mind on the mission, there's a reason we were hit by such a massive wave of husks." She stabbed her Mattock toward the fence she'd hit with the particle beam. "Move up, get into cover, keep eyes on. They're setting up an ambush."

When the kid moved to take his position, Shepard dove into her belt pouch for her sunglasses,
slipping them on. Not that they helped all that much, the glare still proved blinding. Perfect conditions for an ambush, indeed.

Shepard moved forward, keeping to the center of the open space between the buildings despite every shred of common sense she possessed insisting that she stick to cover. The Collectors sent the husks to slow her down, but also to test them, get a read on their strength. The next wave wouldn't be so easily taken down, but even then, it wouldn't reveal their full strength. Let them see her coming, cocky and exposed, maybe they'd show their hand.

The wasp stung, sending a jolt down her spine.

"Nihlus, scout ahead, twenty metres ahead of Martin on the left." She pointed toward a small shed and generator that provided decent cover. "Javik, up on the lower porch on the end on the right. Garrus, upper balcony, same building."

Everyone moved into position as she continued forward, moving slowly, but steady.

Maybe ten metres before she reached the end of the first block, a papery sort of buzzing sound tickled the outside edge of her hearing. It reminded her of the drone of a large dragonfly.

"Does every breath still taste of grave dust and ashes, Shepard?"

Shepard froze, the voice stopping her in her tracks, the wasp sinking a stinger the size of a K-bar ™ into her spine. She knew that voice. It had reached out of the stone on Thessia and possessed the swarms on the Cerberus station.

"Have you wondered why your terror of darkness and death have lost their hold? Do you feel them moving, inevitable and welcome, at your core?"

"Incoming," Garrus called from his perch. His voice—supremely confident and ready for business—helped banish the voice and the sliver of ice it stabbed down through her. "Flying in at our twelve."

Shepard tore her hand from the base of her skull, and shaded her eyes against the sun, a small cloud of shapes dropping down out of the blue.

*Isn't that always the way?*

And for a moment, she froze, something … ugly and nameless and blacker than sin … blacker than the tar-spiders that lived between the folds of her brain … pressing in on her from that lying sun and powder-blue sky.

The spiders … she felt nothing, not a twitch or a skittering leg, and the reason for the sting finally registered. That open door and the windows letting in the breeze … they were the fresh air of freedom. Shepard clapped a hand to her temple. Sweet Jesus, she'd actually forgotten what it felt like to be alone inside her skull.

But no spiders meant no protection from the Reaper indoctrination signal. Eyes remaining glued to the incoming Collectors, she dove into her belt pouch for a syringe of the indoctrination serum, injecting it before moving forward once more.

"Do you feel it?" the gauntlet of chia cried, their voice laced with terror that they blessedly kept to themselves. "They're here."

Shepard took standing cover behind a wall. She could feel … something. Greed … no … not
greed, hunger … a ravenous, endless hunger to recover what was stolen. A hunger so pervasive as to constitute madness.

*The echoes cannot be allowed to complete the Catalyst at any cost. We will regain our rightful place. The servants will obey and perform the task for which they were created. The thralls will thrive in our care, never again rising up against us.*

"Yes!" the chia said. "Yes! The suzerain. They need to reclaim their servants … the entire galaxy."

"Neutralize Captain Shepard," the deep, terrible voice said from a couple of metres distant, tearing Shepard away from the distant presence and madness of the suzerain. "Kill the rest."

"Fucking hemorrhoidal Enkindlers," Shepard grumbled, clenching her jaw. "As if one terrifying evil power wasn't enough. We had to get stuck in a war between two."

She glanced out. Collectors landed along the grassy courtyard. The closest one strode toward her, its shell cracked and glowing as if magma threatened to explode through, just like the little drones. Swallowing a bolus of overwhelmed helplessness, she pressed her back to the wall. Oh well, two evil powers or not … she just needed to kill the ones in front of her, and keep doing it until she'd cleaned the galaxy of every last one.

"Possessed drone," the gauntlet said, its volume lowered to a whisper.

"Whatever the hell it is, it's dead." Shepard ducked out of cover just in time to face a ball of undulating black energy flying straight at her, another ball … that one like a ball of flame … following right on its heels. She turned back into cover, then something slammed into the wall, throwing her back, right into the path of the shot. Throwing herself into a roll behind the wall, she felt the fiery ball slam into her left hip. It sent her sprawling, flames exploding along her armour. She covered her head, the stink of roasting hair filling her nostrils before a torrent of cold and wet splashed over her head.

"Drop your arms, Shepard."

She did as Martin said, scrambling up once the kid extinguished her hair and the effect burned itself out. "Shit. Avoid that one." She gave him a shove toward Javik's position, not willing to send him back across and expose him to the drone boss's attack, then took cover again.

"Garrus, you have eyes on that glowing bastard?" she called rather than sticking her head out to see and chancing another hit.

"Affirmative. Another attack incoming, move!"

She rolled further behind the wall, then stepped back. Black tendrils, almost like the indoctrination field around the Conduit, snaked through the wall. A couple seconds later, the fireball roared past the end. "Hit it with a concussive shot," she said, returning to her cover. Once she heard his shot impact, she leaned out, launching Droney before opening fire. As soon as her tool pinged, she keyed up incinerate, the power turning the Collector into a pile of ashes.

"Okay, we know how to kill that one now," she said, turning her attention to a drone armed with one of the particle rifles. The rest went down easily, only eight of them taking the field. A test for certain, and probably a delaying action. Shepard strode over to the last one to fall and picked up its weapon, tossing it to Martin. "There you go, kid. A great big gun, all your own."

"It's power cell is almost drained," Martin said, shoulders slumping. "Can't wreak bloody doom with no charge." He crouched next to the dead Collector. "Maybe it was carrying a spare." After a
second, he let out a small crow of victory.

Shepard strode over to the first set of garage doors. "Nihlus, Javik, watch our backs." Activating her omnitool, she set into bypassing the lock. Someone had scrambled the hell out of it, giving her a reason to hope that some of the colonists had made it to safety.

Garrus hefted his particle rifle. "I imagine the geth will be able to take these apart and adapt them for standard power cells." He hung it from his back. "It tore through the Collectors in seconds. I can't wait to see what it can do against the Reaper units."

"Garrus," Nihlus said, gesturing his fratriin over. "Take my position for a minute?" When Garrus replaced Nihlus, the Spectre walked over to lean against the door next to Shepard.

She glanced at him for a split second before returning to her bypass.

"Do you feel it?" he whispered, pressing close.

Shepard frowned, but stayed focused on her work. "The spiders are gone. Whatever the suzerain are, they've completely pulled out of my head. Is that what you mean?"

He shook his head, his mandibles canting a little. "No, although that might be a part of it." He cleared his throat. "I feel something … a pressure … like …. " He grumbled. "I can't explain it. It's not strong or clear enough, but it feels like it's coming from Merol, or the beacon information, anyway." Shaking his head again, he muttered, "There's something about this place. Feels like … maybe I've been here before, or something."

Shepard let out a soft cry of victory as the lock succumbed, then turned to look into Nihlus's eyes, searching for any sign of trouble. She didn't see anything but a deep concern and some confusion. "Keep yourself open, we'll see." She shook her head and reached up to scratch at the back of her head. "The presence from the orbs has pulled out, but otherwise, I feel as jammed as the comms." And she did. Her emotions felt flat … distanced.

His brow plates rose, slanting a little. "Except your alarm keeps going off, doesn't it?"

Sucking in a strong breath, Shepard nodded. "Yeah, except that." She tipped her head toward the garage. "Let's keep moving. Beacon mischief or no, there's a trap waiting ahead of us. Of that I have zero doubt."

"Extraction team to Shepard. First two shuttles are loaded and away."

Shepard slapped the door control. "Excellent news, extraction team. Keep me informed. Shepard, out."

Inside the garage, people stood packed tight, standing room only, every single one frozen, surrounded by the amber and black smoke. They might not have kept the seeker swarms out, but they'd managed to avoid the Collectors and their pods.

"Let's move. We're taking too long to get through here," Shepard said, pushing through the wall to wall colonists. "At this rate, they're going to have ninety-eight percent of the colony."

The door on the far side had been scrambled, but luckily set to release from the inside, and they emerged back into the sun. Shepard cracked her neck, feeling as though she'd just crawled through a mass grave. The sun did nothing to ease back the dank chill, especially when she reached the top of a short ramp and turned into an elaborate complex, Collectors wandering the walkways and gardens, standing inside the buildings as if they belonged.
Shepard dove into cover praying to the sweet baby Jesus that they hadn't spotted her. She waved the others into cover by her side. Using hand gestures, she organized their assault, Martin and Nihlus hitting the small clusters of husks with grenades, then Garrus and Javik—

The sun darkened as if a cloud slipped over its face. Glancing up, Shepard shielded her eyes against the glare of the piercing blue sky, just as cloudless as it had been minutes before. She held out a hand: shadowed. She poked at the sore tooth, but the spiders hadn't returned, so that wasn't messing with her eyesight.

"Is it getting darker, or is it just me?" Martin shifted next to her, glancing toward the sky.

"Spirits." Garrus's soft oath pulled Shepard straight back to the Collectors. She looked to her husband, then followed his stare to a massive bug-shaped metal monster flying in above the buildings. "It took the Normandy to bring down the last one of those we tangled with."

"Oh, shit." She glanced at Martin. "Get ready to use those power cells. We're in the crap up to our teeth now."

"Two more monsters descending from the top floor right rear building," Nihlus whispered. "What in the name of buratrum are they?" His sentence dissolved into a subvocal that lifted the hair on the back of Shepard's neck.

The two lumbering down the stairs from the right each looked as though someone took a few ordinary husks and smooshed them together like plasticine. Was that …? A massive cannon replaced their right arm, the damned thing made out of at least most of another husk. Their heads stuck out at odd angles, a massive sack of … who knew what … pulsating on their backs. For a moment, Shepard had to fight back her breakfast, but then the things both sent some sort of shockwave pounding across the complex toward them. Everything the splash hit froze solid.

*Fan-fucking-tastic, biotic cryo zombies.*

"Move out! Nihlus and Martin, head for the first building on the left. Garrus and Javik, just try to find decent cover, but keep mobile." She switched her Mattock for Ingrid, and launched Droney.

"Nihlus and Martin, use your grenades on those two big bastards. Martin, Garrus, Javik get your particle beams on that massive, flying mother of an Enkindler's ass." She set her incinerate for area effect and sent it searing toward the two lumbering monsters, pulling down some of their armour.

Chaos reigned once more. The massive bug-shaped one slammed down into the ground, letting out some unearthly wail that threw everything in the courtyard onto its ass. Shepard scrambled back up, sending Droney zipping toward the biggest target. Maybe if she could keep the three big ones occupied … .

"Assuming direct control." Even over the cacophony of battle, Shepard heard the boss Collector's voice. One of the drones at the back of the complex rose into the air, writhing as if being torn apart from the inside. Then with an explosive flash, it burst … getting larger, the cracks glowing from within. It flew toward her, landing just the other side of cover.

"You escaped us before, Shepard. Not again," the thing said. "You cannot escape your destiny."

She glanced over the low wall just as Garrus hit it from behind with a concussive shot that blasted away its shields. Striking with incinerate, she rolled down the wall, coming up hard against the wall of the garage. Fuck. Nowhere to go.

"Shepard!" The air sizzled just above her head as Garrus turned the particle beam her way. "Nihlus,
the glowing one has Shepard pinned."

The rumbling thumps of shockwaves cut off any replies, but then flakes of ash drifted down onto Shepard's face.

"You're clear," Garrus hollered. "Get to better cover."

Instead, she crept out a little further and sent another incinerate into the two sack-monsters, tearing down the rest of their armour. "If you've got grenades, hit those two. Armour is down." Taking a long breath, she waited for the grenades to detonate, then darted straight toward the two slow monsters, hoping to deke past them and up to the second level.

She was halfway across the complex's courtyard when the sun all but went out. She stumbled a little, recovering in time to roll out of the path of one of the cryo-shockwaves.

"Come on, Shepard," she said, growling at herself, low and fierce. "Move your ass." She dug in running hard, dodging husks and the smaller Collectors. Strange how they suddenly seemed so damned harmless by comparison.

Almost there, Janey. Almost—

The massive bug crashed down into the stairs above her, the husk heads inside its maw emitting one of its piercing 'scream of the damned' shrieks. It flung Shepard backwards, lifting her right off the metal decking, throwing her four or five metres to land flat on her ass. Crawling backwards, nose and lungs burning with scorched ozone, she raced to put some distance between them as the thing pounced, landing half on top of her. Two blinding purple particle beams erupted from the thing's eyes. Shepard barrel-rolled to her right … beneath the creature. She crashed into a back leg and flipped over, scrambling out from under the thing's ass and straight into a sprint.

She'd made it halfway up the stairs when the Collector monsters suddenly all let out a thunderous chorus of screams, wails, and bellows. The power and … and … sheer agony of it staggered her, but she pushed on. She needed to make it up to the second level to provide cover for her team.

"What the hell?" Martin asked, his tone a disturbing combination of terror, delight, and fury. "What the hell?"

Reaching the top of the stairs, Shepard paused and turned in time to see the bug's particle beams tear both of the sack monsters into ribbons. Collector drones fought off husks, the tech-zombies crawling over each other and their allies like they'd caught some sort of zombie rabies. Her people stood out of cover, mouths hanging open as the Collectors obliterated each other.

The bug ended the battle flopped on its side, twitching. Climbing down a couple of stairs, Shepard finished it off with three shots into it's flickering eye-lights.

"The suzerain have come!" the chia cried.

Shepard looked up, her eyes suddenly too large and too dry for her face. She staggered back toward the building, her heart stopping in her chest, her lungs freezing solid. A ship … at least she thought it was a ship … blocked out the sky in every direction, covering at least the entire compound, but more likely the entire colony. Not even Sovereign had come close to matching the size of the gleaming, crystalline monstrosity hovering over their heads.

"The suzerain have come!"
(A-N: A day late, hopefully not a dollar short. Horizon has taken a strange, strange turn. :D Thanks, as always for reading. To those who leave reviews and comments, thanks so much. Sometimes the encouragement of readers is all that keeps me beating my head against the keyboard. I luv yah!)
Chapter Summary

Nihlus shoved the voice back through the tiny trapdoor that kept Merol at bay, slamming it in the prothean's face: that distraction the last thing he needed. Bad enough that the entire planet felt like a fist poised to drive straight through his chest. The sun shone too brightly, the sky too wide, the rolling hills and light forest far too open. He pressed his back to the metal wall and watched the world go mad around him, a nest of hibernating soluvermus writhing in his gut.

**Soluvermus** - A small (average size 8-12 cms/1 cm diameter), heavily armoured earthworm native to Palaven's more northern and southern regions.

**Ahmu** - (Prothean) Mother

**Bahta** - (Prothean) Father

**Bihni** - (Prothean) Daughter

**Kerashe** - (Prothean) Dearest one

**Suum** - Slaves. Thralls. The races under Leviathan that rose up to depose them.

**Tar'za'liik** - Ancient turian god of storms. His roar was thunder so loud that it was said to drive whoever heard it insane, and his lightning so bright and fierce that it could turn anyone who displeased him to ash at a touch. Those who bore his favour were branded with fire, usually somewhere conspicuous, the brand ghastly, for to be favoured by the gods always bore a price. His was disfigurement.

**56 Days ASR Horizon**

Why Horizon? Of all the planets for the Collectors to target, why the third planet in the Iera system? When they'd landed, he'd watched Shepard to see if anything about the planet triggered her, but she acted closed off, as if something stood between her head and her heart. He supposed that he should have expected as much: she always managed to keep Tashac sealed away. He wished he could keep Merol silent with that level of thoroughness.

*Amani. The planet is Amani; the ball of flame burning in the blue is Jikomuja. The ground beneath our feet screams with rivers of blood. With the blood of—*

Nihlus shoved the voice back through the tiny trapdoor that kept Merol at bay, slamming it in the prothean's face: that distraction the last thing he needed. Bad enough that the entire planet felt like a fist poised to drive straight through his chest. The sun shone too brightly, the sky too wide, the rolling hills and light forest far too open. He pressed his back to the metal wall and watched the world go mad around him, a nest of hibernating *soluvermus* writhing in his gut. Iera's bright fire did nothing to break up the chill, second skin that settled inside his armour the moment he stepped off the shuttle and looked up at the golden leaves hanging heavy and still on the trees.
It's fall, the leaves golden and sweet-smelling at last. So many days painted morning and night with summer colours, each feeling as though the season—the siege—would never end. A sigh drifts behind the words, sending them swirling amidst those leaves. 'If our luck and stealth systems last until winter, the base's geo-thermal grid will allow those sheltered here to slumber undisturbed by time and the last days of our defeat.' Warm hands slide beneath his robe, welcome comfort—

"Nihlus!"

Garrus's shout pulled the Spectre's mind from the thick soup swirling just beneath his skull. He shook his head and brushed a hand over his face, then lifted up just high enough to scan the courtyard. Husks and Collector monsters converged on the general and Javik, who'd managed to circle around to the head of the complex, finding slightly elevated cover.

"Get to Shepard. We'll cover you. Martin, cover his back." The filament of fear threaded through the general's unflappable calm pulled Nihlus the rest of the way back to the warm, fall day. Lifting higher, he saw Shepard trying to bolt around the far side of the complex, making for the second level and a decent sniper perch.

Right, double bolting the lock on Merol's trapdoor, he glanced over at Martin. "You got my back, kid?" he called, turning away to slip down the wall to the nearest door. He pulled one of his last few grenades, set it for an incendiary blast.

"Ready when you are," Martin replied, crouching below the large window and perching his Revenant on the sill.

"Wait for the boom." Nihlus leaned out, lobbing the grenade seven metres away from the door before ducking back and covering his head. "Fire in the hole!" A bright flash of superheated flame consumed everything within its radius, clearing the path. "Kryik crossing the courtyard!" he called then bolted.

Before he covered half of the courtyard, dodging the husks and Collector drones that made it past Martin's assault rifle, Nihlus saw the giant bug thing leap nearly the entire length of the space to cut Shepard off from the stairs. It let out a blast of power, throwing Shepard backwards down the stairs. Damn it! Why couldn't she just stay with the rest of the group instead of trying to draw fire? Trying to protect the rest of them was going to get her killed.

"Shepard!" He dug in, bolting another three metres before being forced back into cover.

Peering out, he watched her scramble away from the monster, but it pounced, just missing impaling her when she rolled aside at the last second. Damn but the woman possessed extraordinary reflexes. When it fired its twin particle beams, she threw herself from flat on her back into a roll that made his bones ache just watching it. She crashed into the back leg, cursed and then leaped out from underneath its chassis and bolted up the stairs.

Spirits, in action hero mode, Shepard was hotter than any being had a right to be. The second after that highly inappropriate thought crossed his mind, realization dawned. He stood in the middle of the complex, no cover, surrounded by enemies, devoid of purpose since Shepard had rescued herself, and bullets ate away at his shields. Priority: cover and fast.

Halfway to the stairs, using the massive bug-thing as partial cover, Nihlus stalled, a strange pressure flooding his senses. It pressed in and down like huge hands trying to crush his skull between them. He stumbled mid-stride, a flailing hand stopping him from going down as it slammed into a planter. He blinked, his vision blurred, his head aching. What in the pits ...?
The Collectors all let out blood-chilling screams, and the constant battering of their firepower against the back of his failing shields disappeared. Refusing to check a gift rifle's firing pin, he pushed on and up the stairs, taking cover at the top next to Shepard, who stood out in the open, an expression of utter bemusement contorting her face. He glanced between the Collectors tearing one another apart and Shepard, who looked up, watching not the battle below but the skies above.

Leaving her to gawk, he turned his assault rifle on the Collectors, finishing off the ones that lie, twitching on the ground. Still, he saw orange light flare in his peripherals as she activated her omnitool and lifted it, running scans on whatever it was that dimmed the skies.

"Dammit." Closing down the scans, she stepped up to the edge of the stairs. "I'm so damned sick of this stupid war getting weirder and more horrifying. Just die. Fucking all of you just do us a favour and kill each other." She lifted Ingrid to punch fist-sized holes through first the cryo-zombie's heads, then the carapace of the bug-shaped one.

The giant bug Collector ended the fight lying on its side, the metal legs twitching, the husks inside still shrieking like souls being dragged down into the pits. Spirits, that noise! It felt as though it sucked the energy straight out of his cells, an aching draw that left him exhausted despite a good twenty metres separating them.

Shepard silenced the cacophony with three shots straight through the thing's ... eyes? Weapons? She hung Ingrid up and turned to face Nihlus, but before she could speak, the chiastyllia did.

"The suzerain have come!"

Instead of acknowledging the gauntlet, she turned to the sky once more, her mouth working as if she possessed so many questions that they fought each other to get out.

"The suzerain have come!" the chia cried again.

Nihlus finally looked up, unwilling to admit that he dreaded acknowledging whatever it was. He agreed with Shepard that they dealt with far too much strange and horrifying as it was. Still, he looked and could have sworn he stared straight into some sort of crystal mirror that blocked the entire sky. It reflected the ground and compound below, but not perfectly ... some of the blue sky showed through. It could almost be considered innocuous, its shape sleek and glistening like a faceted jewel in the heavens. Almost, except for the crushing pressure of malevolence that oozed down from it, invisible twins of the twisted spectres of black the Conduit gave off.

"So many screaming," the chia cried. "So many in pain."

Nihlus shuddered, the muscles to either side of his lower spine seizing. Somewhere in the hidden folds of his brain, he could hear the screams. Billions of tiny voices that hadn't stopped crying out in their agony for millions of cycles.

"Shut it," Shepard said, both her words and the hand that sliced the air, scalpel sharp. "Are the Collector units all dead?" she asked, pivoting on her heel to search inside the building. Inside, frozen colonists stood, knelt, and sprawled, amber and black-smoke statuary standing vigil over the Collector dead. In that same space that heard the enslaved chia calling out, Nihlus felt something moving inside his skull. It didn't step forward, didn't try to take him over as it had on Illium, but present.

Perhaps Merol had slipped his cage once more.

"Giran! My beautiful, fierce bihni ... ." Merol backed toward the door. Panic drove a long knife
through his chest at the thought of leaving his last daughter among the sleeping-dead. "Come with us, kerashe. You should be with your ahmu and I."

She smiled and stepped into his embrace, brushing her kepala along his. "You have one another and Attit. These people need me, you do not. His last daughter left a strong imprint of love and devotion, then stepped back. "When you’ve hidden the Conduit, return and wake me. We’ll be together again."

"Shepard," Garrus called. "You and Nihlus all right over there?"

"Yeah, fine, big guy. Just sweeping the upper level. On our way back down in a second, and we've got a colony to save." Shepard's voice cracked a little. She twisted her neck until the vertebrae snapped like a series of dry twigs. Perhaps she didn't have Tashac as well contained as he imagined. Still, she pushed on, strong, angry, and determined. "Assault team, let's keep moving. Meet me at the gate at the back of the compound," she called, her fingers resting over her radio.

"Science team, everyone all right?" After a second, she nodded. "Excellent. S&R team, report in?"

Even as she spoke, Shepard moved with purpose, her weapon nestled in the crook of her arm. He caught up with her as she signed off with Lt. Cortez.

"Looks like it didn't damage anyone but the Reapers." She nodded toward the door out, but then stopped and lifted a hand to press against his cheek. For a second, as their eyes met, the captain stepped back in favour of the dilan. "You're all right?"

Nihlus pressed his hand over hers, the contact an anchor that helped contain the pressure in his head. "It felt like someone was crushing my head for a couple of minutes, but it's fine now … just feel like someone's watching from inside my own skull." He sighed and waggled his head a little. "Being here has Merol coming out of his skin as well."

"No," the gauntlet said, the voice of the chia strident. "Suzerain don't save; they enslave. They came for a reason, but it was not to save the humans living on this planet. They would sacrifice every human, every turian … every life to reclaim their former glory."

"Of course they would." Shepard dropped his hand.

Nihlus stepped up beside her. "So, what are we looking at? What is that thing overhead?"

"During the great insurrection, the suum became far more powerful than the suzerain could have imagined. The most advanced races formed a brotherhood with artificial life, and upgraded themselves until they became capable of building great ships and constructing mighty weapons. They fought the suzerain to the brink of defeat." The chiastyllia let out another wail, stilling even as Nihlus saw Shepard's jaw clench. "Then the suzerain discovered the chia," the gauntlet continued, calm once more. "Their will formed the people into terrible, massive weapons of war like the one above. Only through using the people to enhance their power of subversion and domination did they survive the war and crush the suum rebellion."
"So, that thing up there is what?" Shepard asked without glancing down. She palmed the next door and jogged through, speeding up. A long, furious-sounding sigh roared in her throat as she exhaled. "Is it some sort of biotic amplifier?"

"Yes, a vehicle designed to render a system helpless and cut off. Three of them together can destroy every form of resistance on a planet with a single command."

Nihlus felt his gut drop into his boots. He took a breath to ask the obvious, but Shepard beat him to the punch.

"Can they kill Reapers with those dreadnoughts?" They emerged outside at front of the compound, but on the opposite side, and Shepard stopped to look down at the chia when they remained silent. "Can they?" She lifted the gauntlet, once again making as if to leave them behind. Her tone and actions began to feel brittle, on the edge of turning into just slamming her way through everything like a mako through a thresher maw.

Not that he blamed her as he looked back up at the dreadnought just sitting overhead. How were they supposed to fight that thing if it came down to it?

"Damn it, answer me. Can that monstrosity kill a Reaper?" Fury snapped and licked around her like flame, and he opened his mouth to suggest that she let him deal with the chia.

Then the gauntlet answered, "Yes, and they have in the past, but they will not unless one of their kind is threatened. They do not wish the servants destroyed, they wish them to return to their duties in an empire restored. Do not consider the suzerain as potential allies, they are a threat."

"So, they're not above killing all of us if they see us as challenging them?" Nihlus asked. He gripped Shepard's shoulder, supportive but a slight increase in pressure and twitch of a brow plate asked, was she okay?

Shepard nodded as the chia answered, "They have allowed the Reapers to destroy all advanced life many thousands of times over millions of cycles. They have done this because better that than allow the Reapers to discover the answer to the question and discover the limitless possibilities of imagination and connection. Better trillions dead than allowing their servant to attain true freedom."

Shepard's nod amounted to nothing more than a faint twitch, but her jaw relaxed. He released her. Letting out a long, rough breath, Shepard led the way through the middle of the compound to where the others waited, everyone casting nervous glances toward the sky.

They passed into shade beneath the building, and Nihlus straightened, not realizing that he'd been ducking until his spine protested. The rest of the team seemed to feel the same pressure, not that he blamed anyone for being skittish with a massive doom machine made up of barely known, let alone understood, aliens sitting over their heads.

Shepard strode over to the gate and began bypassing it, Nihlus able to see her mind working faster than the omnitool. She glanced back at him and then Garrus. "Okay, they told me that the Reapers have discovered the means to answer the question. They told you that as well."

"And that they're building the Catalyst. They said that—" Once again, Nihlus's gut took a belly flop into icy water. "Spirits, the Catalyst … they're building it out of colonists … it's another Reaper … a Reaper that answers the question." He saw the realization dawn in Shepard's eyes as well.
"A Reaper with a soul," she agreed, her whisper pressed flat, a barely vocalized thought.

"Shit, the colonists!" She brought up the manual interface, fingers flying through the commands, the gate relenting to her within seconds. It opened to reveal a large yard filled with dead Collectors and husks in all their forms.

*The crackle of static over their radios stopped the small party just inside the bay that housed the frigate that would become their home until the Reapers returned to dark space. "Commander Jacar ... Ahmu, Bahta ... the base is under attack! Get clear!" Giran's voice rose harsh and furious over the sounds of battle.*

"Giran!" Tashac called, beating Merol to the radio. "We're returning to your side, kerashke. We can help hold the base."

"The base is overrun." Their last daughter paused before she said, "I love you all." Soft tones hardened. "Attit, get our parents clear!"

The roar of distant explosions yanked Nihlus from the memory, rough claws spinning him around to stare as the Collector ship began to blow up from the inside. "What in the pits?" he said, the words a thin whisper, disbelief rooting him for a half-second despite the chia's warnings. When it broke, he bolted toward the spaceport, strong hands stopping him as he passed between Shepard and Garrus.

"Nihlus, no," the general said, his expression as miserable and furious as Nihlus felt. "There's nothing we can do. It's too late."

"The suzerain are controlling the Collectors?" Shepard asked, her demand hissing between clenched teeth even as she pulled him back toward the gate. "They're making them destroy their own ship?"

"To deprive the Reapers of their building materials," the chia replied, "yes."

"How can they ...? Can we stop them? They can kill the Collectors, and we can get the people out." She turned to Garrus and then to him, panic and imagination spinning alternatives so quickly that he could see the screens flipping.

"They will not risk another Collector vessel returning to salvage the vessel and remaining colonists."

The entire skin of the Collector ship began to crack, fires erupting through the fissures. "Everyone through the gate, get into cover!" Shepard ordered, turning to shove Martin back the way they'd come before she and Garrus ran, arms urging one another on.

"No! You don't need to— They're innocent—"

"Nihlus?" Shepard called, slowing and turning to wait for him.

No, his anger couldn't be allowed to put Shepard in danger. "Right behind you." Nihlus tossed Javik through the gate with one massive heave when the Prothean just stared at the corrupted vessel, a satisfied sneer celebrating its destruction.

Then the explosions reached the drive core, announced by a blinding flash followed by *Tar'za'liik's* roar. The shockwave flicked Nihlus into the air with all the effort of someone brushing an insect from their clothing. He tucked, rolling as he hit, then scrambled behind cover next to Shepard and Martin.
Debris, shrapnel and dust pelted their cover, shredding the thin metal of the prefabs in the compound. When the wind and cacophony died down, Nihlus reached up, digging the heels of his hands into his aural canals, the ringing in his head worthy of the storm god's wrath. Shepard stirred next to him, pushing herself up, her face frozen in a rictus of a fury that matched the fire raging in Nihlus's heart.

He leaped to his feet, entire body screaming in protest. "You bastards!" he shouted, railing against the impassive monster in the sky. A hand rested on his arm, turning him to face Shepard. Tears streaked the filth on her face, but he knew they merely reflected the impotent fury burning at her core. Shepard needed to rescue everyone, and it never failed to carve huge gashes in her heart when she couldn't.

"All hands, converge on the periphery of the explosion site," she said, shouting into her radio. "Miranda, you're in charge of search and rescue efforts. Get Dr. Eis down here to help Chakwas and Mordin. We could use Ms. Chambers and Vincent as well. All hands on deck. This is going to be a hell of a mess."

"Shepard … ." Nihlus didn't continue but tipped his head up at the dreadnought poised overhead and cocked a brow plate. Did they need to herd more drellak into the slaughter yard if the suzerain decided to obliterate the planet's population? She nodded, but continued, calling down all hands and shuttles to aid with the wounded.

"Whatever you and the docs need, get it, understood?" she said into her radio as she twisted a bandage around her hand, applying pressure to a gash across her palm. Nihlus held his hand out, giving it two, emphatic shakes when she refused to relinquish it. She grumbled a little as she placed it in his talons and he unwound her sloppy work.

"Me?" she continued with Lawson. "I'm taking the assault squad in to see if there are any survivors, start putting out fires, whatever we can do." A sharp breath cut through what he felt sure was yet another case of Miranda's insubordination. "Opinion noted. Shepard out." The second she closed the channel, Shepard's eyes focused past him, though she hissed a little as he peeled off her glove. He winced at the depth of the slice, but merely lifted a foot onto a piece of rubble and laid her hand palm up across his thigh.

Shepard gestured with her other hand as she gave orders, moving enough to make cleaning the wound an exercise in frustration. "Garrus, Javik … see if you can find fire extinguishers and stockpile them at the back gate. Martin, go back to the garage. If the people are out of stasis, send twenty or so skilled volunteers our way, get the rest to Miranda."

His turn. A laser stare bore into the side of his head as he turned his attention to dressing her wound. "I wasn't questioning you," he said without her needing to speak. Her intensity began to burn. "Betting that they won't take out the settlement because we're here is a gamble, that's all."

A sigh, steam hissing through a cracked valve, broke from her lips, and she nodded. "I know, but what's the alternative? Sit here and leave the colony to burn?"

Nihlus smeared a thick layer of medigel across her palm, and wrapped the hand tight, so her glove would slide back over it. He hesitated, pretty sure even with the medigel, she needed the wound sealed properly, but then just passed her the glove. She wouldn't stay still long enough for healing until after she'd secured the colony.

"Thanks, cikabeknai," Shepard said, grabbing hold of his yoke and pulling him down for a quick kiss. She moved to pull away, but he grabbed hold of her upper arms and held her, their brows touching.
"We'll do everything we can, haksaya kubenar," he said, sliding a thick layer of calming subvocals under the words. He breathed her in, drawing as much strength as he hoped he gave, the hint of jasmine and spice caressing his olfactory and pheromone receptors and slowing the beat of his heart. "Everything we can. Right?"

Shepard took a breath and pressed into the contact for a second. "Right." Another soft press of lips against the rigid plate of his mouth and she pulled away, turning toward the sound of running feet.

Martin raced around the corner from the garage, an orderly double line of colonists right behind him. "I found your volunteers." He stopped and looked back at the group with a respectful sort of pride. "They worked on the colony's emergency and fire brigade or at the spaceport, so even come complete with hazmat gear."

Shepard grinned, the first real smile Nihlus had seen on her face since they landed. "Excellent work, Instructor Weaver." She nodded to the colonists, the mantle of leader easing some of the brittleness as it settled onto those deceptively narrow shoulders. "Thank you for volunteering. I've got doctors, medics, and bodies on their way, but the faster we get into the site and start disaster control protocols, the better."

An older man in red overalls stepped forward. "Chief Randall McQuire, ma'am. I was the head of the Emergency Management department at the spaceport." He looked around, his entire body sagging for a moment before he straightened. "Most of my people are missing, but we need to get in there and see if the fire suppression systems are intact. The land is dry as a bone this time of year. We could lose the entire colony."

Nihlus glanced at Shepard, seeing his relief mirrored there. He didn't have the first clue about fighting a fire of that magnitude.

"Then we'll gladly leave that to your people, Chief," Shepard replied. "However, if you need help, shout. We'll get you whatever you need."

Nihlus and Shepard spun in sync, hearing footsteps running up from the ruined compound the other side of the gate. Garrus and Javik both wore helmets, and judging by the rasp in his voice, Garrus had done some choking on smoke before giving in.

"It's bad back there, Shepard," he said, cutting an arc over his shoulder with his thumb. "But we found twenty or so emergency kits, fire extinguishers, pry bars. They're all piled away from the fires, just this side of the entrance to the landing field."

Nihlus packed down the anger. He couldn't do anything about the suzerain in their dreadnought, but trying to save their victims … that formed a task he could sink his teeth into.

"Excellent." Shepard turned to the Emergency Chief. "Let us know when the area is safe to start searching for survivors, Ch—"

Movement at the far end of the complex caught Nihlus's attention as Shepard's mouth snapped shut, the pair of them turning toward the battered figure limping toward them.

"Skipper?"

As one, the rest of the squad spun toward the voice, their weapons lifting to face the new threat. For a moment, Nihlus just stared at the woman. Williams stumbled to a halt, leaning against the bumper of a truck, blood running down her face and splashed all over her pink and white armour.

"Ash!" Shepard lowered her Mattock and raced to the Marine's side, Nihlus right behind her. Each
taking a side, they wrapped an arm around Ash's back, supporting her even as her knees buckled. "Nihlus, take her," Shepard ordered, helping him lift the woman into a cradle carry. "Got her?"

He nodded, and Shepard hung up her gun, bringing up her omnitool to scan the Marine. "Sweet baby Jesus, Ash, you're beaten to crap." The captain spun, searching the debris field, then lifted her hand, beckoning to the lieutenant even as they made their way to the garage. "Sparky are you close to my signal? Ashley needs medical attention. We need you and the docs here now!"

They made it back through the gate before Alenko raced around the corner, a med kit slung over his shoulder, omnitool active. "Ashley?" Kaidan called as he matched strides with Nihlus, scanning her even as they moved. "What are you doing here?"

The chief's head wobbled a little as she lifted it from Nihlus's chest. "Hey, LT. Well, you know … just living the dream." A thick, wet cough chased her brittle chuckle from her chest.

"You're here keeping an eye on the colony for Cerberus?" Nihlus asked. He took a long step over a twisted piece of prefab, the jarring pulling a thin moan from the chief.

She nodded. "Good thing, huh?" Her head made a soft, hollow thock as it dropped back against his armour. "I did a bang up job saving all these people." She shook her head, just a faint tremor to either side and then closed her eyes.

"Hey," Nihlus said, understanding and empathy lending steel to the word. When she didn't open her eyes, he gave the soldier a slight squeeze. "Hey, Williams." With a stubborn reluctance that tugged at his mandibles, she cracked one eye to glare at him. "There wasn't anything any of us could do against that dreadnought, but we're here because you were here. If you hadn't been sent to check in so regularly, it could have been days before anyone found out."

"Cold succor, Spectre," she said, the grumble thick and wet, blood bubbling inside her lungs.

"It is what it is, Williams. Sometimes the galaxy just throws handfuls of *tarc* at you, and the only thing you can do is hose down and carry on." He nodded toward Shepard who tossed rubble, spurred by worry and rage to feats of freakish strength as she dug a table out of a pile of ruin. Her bellows roared over the sound of rescue crews as she called for Chakwas or Mordin.

"Shepard! Ease up!" Garrus raced over and dug in, no doubt trying to help to spare her a week of chiropractic treatments.

"What do you think she's telling herself?" he asked, leaning down so only Ashley would hear him. "Don't you think she's furious and feeling helpless?"

Ash looked over at the captain. "She always did take every bullet fired at the squad like a shotgun to the gut." Sucking in a deep breath, she nodded. "Okay, I get it, Spectre." She grinned, a sharp, toothy expression. "You've been taking Shepard lessons." A shrug lifted one shoulder. "You need to work on getting some grit and volume, though. When Shepard tells you off, she leaves abrasions that bleed for a couple of hours."

He chuckled, obeying Shepard's waved summons to lay Ashley down on the cleared table. "Yeah, I don't think anyone will knock her off that throne."

"Where are you hurt?" Shepard demanded, helping Kaidan peel off the Marine's armour, searching her for wounds. "The doc is on her way. She and Sparky will set you right." She winced, finding a hunk of shrapnel embedded just about Ashley's hip. "What's the situation, Ash?" she asked, continuing to remove armour. "We're not finding nearly enough colonists—dead or alive—for a
Nihlus's hand reached out to grip Shepard's wrist, just a quick squeeze to silently communicate the worry that burned at the base of his throat. One glance from Shepard halted it before it made contact.

'I'm fine. Don't coddle me,' snapped from that pointed glare, returning his talons to removing the chief's armour.

"We found a huge series of tunnels and what looks like a hangar complex buried under the hills on the north end of the colony," the chief reported, the words sluggish and punctuated with sloppy coughs that splashed her lips and chin with blood. "As soon as that thing appeared, we evac'd as many as we could."

Kaidan placed a wadded up canvas tarp under Ashley's head. "That's enough talk, Ash. Just lay here and let me look after you, okay?"

"You're in good hands," Shepard said, before pressing a hand against Ashley's cheek and then Kaidan's. "Good man, Sparky." She looked up into Nihlus's eyes, holding his stare with one haunted by the memories that kept flashing through his mind.

"The Senarium's base," he whispered, reaching out to take her hand as she rounded the head of the table. She passed by him to stare to the north, past the belching smoke of the fires.

She squeezed his hand, pulling it tight against her side, her voice small and lost as she replied, "Giran."

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**Senarium** - The division of the Prothean government's science branch that was tasked with ensuring that the five major keys to dark space were stolen and hidden.

(A-N: Heyas. Sorry if this chapter is rougher than usual. At least my beta assured me it didn't suck. :D So if it does, address all angry letters to her. :D *runs and hides from Vy* Lots of important stuff in this one, and the next, but I've been sick, and had two computers die in a week, so I'm off my game a little and my fingers are really confused by three different keyboards. Hopefully I can get 147 out faster than this one. Sorry for the wait. All the love.)

(A-N-BETA: NO ANGRY LETTERS! NO! ~ Vy) Sometimes betas having edit access gets abused, that's all I'm sayin'.

Unlike the other prothean ruins she'd walked through, even Ilos, the silence and emptiness of those corridors bled, a constant drip that she felt on the back of her neck and in the center of her chest. Because, unlike those other ruins, she remembered what those corridors sounded like filled with the bustle of life: the laughter of children, the intellectual arguments, the whispered affections. She remembered it as a living organism, some great and precious creature that now lay dead and buried, its corpse formed of nothing but dust and regret.

**Dahtaric** - The highest rank of the Prothean Scientific Authority

**Regulikar**: The Prothean central government.

**Morumplacus** - Restless spirit, undead, ghoul. From ancient turian folklore. The souls of those slain by dishonourable means were believed to wander after death to exact justice. They were believed to torment the living by taking the form of whatever the victim feared most.

**Arate** - Prothean rank comparable to captain

**Binav** - Prothean rank comparable to private

**59 Days ASR Horizon**

The tunnels leading to the underground prothean base teemed with life and noise, Horizon's survivors walking that thin line between grief for the lost and relief at their own survival. Kind words and busy work soothed the former amidst the excited, nervous chatter of the latter. To Shepard's ears, the noise, even the grief, amounted to life, and it eased the weight of days of silence and crackling flame … of the roar of fire suppression equipment and agonized moans … of screams and fists hammering against the lids of pods even as the fires cooked the poor bastards trapped inside.

Yes, life—even in all its shit, tear, and blood-stained horror—lightened the impossible burden of the past three days, and she felt its absence keenly as the walls closed around her, pressing tighter with every step that carried her down into the *Senarium* base. Unlike the other prothean ruins she'd walked through, even Ilos, the silence and emptiness of those corridors bled, a constant drip that she felt on the back of her neck and in the center of her chest. Because, unlike those other ruins, she remembered what those corridors sounded like filled with the bustle of life: the laughter of children, the intellectual arguments, the whispered affections. She remembered it as a living organism, some great and precious creature that now lay dead and buried, its corpse formed of nothing but dust and regret.

"Vindication?" Shepard called, walking up to the closest computer access point. She pressed her hand to the interface. "Confirm and recognize imprint of Commander Tashac Jacar." When the base's VI didn't answer, she nodded, not expecting any different. Indoctrination tainted Tashac's imprint and her own. "Nihlus?" She glanced back, a weary smile brushing her swollen, still-
bleeding face when he nodded and stepped up. Heels dragging through the thick dust and debris on the featureless, grey floor, Shepard backed up to give him access to the panel.

The Spectre's hand ghosted over her chin as he stepped past, the soft, fleeting touch comforting. He peeled off his glove and pressed his talons to the interface. "Vindication, recognize imprint of Dahtaric Merol Natil, and provide access to base systems."

As Shepard waited for the VI to respond, each breath took more effort to draw in and did less to feed her body. Ten seconds ticked over into twenty and then thirty. She activated her omnitool, scanning the air once more to be sure that carbon dioxide or worse hadn't settled close to the floor. Oxygen levels read within normal range, even richer than Earth norm.

It's all in your head, Janey. You're just overtired and starting to hallucinate a little.

Overtired, she couldn't argue with. For three days, she'd searched the wreckage of the Collector ship, pausing to sleep for a few hours only when Nihlus or Garrus witnessed her falling over, or she fell asleep sitting or leaning somewhere while she paused to eat or drink. Even then, she'd only agreed to lie down if they did as well. Needless to say between the three of them, the levels of sheer stubbornness ensured they only slept for two or three hours at a time. The rest of the time, they ran off stims and caffeine.

Finally, she'd quite literally fallen asleep on her feet and fell forward, bashing her face on a piece of wreckage, thus the swollen, split lip. Oddly enough, no matter how hard she tried to convince Garrus and Nihlus that she was fine, the fountain of blood pouring down her chin had made them somewhat intransigent on the whole 'seeing the doc and getting some sleep' issue.

By the time she got to the point of standing there, waiting for the base's VI to respond to one of them, Shepard couldn't make the 'I'm all right' claim any longer. Her face felt as if someone sculpted it from putty, the entire thing numb and cold except her lip. Well, and her eyelids. They felt lined with sandpaper. Not to mention that, judging by the crunching sounds and pain emanating from her joints, some bastard had dumped handfuls of ground glass into them.

All in all, Horizon had quickly lost any tiny amount of appeal it once held.

A minute ticked over into two. "Sweet baby Jesus, if I stand here any longer, I'm going to grow roots and turn into the glowing tree of the Enkindlers' blessed firmament. Then, once every six years, the hanar will festoon my branches with flower garlands and gather around me to dance and throw small, shucked clams and half-eaten minnows at one another." She shuddered. "Well, at least, until someone accidentally starts the mating rituals, then things will get crazy … and nobody wants that."

She bit down on the inside corner of her bottom lip as both Nihlus and Garrus gaped at her, their brow plates canted at the same angle, their mandibles doing little, helpless flails of incredulity. She flinched as her wound complained, releasing her lip but waiting for them to comment. Before they could say anything, the VI responded.


Impatience born of exhaustion stabbed needles into Shepard's spine, sending her back to the interface rather than waiting as requested. They needed to assess the damage to the base, see if anything could be salvaged, particularly information, and then get the hell off Horizon. The ground under her feet felt as though it burned through her boots, poisoned by the threat hanging over their
heads, the thousands upon thousands of dead and wounded, even the base itself.

"According to scans," Vindication stated, "20,458,319 days have passed since my program was deactivated. Base structure remains 97% intact. Damage is restricted to the north and east entrance tunnels where the exterior of the base was compromised."

Shepard's hope began to dissolve when the VI didn't mention the souls they'd left to sleep within the base. "And the personnel? Did any make it to their sleeper pods?" Weariness pressed down, bowing her shoulders as it pulled her down into a thick layer of dry quicksand.

"Negative," Vindication replied. "Enemy forces penetrated the base prior to the security systems activating the lock down. Arate Giran Jacar called all personnel to the defense lines while the neutron purge was primed and detonated. As soon as the base defenses locked down, Arate Jacar ordered the purge. All lifesigns within the base ceased .672 setixs after detonation."

Shepard reached out a hand, buttressing herself against the wall as the coffin lid slammed down on the base, sucking the air from her lungs. Tashac remained silent in her cell despite the flood of grief that rushed out under the door. Reaching out, Shepard took Nihlus's hand, squeezing his talons when she felt them trembling. He'd never managed—nor even particularly wanted to—control his passenger very well. Nihlus nodded and tugged free of her grip to replace his glove.

"All right," Shepard said, declaring the brief mourning period at an end as she pushed off the wall. "Vindication, please release the seal on this door and on all interior doors. Leave all exterior entrances locked down except for the south." She pressed her hand to the interface. "Also, sync your systems to our mobile devices, and provide a map to the important hubs within the base. Continue your projection as your emitters allow throughout the base."

"Confirmed."

Shepard punched the door control the moment the lock indicated that the seal was disengaged. A map appeared on her omnitool, the computer core and labs all indicated. At the far end of the base the map showed a series of elevator shafts that dropped … . "This can't be right," she said, a soft mutter of bewilderment. She held the map out so Garrus and Nihlus could see it. "This says, they've got a series of cargo elevators that go down nearly five klicks into a network of huge labs or bays … or something. There's an entire other base down there, living quarters, the works … but it's marked as nothing being there."

"You don't engineer something that massive unless you need it," Nihlus agreed. The scowl that had settled onto his face a couple of days before deepened, his gaze darkening enough that she guessed Merol's involvement. A soft growl rumbled through his subvocals. "They were hiding something down there."

Shepard nodded and held his stare despite his trying to duck hers, as if he didn't want to admit to being locked out of Merol's memories. She reached out to press her hand against his chest. "This place … " She looked around the hangar stretching out before them, the cement barren but for the dust, disturbed here and there by insect tracks. "... it's a blank in my head. Tashac usually has something to offer me, but other than evacuating and leaving Giran … everything else is locked down."

He pressed his hand over hers. "Merol as well." Taking a deep breath, he let out another growling sigh. "Whatever is down there, they don't want anyone knowing about it."

"Yeah," she agreed. "Maybe not even the two of us." That thought sent a jolt of dread through her unlike anything she'd felt since facing down Nazara on Virmire and realizing that the damned thing
had been stalling in order to trap them. Remembering how well that fuck up had turned out for them ... well, she needed to proceed with previously unmatched caution.

"If we go through everything on this map, we're going to be here a couple more days," Garrus said, pressing up behind her left shoulder. "Want me to call the science team in? Now that the colonists are secure, Mordin and Miranda could take the computer core." A heavy hand rested on the back of her neck, gentle talons massaging the base of her skull, easing the tension sending splinters of pain jetting up into her head. "If you can get Javik clearance, he and Martin could go through with them."

Shepard leaned back into him a little, glad for his broader view. She nodded and reached up to swipe at her bottom lip, the damned thing still allowing spit to escape from nearly everywhere. Pressing her fingertips to her aural implant, she opened the team channel.

"Operative Lawson, status report."

"We've got the colonists settled into the tunnels. Medical facilities are up and running. We located a doctor and three nurses among the colonists, and Lt. Cortez is retrieving four doctors and a dozen nursing personnel from other settlements. The camp here should be able to take care of their own as soon as the medical team arrives."

Shepard nodded, giving the operative credit for organizational skills second to none. "Excellent news. If the science team can leave, we need your help go through the Senarium base. There's too much here for us to do alone. I'm going to make sure Javik has clearance to get you access, and I'll send you the map to the computer core and the main labs. Martin and Sparky both have tech savvy, so they'll be able to help as well as provide security."

"Understood, Captain. I'll have the team to your current position within ten minutes."

"Excellent, Javik and Martin will be waiting. Shepard, out." The captain glanced over at Javik even as she spoke to Vindication. "Vin, recognize Commander Javik's imprint and allow him access to all base systems." She nodded to the prothean commander. "You know the drill, just touch the interface."

Giving her a stiff nod, Javik approached the terminal and pressed his hand to it.

"Commander Javik recognized as possessing Regulikar Black Level security clearance. Access to Senarium systems granted."

Shepard met the prothean's haughty stare, nonplussed by his clearance. He'd been left behind to rebuild the empire, after all. He'd need to be able to access systems galaxy wide. "Get the team through the computers as quickly as possible," she told him. "If they were working on anything here that might help us in fighting the Collectors or Reapers, we need to know about it."

She turned to Garrus and Nihlus. "Let's go check out this blacked-out section of nothing down here at the bottom of the base." A bitter laugh escaped as she shook her head. "Nothing says hiding something like a big 'nothing to see here' sticker plastered over a spot on the map."

Garrus reached around her to tap the sync control on her tool, sending the map to his visor. "Nothing says walking into something that's going to try to kill us—"

"Or scare the tarc out of us," Nihlus interjected, activating his omnitool to grab the map as well.

"... or scare the tarc out of us like blacked-out sections of secret bases," Garrus finished, flicking his mandibles at his fratrin. He turned a slow circle, then nodded toward a glowing control on the
Shepard nodded for them to go ahead and turned to Javik and Martin. "Stay in touch, and Javik, keep an eye on Miranda. I don't trust her not to hide some of her finds."

The prothean merely nodded, but Shepard knew that he maintained his professional front with Cerberus only out of respect for her via her link to Tashac. He wouldn't let Miranda do anything that would hurt the war effort.

"Any orders for me, Shepard?" Martin asked, a cocky but exhausted grin tugging at one corner of his mouth.

Turning to follow her torins across the hangar, Shepard called back, "This planet breeds really huge insects. Make sure no one gets carried off." A wide grin answered his groan.

"You going to be okay?" Nihlus asked as she stopped at the threshold to the base.

Shepard nodded, twisting a little to step between them. "Dying seems to have abolished a lot of my fears." She shuddered at the thought of diving that deep beneath the surface with only one way back up, but then shoved her shoulders together. "None of the elevators are longer than 500 metres, and there are living areas and labs on the way to provide some breathing room. I'll be fine."

They crossed the base, Merol and Tashac imparting a self of familiarity that helped them navigate the labyrinth, although the sense of loss that greeted all the empty labs and dark sleeper pods made Shepard wish that they'd be forced to use the map.

She paused for a half breath outside the first of the elevators. The door control remained stubbornly locked down. Glancing over at the VI, Shepard shrugged and said, "What's the deal here, Vin?"

"Locks in this section require individual ID and indoctrination verification imprint," it supplied.

"Right, so super top secret." Shepard blew a noisy breath out her nose. "Not that it's unexpected, but certainly not comforting." Without thinking about it, she pressed her hand to the interface.

"Imprint accepted," Vin replied and the doors opened.

Shepard waited for the other two to enter so that she'd be standing at the exit, old habits dying hard. Still, as the doors shut in front of her, her heartbeat remained steady. Nice. She might even get used to her new lack of phobias. Stepping back, she pushed into Garrus's space a little. Although she didn't think she'd ever tell the big guy it was okay to turn the lights all the way off. She loved that little act of caretaker-ey-ness.

"Shepard," Garrus said. In her peripherals, Nihlus turned in tandem to face the general, something in Garrus's tone hooking them both. The general's mandibles raised and spread as he lifted a hand to cup Shepard's ear. "Did you hear what the VI said when he recognized Tashac and Merol's imprints? Do you realize, this elevator just opened at Tashac's imprint?"

Again, out of the corner of her eye, Shepard saw Nihlus match her, this time frown for frown. What had Vin said? Something about recognizing the unindoctrinated imprints of Tashac and Merol. Oh! She turned to look at one, then the other. "Unindoctrinated imprints," she whispered. Hope flipped inside her chest like a fish hauled up onto the rocks. "And me too."

Shepard nodded then, her frown fixed in place, but thoughtful. "I assumed Vin meant that it sensed them both in Nihlus." Intense, confused, and hopeful, she looked from Garrus to meet Nihlus's stare, then back. "He's always been our source of indoctrination-free imprints."
"Merol's, yes, but not Tashac's," Garrus countered. "On Ilos, Vigil activated the elevator and comms based on Merol's clean imprint." Talons clamping down on Shepard's shoulders, Garrus looked to Nihlus for confirmation.

A surge of relief burst through Shepard's dread as she registered the notion that whatever had been done to herself and Tashac could be reversed or hidden completely, but then the implications began to register, turning felicity to ash. "Well, it's got the be the suzerain since they're hanging over our heads." She bit down on the inside corner of her bottom lip, the old habit eliciting a soft curse. "So, they can do something to either completely reverse or mask Reaper indoctrination," she said, "but they haven't bothered until now." Numb fingers reached up to scratch at the scar on the back of her head. "And they've withdrawn from my mind completely for the first time since the Citadel. So, why now?"

Shepard closed her eyes and let her head loll back against her armour, but then the elevator doors opened, depositing them on the first sublevel. That floor consisted merely of a security station to pass through on the way to the next elevator. Spinning on her heel, Shepard turned to lead them through. "Whatever is down here," she said as the light dawned, her words clipped. "Whatever it is, they want to get me close to it, and they know that I couldn't get access with even the slightest trace of indoctrination."

A sudden flush of rage snapped her straight and stiff. "Who gives a shit?" she hollered, throwing her arms up, lashing out at the universe. "Seriously? I am so done with playing this game as a pawn." She palmed the interface. "With our luck, we'll find five thousand protheans down here, and they'll try to mow over us and run the war too."

As the second elevator swept them down another half-kilometre into Horizon's crust, a storm formed of converging fronts of sardonic amusement, anger, dread, and defeat began to boil in Shepard's gut. Every day the face of the war shifted, less about digging in and whittling down an impossibly strong enemy through applied ingenuity, tactics, and guts, becoming more and more about being shuffled around, the most current pieces on the board in an ancient game.

The first she could win ... maybe. The second? They needed to take out the Collectors, which she felt certain they'd be allowed to do, but then came the Reapers. The fact that the suzerain and their impossible dreadnoughts didn't want their servants killed, just hobbled … that posed a very real problem. Trying to take out the dreadnoughts built around the ancient monsters? She let out a grumble that felt a lot like a retch. How in the name of the Enkindlers' glowing grabass was she supposed to pull that off?

Suddenly, being the glowing tree at the center of a hanar orgy sounded like the best of her options, because no matter which side managed to succeed in indoctrinating and using the galaxy's population, the pawns ended up screwed.

The elevator opened onto the second sublevel: housing primarily. She swept down the hundred-metre-long corridor, quickly palming the interface to open the elevator. Unlike the others, the door didn't immediately slide open, so it had to be called. She frowned, wondering if that meant anything, but then Nihlus broke through the angry flurry of her thoughts.

"The Collectors came for the people," Nihlus said, jogging up to Shepard. Garrus followed just behind the Spectre, his mandibles pulled in tight, his stare locked on Shepard and concerned. Nihlus stopped next to her and shook his head. "So, the Collectors came to harvest the colonists, but the suzerain didn't come here for the people."

"No. They didn't come for the Collectors either," Shepard agreed. "Taking them out was just about getting them out of our way. If it really was about stopping the bastards, they would have interfered
with the other colony abductions. They've got the means, just not the will." She turned when the door opened and stepped aside to allow them to enter. Following them in, she pressed her back to the wall and looked up into Nihlus's eyes, her gaze fixed inward. "This place is the reason they came. This place and the fact that we're here."

"They paved the way to get you both in here," Garrus said, his subvocals uneasy enough that the hair along the back of her neck prickled. "But they can't control either of you, not having withdrawn their presence completely from your minds." His mandibles flicked in a tight smile. "Not that they could even before, you're both so stubborn. So why?"

Shepard let out a long breath and met the general's eyes, the thickness of her tone answering his worry. "I can't even begin to guess, but keep your eyes open, Callor. If either of us starts acting strangely …." She left the rest of that thought unsaid, but he nodded.

The elevator chimed, the door opening behind her, but before she could even get turned around, the power died, plunging them into absolute darkness.

"Fuck!" She yelped the curse as her heart jumped into her throat. Similar oaths from either side told her that her torins' pulse rates had hit FTL right along with hers. Shepard turned on the flashlight attached to her Mattock. "Vin? You still there?" she called. "Why did we lose power?" Garrus and Nihlus's flashlights filled the carriage with light, allowing her to release the breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"Investigating," the VI answered. "Please stand by."

"Please stand by," Shepard grumbled. "Not like we have much choice." Wincing a little, she turned to look out the open door. A wide corridor opened before them, the deck plating reflecting blue into the broad expanse of black. Opening the map on her omnitool, Shepard ventured out, something telling her that Horizon's prize awaited them on sublevel three.

Moving silently, Shepard took a handful of steps straight ahead, but then stopped. "I hear breathing," she whispered. "There are …" She closed her eyes and reached up to turn up her aural implants, listening to the movement of the air out in the darkness. "… three or four other people within twenty metres." She returned her implants to default and gripped her Mattock in both hands, the flashlight sweeping the hallway ahead. The level felt like a haunted house, ghosts hanging thick and suffocating in the air, their corpse fingers tracing tracks through the dust.

Dust …. She took another step, the sole of her boot ringing clear and unmuffled against the tile. She aimed her light at the floor. Nothing. Not a trace of dust. The floor looked so clean she'd swear the janitorial staff had just gone through. Sounds of life. Signs of upkeep. But if the damned place was inhabited, why was the power out? She backed up a step, retreating toward the elevator. At least until she remembered that it had lost power upon opening on that level.

Trapped. They'd been lured down into the dark, buried under a kilometer of planet in a giant trap, and locked in. Sweet baby Jesus. She lifted her wrist, hating the way her breath wheezed through her words as she spoke, addressing the chia. "Are the suzerain behind us being stuck down here?"

"We sense no trace of their energy. Nothing in our memory indicates that they would be able to control anyone this far beneath the surface."

"That's why they needed to get me down here." Shepard's lungs began to clamber for oxygen again. Not enough air. She reached up to tug at the collar of her armour. "Where the hell are we? What the fuck is this place?" she asked, feeling the icy, skeletal fingers crawling between her lips. Their points scraped over the torn flesh and caressed the blood that still trickled into her mouth on
their way into her throat where they wrapped a strangling grip around the base of her tongue. Panic set her heart racing, her calm finally shattering. Her breathing drowned out the subtle sounds of life around them.

An arm wrapped around her neck, stripping a thin shriek of terror from her lips before Garrus's scent broke through her fear, her husband pulling her in tight against him. From the other side, Nihlus slipped an arm around her waist.

"Just breathe, Kahri," Garrus whispered. He bent down to pull her in tighter. "Press your face in against my neck, and just breathe. You're okay."

She did as he said, his heat warming the chill that clung to her, his perfect scent of cloves and myrrh, gun oil and armour underlayer reaching straight down to ease panic's fist from her throat. She wrapped one arm around him, pressing as close as she could manage considering their armour. "I'm okay," she whispered, as much for her own benefit as theirs. "I'm okay. Just had a moment."

"Vin," Nihlus called, his talons stroking her hair. "Report in. Can you restore power to this level?"

"Unable to restore power. Controls have been physically locked down from the lab control booth." The green hologram appeared next to them, casting an extra little bit of light into the space.

The light wasn't much, but between it, and the close press of her two torins, Shepard's panic eased enough that she pulled back, standing under her own strength.

Warrior inside and out, Janey. Breathe through it.

"Vin, mark the location of that control booth," she commanded. When the marker appeared on her map, she set out, moving quickly.

In, two, three, four, five. Out, two, three, four, five.

The corridor proved too tall and too wide to orient herself reliably just using sight. Uniform darkness spread in every direction. Checking back and forth between the map of the level and the few landmarks she saw around them—mostly metal girders that at least allowed her to keep track of the distance—she made her way to the side tunnel marked as the next leg of their route.

"Sweet baby Jesus," she grumbled, "I'm turned around as hell." Moving toward a railing on her right, she shone her light out into a huge, open void. Tens of metres away, the light glinted off something, a pinprick of reflection too close to be the far wall. According to the map, the space was nearly two hundred and fifty metres across.

"This is insane. Who builds this large underground … and how? The whole fucking colony should collapse into this pit." She turned her flashlight to the wall, searching for a computer interface. Gritting her teeth, she pushed on, using the railing as her guide. According to the map it would end, another starting five metres further along, then their next turn awaited at the end of that one.

The third corridor pressed close on either side. On the right, another railing and the impossible expanse of the prothean-made cavern. Less than a metre to her left, a series of tall, blade-sharp projections stood out from the wall as if someone had formed a long line of ship prows. The ten-metre-deep alcoves between the blades clung to the dark, jealously guarding their deepest recesses. Shepard's flashlight turned into each one, despite her brain's insistence that she didn't need to look.

The base was empty. It had been empty for a very, very long time. Nothing hid down those narrow slips of space. They'd probably been built to form sound baffling for whatever construction took place on the other side of the—
Metal clanged, a sharp ring that made her jump, then chuckle as she let out a long, shaky breath. She was being an idiot … 'that' person on the paranormal investigation crew who screamed every time a coffeemaker light turned on or the heat ducts banged. Still, she pressed her hip to the railing, her flashlight checking each alcove as she passed.

In, two, three, four, five. Out, two, three, four, five.

Something darted across the foggy nimbus where the beam of Shepard's flashlight surrendered to the impossible darkness. She snapped the light around even as Nihlus did the same, apparently catching the same movement.

"Did you see it?" she demanded, hurrying forward, intrigue replacing her earlier panic. Dammit, something—someone—was down there. She'd been dragged more than a kilometre below the surface of the damned planet for a reason, and people meant finding out what that reason was. She swept the narrow space with her beam, finally settling on the Spectre who'd moved up to her nine o'clock.

Nihlus shrugged and scanned ahead before looking down at her. "I didn't see anything. You acted like you had, so I reacted." He squeezed her shoulder. "We're just about there. Once we've got some light, this place will seem a lot less like a morumplacus lair." He shuddered, a slight tremor down the back of his neck. He looked back to Garrus, who watched silently, his expression uncomfortable, almost as if he felt as though he didn't belong.

"I saw movement," Shepard said to Nihlus even though her eyes remained fixed on Garrus. "And I know I can still hear breathing." The captain grumbled and turned, easing her way forward. The breathing she'd heard earlier, and heard again … it wasn't imagination. "It's not ghosts or ghoulords down here, it's someone very much alive and sporting a roman nose with more than one break." Glancing back at Garrus, she gave him a wan smile and added, "And I'm not just hearing myself echoing back. Well, I am, but this is separate."

Moving down the long corridor once more, she stepped ahead of Nihlus. Living, breathing people she could deal with, either using words or bullets. She swept the darkness, counting the strides to the corridor that led to the control booth. Despite the fact that her fear truly had settled, her flashlight still dove into every alcove. She chuckled at herself and shook her head. Superstitious fear really was an insidious passenger.

Her flashlight glinted off the railing where it turned the corner, and she sped up, relief pulling extra oxygen into her lungs as her heart sped up, but from excitement rather than terror. Just before she reached the corner, she caught another flutter of movement. Spinning to search for it, she flashed her light into the last alcove, the brightness reflecting back off a large face, its mouth hanging open, its eyes wide and staring.

"Jesus! Fuck!" she cried out. Jumping back, she slammed her hip into the railing, sliding backwards down its length for a couple of metres as her heart crawled up her esophagus to escape out her mouth and run screaming back the other way. Garrus and Nihlus raced up next to her, their guns trained on the unmoving man. Focusing her Mattock on the intruder, Shepard sucked in long, shaky breaths that trembled with laughter.

"Holy crap, my friend, you scared the shit out of me," she said, shuffling a little closer. He didn't respond other than to look at her. Frowning, she stepped right up. "Are you all right there?" She lifted one hand from her weapon to wave it in front of his face. "Hello?" No response.

"He's human," Garrus whispered, stepping up close enough to press along the back of Shepard's arm.
And he was. A slightly overgrown crewcut and a strong, square jaw framed a broad face. Dark skin and deep, almost black eyes were accented by the broken nose she'd predicted. His mouth hung slack for another second, but then he swallowed, pressed his lips together, and looked away, sidling further into the alcove like an animal startled out of cover. Damn, what had happened to him? Curiosity warmed into compassion and she smiled, letting her rifle drift toward the ground, lowering the light glaring in his eyes.

"Don't worry, we won't hurt you. What are you doing down here?" Shepard asked, letting him retreat and find some comfort in the shadows. "How did you find your way down here? Was it the suzerain?"

"They started showing up about five cycles ago," a voice spoke out of the darkness. Its accent told Shepard that the speaker was both female and prothean. "We think they make their way in from the surface where the charges meant to seal the tunnels cracked them." Movement closed on them from the last corridor. "Binav Kavrah," the voice ordered, "the lights."

Banks of light flared to life down the corridor, then clusters further out until Shepard was forced to cover her eyes for a moment, letting her pupils adjust. A plain, utilitarian space awaited her when she dropped her hand, everything so much less sinister and gothic when illuminated that her pulse rate and blood pressure both dropped instantly to normal levels.

A small squad of protheans halted at the corner, their hands relaxed on beam weapons like Javik's, their armour the same style, but shades of blue, green, and black: almost like beetle carapaces. The one at the front lifted a hand, halting the rest as she strode forward. Shepard raised an eyebrow, surprised that Tashac's memories allowed her to identify a female prothean in full armour.

The female stopped a handful of metres away. "Vindication recognized the imprints of Tashac Jacar and Merol Natil," she said after staring at Shepard for a few seconds. Her shoulders squared. "You are neither."

Shepard nodded. "I interacted with a prothean beacon and had their imprints and memories downloaded into my head."

"You hold their imprints?" The soldier hesitated, but then stepped forward, closing to within a metre. She released her rifle with one hand and reached up to remove her helmet. For another second, she looked down, almost appearing nervous, but then she straightened and met Shepard's gaze.

"Giran!" Nihlus exclaimed, hurrying up beside Shepard. He slid to a halt when Giran Jacar drew back. "Vindication said you died."

Shepard sucked in a slow, tremulous breath, trying to maintain her equilibrium in the face of the barrage of emotions that wailed from behind Tashac's locked door. Longing, joy, surprise, shame, terror … they tore through her, grabbing at the strings of Shepard's own emotions. She reached out, using Nihlus and Merol's reaction to help her wrestle hers back under control.

"Introductions seem to be a good idea at this point." She said, releasing Nihlus to gesture toward him. "Spectre Nihlus Kryik. As you have probably guessed, he and I shared the download from the beacon, so he also has your parent's imprints. He received more of Merol's memories whereas I received more of Tashac's." She stepped aside to let Garrus join them. "General Garrus Vakarian. He doesn't have any beacon imprints."

Giran closed her eyes and tilted her head. "No, but I still sense something there. A million million voices, all silenced."
Shepard nodded. "On the planet Feros, we were given something called the cipher from an ancient creature that called itself the thorian. It helped us decode the information from the beacons."

"And you?" Giran asked, cocking her head a little. "Who are you who smells and feels so much like Tashac Jacar, but looks at me with recognition from a stranger's eyes?"

"Captain Jane Shepard." She nodded and then looked toward the human. He'd completely withdrawn into the alcove, pressing himself as far into the sharp angle at the end as he could manage. She held out a hand and smiled. "You don't have to be afraid. We won't hurt you."

Giran let out a musical sort of sigh. "Henry does not retain enough of himself to understand." She touched her wrist, speaking into the small interface there. "Marcalin, could you come take Henry to the lounge, please. He's distressed." Turning her attention back to Shepard, Giran waved them further down the corridor, away from where the human cowered. "Do not be concerned. Henry trusts Marcalin. He'll calm down as soon as he's in familiar territory."

Shepard bristled, fury settling into a slow simmer in her gut. "What happened to him that he's like this?" she asked, struggling to keep the blades and barbs leashed. "How did he get down here?"

"As I said, they just appear," the prothean answered. "We cause them no harm, if that is what you fear. When they appear, we read them, to find out what their names are, who sent them, and how they reached this level of the base, but all they ever show us is dark and cold. A deep grey space."

"The suzerain," Nihlus grumbled. When Giran tilted her head, questioning and curious, he continued. "We're just starting to discover more about a very ancient race of beings that we know either by their title of suzerain, or by Leviathan."

"They control other being's minds," Shepard added. "And they want very much to know about what is hidden down here." Scrubbing a hand over her face, she just stared at the massive space, giving herself a moment to catch up with everything. Every scholar on every planet working together couldn't manage to create a scale to cover the amount of strange shit that intruded upon her life.

A turian hurried down the corridor from behind Giran and her people. She smiled and nodded to Shepard and Garrus, but paused when she spotted Nihlus. "Spectre Kryik?" she asked, extending a hand.

Nihlus clasped her wrist. "Hello. Marcalin, right?" He smiled then released her. "I'm sorry, have we met?"

The tarin chuckled and shook her head. "No. I've just seen you on the news." She shrugged, and lifted her hands to indicate the base. "Well, I had before I woke up down here six months ago. We don't get much news down here." She backed toward Henry. "It was a pleasure to meet you." Excusing herself with an awkward gesture toward the human, she turned away.

"Hey, Henry," Marcalin said, her voice gentle. "We're going to have some of that green pudding you like and watch a movie. Do you want to join us?" She held out her hands, the man hurrying forward to grip them. Pulling him in under her arm, Marcalin eased him out of the alcove and down the corridor.

Shepard swallowed the lump in her throat prompted by the tarin's gentleness with Henry. Apparently, whoever lived down here, they all cared about each other. "What in the name of the …?" Shepard stopped herself short of glowing backsides, considering the company. Who knew how much of the galaxy they'd learned about down there. "She seems fine. Why is she still down here?"
Giran reached up, scrubbing her knuckles along the underside of her kepalar ridge. After a second, she waved them forward. "Come, we'll show you what it is that these suzerain want to see."

"And the three of us?" Garrus asked. Shepard winced. She'd been hoping for more of a read on the situation before popping that cat out of the bag. Garrus didn't waver in the slightest when she glared at him, his front solid as stone. "Are we going to be held captive down here as well?"

Giran turned and set out down the corridor, apparently impatient with waiting for them to do as she wished. "That will depend on you."

Not exactly Shepard's idea of an ideal answer, but she followed. As much as she hated the idea of shooting their way out, that remained an option if push came to shove and then shove came to bullets.

Gasin (Gasinu - pl) - Prothean male the age of majority. (Dropped from 20 to 13 over the course of the war.)

Takun (Takune - pl) - Prothean female the age of majority. (Dropped from 20 to 13 over the course of the war.)

Dahtaric - The highest rank of the Prothean Scientific Authority

Regulikar: The Prothean central government.

Morumplacus - Restless spirit, undead, ghoul. From ancient turian folklore. The souls of those slain by dishonourable means were believed to wander after death to exact justice. They were believed to torment the living by taking the form of whatever the victim feared most.

Arate - Prothean rank comparable to captain

Binav - Prothean rank comparable to private

59 Days ASR Horizon

Shepard started after the group of protheans, taking her time and letting a demilitarized zone build between them. She didn't have any sense of Giran's play, but just handing them an open invitation to look at whatever the suzerain wanted to see? Yeah, she didn't buy that for a moment.

She paused outside a door two hallways from where they'd met Giran and Henry. Through the windows, she saw thirty or so people—asari, human, turian, even a krogan and two quarian—all moving busily around what looked like the dayroom at Martin's old rehab facility. Agitated by the disruption to their lives, a good half of them paced or rocked in their chairs, crying or yelling. The rest of their number tried to calm the others down, bribing them with food or makeshift games.

"Why are all these people here?" Shepard asked, looking to Giran. "Most of them probably have lives up there."
Giran returned to stand next to Shepard. "The security of this base must remain absolute. If they return to the surface, the ones who sent them down here could recapture them." Her posture straightened, going rigid. "Without knowing their masters' desires, we could not risk returning them to the surface."

Shepard spun bristling, spines and barbs only just contained, her anger and growing paranoia agreeing to wait for more information, but not long. "So they're prisoners?" She felt Garrus close behind her, but stepped away from him, needing the space more than the weight of his protectiveness.

"They're family." Giran's counter felt like a feint and did nothing to ease Shepard's concern. "When they arrived, we broke their masters' hold over them, but the power that drove them down here destroys them a little more every moment they are subjected to this control." She pointed to Henry. "He was the first. Vindication awoke us upon sensing his intrusion. When we discovered him, he hovered moments from joining his antecessors."

The prothean held out a hand to usher them further down the corridor. "Once Henry was stable, we placed him in stasis and returned to our pods. Two hundred and thirty-eight days later, another arrived, and then another. We ceased returning to stasis after the sixth, their arrivals coming so close together that I decided that a greater vigilance was required." She gestured again, that one carrying enough demand that Shepard opted for acquiescence and greater vigilance of her own.

"And the three of us?" Garrus asked. Shepard winced. She'd been hoping for more of a read on the situation before popping that cat out of the bag. Garrus didn't waver in the slightest when she glared at him, his front solid as stone. "Are we going to be held captive down here as well?"

Giran turned and set out down the corridor, apparently impatient with waiting for them to do as she wished. "That will depend on you."

Not exactly Shepard's idea of an ideal answer, but she followed. As much as she hated the idea of shooting their way out, that remained an option if push came to shove and then shove came to bullets. She shook her head a little when Garrus opened his mouth to continue. As much as she wanted guarantees that they could leave along with any of the others who wanted to return to their families, she figured pushing could wait until after the big secret.

Giran turned right onto a large balcony, striding up to a computer terminal far more complex than the small interfaces that dotted the walls here and there. "My parents believed so passionately in the security of this project that they purged all memory of it and their work before they departed the base for the last time."

Sweet baby Jesus, what the hell awaited them down there? For a half-second, every instinct Shepard possessed insisted that she reach out to stop Giran's fingers on the interface, to tell the prothean not to show them anything. Anything so secret and so dreaded … they'd just end up another nightmare that they had to fight or overcome. Sometimes knowledge just didn't justify the cost.

However, despite her misgivings, Shepard remained still and breathless as Giran powered up the computer and lights began to appear down near the bottom of the space.

Light pouring into the space thawed Shepard's voice, the specific word Giran used—purged—catching her attention. "Purged?" Even as she asked, an image of the small storage devices Liara and Shiala brought back from Eden Prime appeared in her mind. "You mean, they placed the knowledge in memory shards?"
A stiff nod answered her. "They dared not allow enemy hands to seize control of the project."
Giran paced a few metres and back. "My parents found the plans on a computer in an inusannon ruin while they were hiding the Fulcrum. They brought them here to decode and translate them. The last decades of the war consumed my people, the Regulikar drowning in desperation, so the scientific authority approved the covert construction of what could prove the end of everything."

Huge banks of light encircling the bay burst to life, blinding Shepard for long seconds before the glare faded, revealing a construction at the center. Massive in scope, it nonetheless looked incomplete. Shepard stepped right up to the railing. "What the hell is it? A weapon?"

Giran joined her, hands gripping the railing, eyes staring up at the metal lattice. "We don't know precisely what it is or what it does. That's why security is so tight. All we know is that its inusannon designers called it the Crucible."

The floor felt as though it disappeared out from under Shepard's feet, only Nihlus's urgent, sudden grip on her shoulder holding her steady. "The Crucible?" she repeated, slanting it as a question. She glanced toward Nihlus and then Garrus. "Damn, no wonder they wanted to get us down here."

Giran stiffened, her hand moving over the stock of her rifle. "What do you mean? You know that name? You know what the device is?" Her violet eyes flashed, filled with suspicion and a sense of duty that burned like fire. Her people closed in behind her, their hands lifting their rifles to an uncomfortably ready position.

"Hold up." Feeling Garrus and Nihlus's alert levels leaping into the red as well, Shepard held up her hands, palms out. "Sweet baby Jesus, give me a chance to explain before the bullets start flying. First of all, we've only heard the name, Crucible. When the suzerain communicated with us, they said that the Reapers were building the Catalyst, so we had to make sure they never built the Crucible. We don't actually know what either thing is."

Giran eased down from high alert, but remained tense, watchful. "The Catalyst is the reason we finished the pieces of the Crucible, but never assembled it. It is the last piece. We believed it to be a power source, the heart of the machine, but never discovered its nature." She shook her head and flung a frustrated gesture at the piece before them. "We built it in pieces, far below the surface to keep it hidden from the Reapers. We believed, as the inusannon did before us, that it was a great weapon to destroy the Reapers. We just didn't understand how it would perform this miracle, or how much of the galaxy would meet its end along with them."

Shepard turned her back to the construct. "And if you'd figured out what the Catalyst was, you would have assembled this and tried to use it?"

"Yes," Giran answered, "and it's construction would prove a small miracle in itself. It measures ten kilometres in length. They are massive pieces of the most dangerous puzzle the galaxy had even known." She let out a long, musical sigh, and for a moment, Shepard saw the stress cracks in Giran's armour. The prothean's battle hadn't stopped with the defeat of her people. Giran dragged her knuckles along her kepalar ridge, a sign of growing agitation. "And if this monstrosity proves to be a Reaper weapon, something their twisted will can turn against us … how many cycles did my parents lose as they laboured to decipher the plans, and how much of my people's dwindling wealth and materials did we waste in its construction?"

Giran strode to the railing a few metres down the balcony, hands gripping the railing hard enough that the metal screeched a little as the takun's armour ground against it. "And how much will it destroy?" She let out a noisy breath. "I should have simply blown the base down into this hole. With its destruction, those of us who remain could have joined our peers, resting in the antecessor's embrace."
Shepard shrugged, a weak flail of helpless ignorance. "I don't have any answers, but the suzerain don't want to get their hands on the Crucible, they want to keep it out of the Reapers' hands … claws … tentacles … whatever." She smiled and let out a long breath. "So that's a good thing. We just need to make sure the Collectors don't find out about it." Joining Giran at the railing, Shepard stared out at the parts and pieces. "Your parents have been incredibly helpful so far, perhaps they could help us sort the rest of this out."

"Helpful?" Something painted Giran's tone in lighter hues as she turned to face Shepard. "Other than the warning they sent through the beacon network?"

Shepard grinned, wide and easy. Proud daughter, eager to share word of her parents … that Shepard understood. "Their intel gave us a huge leg up in the battle against the vanguard, and it's still helping us. We only know why the Collectors are abducting our colonists because of their memories, and their imprints led us to the discovery of massive Collector bases on our homeworlds." She shrugged. "We might have come through the fight against Sovereign without their aid, but definitely not with the strength we did."

"Imagine what we could accomplish together," Nihlus said, stepping up between them. The green field of his stare crackled with excitement, and the most hope she'd seen from him since her return. "We're out ahead of the Reapers' return this time. We don't know how long we have before they find a way back, but if we could take down the Collectors, study their technology, it might help us find ways to fight the Reapers." He stared out at the Crucible. "Your people would be invaluable in helping us discover how the Reapers changed your technology."

Spinning to face Giran, Nihlus beamed at her as if looking down on his own daughter. "Would you help us? We could use this base, keep the Crucible safe, even examine the plans, see if a fresh perspective can figure out what it's meant to do." Nihlus leaned against the railing, stretching out to look down the piece's length. "Maybe, if between us, we can figure out what it's meant to do, we can figure out what the Catalyst is." As if he could see the entire plan unfolding before him, he nodded. "Then we can stop the Collectors from completing it for the Reapers."

Giran took off her gloves, hooking them on her armour, and held out her hands. "Will you permit me to read you?" She nodded to include Garrus in her question. "All of you? Only through following the threads of your lives can I truly understand your paths and motives. If you hide no deception, I will allow you to leave." Her violet gaze latched onto Nihlus. "And perhaps we can find ways to work together."

Nihlus removed his gauntlets and placed his hands on Giran's before Shepard even had a chance to wonder if there might be a reason for them not to. They'd been down there a half hour, far too short a time to assess any risk. What if Giran could pull out memories? What if she could remove the imprints?

"Nihlus!" Shepard let out an exasperated sigh and stood beside their joined hands, ready to break the contact or shoot Giran … whatever she needed to do to save his asslessness.

Despite the worst possibilities running through Shepard's head—including a lobotomized Nihlus getting excited about green pudding in the day room—a moment later, Giran looked up, smiled and laid a hand against Nihlus's cheek. "You truly honour my father." Notes of sorrow, nostalgia, and love whispered through the words. "Thank you for allowing me to see his final cycles."

Despite the worst possibilities running through Shepard's head—including a lobotomized Nihlus getting excited about green pudding in the day room—a moment later, Giran looked up, smiled and laid a hand against Nihlus's cheek. "You truly honour my father." Notes of sorrow, nostalgia, and love whispered through the words. "Thank you for allowing me to see his final cycles."

Nihlus placed his hand over hers. "He's a part of me, always teaching, always guiding." He stepped back, one hand gliding down Shepard's arm. "It's fine, Jane. You'll see." The smile he gave her reminded her of the beatific happiness of cult members. Facing down her ire and suspicion with a slight chuckle, he bent to nuzzle her ear. "I'm fine. You'll be able to read her as she reads you."
Shepard stepped back and snapped, "You're allowing Merol too much freedom. It's making you too quick to trust." She sucked in a deep breath when his mandibles dropped, steeling herself against the blow she'd dealt.

He policed his reaction and squeezed her shoulder. "Trust me if you can't trust her. You know that Merol or not, I'd never put the two of you in danger." A crooked grin set one of his mandibles twitching. "That's why I went first."

Shepard took another deep breath, that one red-tinted and heavy. "You're not disposable." Instead of allowing him to reply, she turned to Giran and nodded. "Very well, but your mother went through a great deal of trauma after she left this place." She didn't know if she'd want to see her mother go through the nightmare that haunted Tashac's life, and really didn't know how letting Giran into all of that would help. Still, she held out her hands, palms up, and prayed that allowing the contact didn't blow everything to hell.

As soon as Giran's palms grazed hers, images poured into her, almost like the beacon vision, but coloured by the spirit of the *takun*. Giran's spirit possessed an honour and dedication to duty as strong as her mother's but tempered by her father's spiritual depth. Family, emotion, the last moments of the base, everything but the work conducted within the base flashed through Shepard's head. The lack of the latter didn't feel like an omission, but rather like a gap in the source material, as if Giran had also dumped everything that might compromise security into a memory shard.

Either way, the bombardment passed in but a moment and then Shepard found herself alone in her head once more. Staggering back a step, she leaned gratefully into the two hands that reached out to steady her. While not traumatizing like the beacon, it left her disoriented and a good two hundred percent more exhausted than she'd already been.

*Note to self: Nap before mind melding. Seriously.*

Garrus wrapped an arm around her waist. That time she allowed the contact, his support a welcome wall at her back.

The prothean stared into Shepard's eyes. "You have journeyed so far and returned." She shook her head, a gentle rolling motion that expressed incredulity. "You have seen betrayal as great as any my mother suffered, and yet … you're here. You're still fighting for the ones who thanked you for defeating the Vanguard by having you killed." She scowled, but not anger … confusion. "How did you join your antecessors and then return?"

"I don't know. What happened during the months between dying and waking up is only just starting to come back, and even then, it's the tiniest shards of memory." Shepard paused. She'd never really thought about why she kept fighting … why she hadn't just thrown up her hands and hidden away on some tropical island in the traverse. "As for why I'm still fighting … . Maybe it's because of these two, and maybe it's because I don't know how to do anything else."

A slight shrug rattled her armour a little, one shoulder joint clicking as it dropped a little further than where it started. "We're faced with an enemy that no one has ever defeated. Not just this cycle is staring at me." She made a low, growling sigh that Garrus echoed through his second larynx. Tipping a smile up at him, she leaned into his side a little as he looked down at her with a gaze that told her she never needed to bear the burden alone.

She nodded before continuing, "Untold cycles wait out there in the future, staring back, waiting for me … for us … to end the Reapers and their harvests. If that is the reality placed before you, how do you … does anyone … refuse to fight?"
"My mother spoke very much as you do, stressing the honour that must guide our path through the despair and destruction." The arate paced a little, her armour appearing too heavy and getting heavier by the moment. "It was not a popular sentiment in the last days of the struggle, my people divided into those who ran and tried to hide—soldiers deserting in droves—and those who threw thousands before the Reapers', commanders sacrificing everyone and everything for a single Reaper kill."

Giran's scrutiny softened a little as Garrus released Shepard and stepped up, offering to allow her to read him. "I have no need to walk the trails of your life," she said. "I have seen you through their eyes. Their devotion and respect shone a light on the things I needed to know." She leaned against the railing, the Crucible to her back.

"I felt pieces missing from your memories," Shepard said, deciding to push her luck and go for broke. The option to shoot their way out remained, although her gut and the alarm at the base of her skull both remained silent. Despite the missing pieces, Giran hadn't felt as though she was hiding anything. "Did you dump your memories of the work into a memory shard as well?"

Giran frowned, surprise evident in her open mouth and slightly bared teeth. Her gaze focused inward, her eyes moving as if searching through files. The reaction appeared so quickly that Shepard didn't believe it false, a supposition reinforced a second later when the arate looked to the hologram standing unobtrusively off to one side. "Vindication? Did I deposit memories into a shard before I went into stasis?"

The VI nodded, a starched, formal gesture. "All base staff voted unanimously to place the memory of their work into shards prior to the base shutting down. Only memories related to security of the Crucible Project remained intact. Shards are sealed in the vault on sublevel five."

Giran stared at Shepard for long moments, her gaze a weighing one. "Will you allow us time to secure our memories and inventory the base? If you return in a few weeks, we'll be far better able to answer questions and make decisions." Again, Shepard didn't feel any sort of deceit coming from the prothean. This time the takun seemed thrown, the revelation of working on partial memories a disturbing one, and Shepard understood that far more intimately than she cared to consider.

"My people and I cannot be sure of the level of security threat the base faces without complete memories of the projects contained within." She shrugged. "Without being able to see the full picture." Shaking her head, she made a low, growling sound. "I've allowed myself ... all of us ... to exist in this twilight of suspended animation for too long." The sound morphed into a bitter laugh. "Weariness, I suppose. Easier to focus on maintaining security down here than to open myself up to the larger implications of the infiltrations."

"We all felt it, Arate Jacar," one of the gasin said, speaking for the first time.

A long, female sigh drifted out from beneath another helmet. "It feels as though we fought our war and should be done, Arate. We all feel it, and we did not even wake to our friends' company, to take up this second war by their sides." A shorter, downward-sloped sigh. "Just the few of us alone amidst these primitives."

Giran spun to face her people. "Datarri, please return to the control room and await me there."

Shepard could tell by the takun's sudden stiffness that she realized her stumble into rudeness a couple of moments too late, but also that she hadn't meant to belittle them.

"Arate, may I express my regret before excusing myself?" Datarri asked, giving a stiff salute. When Giran answered, a simple nod, the prothean soldier saluted the three of them. "I apologize for the
slip in my vocabulary. I did not mean to offer insult."

Shepard smiled, and then spoke, the proper words for a formal apology appearing from beneath Tashac's door. "Thank you for your apology. It is accepted with an open mind and heart. Go in peace, unfettered."

Datarrì saluted again and hurried down the hall. Once the prothean disappeared out of earshot, Shepard sighed. "We've met another prothean along our journey, as I'm sure you saw. He takes great delight in calling us primitives and telling us how much smarter and stronger protheans were."

"Commander Javik," Giran confirmed. "I knew two of his offspring. I was raised with them as my older, heroic siblings. I mourned them greatly when they joined the antecessors."

Shepard stepped close to the arate, a plan appearing in her mind as she began to speak. "I will gladly give you a few weeks, even a month to secure the base and your memories. Our partnership will be more fruitful for the time spent, but I would ask one boon." She took a deep breath, bracing before throwing caution to the wind as she continued, "A boon that would benefit us both."

Suspicion tinted the edges of Giran's stare, but she nodded. "And that would be?"

"Allow me to leave two people with you," Shepard said, the plan growing focussed as it came out her mouth. "They'll work within whatever security restrictions you feel are necessary, but they'll also be able to help acclimate you to this cycle. One of them may even be able to assist your guests. She's a very accomplished scientist in her own right."

"Captain?" Speak of the operative ….

Shepard opened the channel. "Yes, Ms. Lawson?"

"The suzerain have apparently departed. They're no longer visible over the colony." Miranda sounded far more cautious than relieved, a sentiment Shepard wholeheartedly agreed with.

"Contact the Ypres to see if the jamming has lifted. If so, have EDI run every scan she can think of to determine if it's really gone, or just cloaked."

"Yes, ma'am. Lawson, out."

Shepard closed the channel, and refocused. "Sorry about that." She smiled and stepped forward, a hand stretching across the gulf between them to grip Giran's upper arm. "If we cooperate and truly grow into allies, we'll be able to do so much more … figure out so much more than we can alone."

Giran nodded. "If you are willing to entrust the safety of your people to me, I am willing to extend trust in kind, but the lower levels of the base will remain sealed." She returned to the computer console, opening security camera footage of the refugee encampment in the hangar bays. "The humans may remain in the upper level. We will give Vindication directives to allow the refugees to use the south door." She smiled, a pale show of teeth. "In return, perhaps they could repair the sections of the collapsed and damaged sections of tunnel."

Shepard nodded, but turned to Garrus, searching his expression and level stare for any sign of misgivings. He saw twice as much as she did, and his cop instincts demanded that he remain slow to trust any situation. If anyone would see the trap waiting, he'd be the one. He simply shook his head, a slight shrug rolling his shoulders.
"All right," Shepard said after Nihlus wordlessly expressed his approval, "let's get these arrangements made."

60 Days ASR The Ypres

Shepard glanced up at the knock on her cabin door. "Yes?" With no small amount of gratitude, she turned away from the massive list of preparations scrolling up her computer screen. "Come in."

Miranda appeared in the open door. "Commander Javik and I are prepared to return to the surface, Captain." Jaw stern and clenched, Shepard's XO formed the very image of disapproval, but she'd ceased to argue the point. Frankly, Shepard had expected the operative to bring up the control chip when repeated uses of the omnitool didn't change Shepard's mind.

"You're an olive branch, Operative Lawson. We have the opportunity to access science light years beyond our own, and you are the first step toward a working partnership with these protheans." She pushed up out of her chair. "I don't want to return to discover that Cerberus has taken them all prisoner and is torturing them." One, absent hand reached up to scratch at the spot over the dead chip before she caught herself and dropped it. "Good luck, and stay in touch. We'll be back in exactly twenty-eight days."

Miranda hesitates for another second, her mouth opening, but then she snapped it closed and nodded. "I'll do my best to build a solid, working foundation, Captain."

Shepard smiled and nodded. "I know you will. Dismissed, Operative Lawson."

When her XO pivoted neatly on her heel and marched out, Shepard folded back into her chair. Where were her torins? Both were on the Ypres, but she hadn't seen either since they arrived back from the surface.

She knew Nihlus had been seeing to making space for a few new bodies as Mordin and Chakwas came aboard to use the lab along with Dr. Eis. Legion, Tali, and another geth would join up with them enroute to Ploba to meet with the Chiastyllian Cynosure. She didn't know where her faith came from, but she suspected that the geth having a similar gestalt consciousness might help bridge the gap between species.

She grinned, her memory playing back Sparky's complaints about the newer version of the Normandy as he skulked up the cargo bay, he and Martin forming an alliance staunchly in support of the SR1 within moments of coming aboard.

Garrus … she frowned and settled back into her work. Garrus probably haunted the briefing room, using the QEC to arrange transport for Liara, Dr. Bryson, and the researcher's team … and checking everywhere for bugs. After they finished on Ploba, the Ypres, Normandy, and Passch would set course for Klencory to investigate the volus billionaire, Kumun Shol's mysterious formations. The scientists believed the volus was onto another prothean sleeper base.

It would be weeks before they made it back to Omega. Shepard closed her eyes and slumped forward, bracing an elbow against the desk to catch her head as it impacted her hand.

A message from Wrex awaited her return, lurking in her inbox. Something about rogue salarians spotted on Tuchanka. She'd set him to the task of finding out more information before they changed course to investigate. The grin returned to her face. Apparently, however, Tuchanka agreed with Grunt, the youngster adopting Wrex and Bakara like parents, and digging into learning about being a krogan with his whole being. At the end of the message, the Urdnot doctor had tacked on a note, telling Shepard that she'd taken a ton of samples and run Grunt through a gamut
of tests. All that information awaited their return to Omega.

Another email informed her that her mother had decided to remain on Palaven and help Trea settle into her new duties and prepare for the move to Omega while Bunny headed home to Omega, wanting to return to her studies at Archangel. Shepard sent up a prayer of thanks that the two of them had found places to belong. They deserved happiness and a sense of purpose.

The door opened behind her, a bright smile of genuine relief greeting Garrus. She lifted a hand to capture his talons as he closed the few metres distance and crouched next to her. "How are you holding up?" she asked, searching his face and gaze for signs of stress.

He shook his head. "Fine. It feels strange being on this ship, though. I found three bugs in the briefing room alone. Stomped them into scrap." Leaning in, he nuzzled her brow and then her lips. "So," he said, letting out a long, noisy sigh, "how are we going to handle the sleeping arrangements?"

Shepard kissed him. "Well, I've been thinking about that. All three of us slept together just fine on Horizon, and …" She faltered, a tightening throat and vague, dissociative dizziness clenching her skull in a clawed fist as she imagined how her torins would react to her idea. When she first arrived back on the ship, she'd looked down at the bed and hated the idea of spending that first night back with one while the other slept alone elsewhere.

Garrus stood, and tugged on her hand. "Come on, let's go sit somewhere comfortable." He led her down the stairs to the bed and sat, pulling her between his knees to sit on one thigh. Once she got herself settled, he wrapped his arms around her. "Okay, better. Now, what's your idea?"

Shepard let out a long breath and leaned into him, her brow resting against his jaw. "Nights like tonight … well, I don't want to be without either one of you." She shifted until he tightened his arms, a silent encouragement to just trust him and spit it out. "And I hate the thought of one of you sleeping alone." Her lips tugged a little to one side, a slight quirk of a smile. "Unless you want to be alone, of course."

"So, you're thinking of the three of us sleeping in the same bed?" He shrugged, his breath whispering through her hair. "I'm not comfortable with anything amorous going on, but I admit, I want to be lying at your side every night." One hand stroked the length of her spine, easing her further into his embrace. "I'm okay with it." A soft chuckle rumbled in his throat, sending shivers along every nerve. "I just never thought you would be."

Shepard pulled away just far enough to meet his gaze. "I love you. You're pieces of my soul I can't live without. What about Nihlus?"

"We'll talk to Nihlus when he stops arguing with Gardner about people bunking on the lounge and cargo bay." Leaning in, Garrus kissed her, long and slow and sweet. She grinned when he pulled back just enough for them both to catch their breath.

"What are you grinning about?" he asked, nuzzling the shell of her ear.

Lowering her arm from its grip on his armour, she ran a thumb over the delicate bracelet wrapped around her wrist. "I just remembered … I have a husband."

Chuckling, he stood, lifting her with him. He kissed her again before lowering her onto her own two feet. "Care to join me in the shower, wife?"

Shepard popped the lower seals on his yoke. "I believe I would."
(A-N: Thanks for still being here readers and reviewers alike. Hugs)
"Tali'Zorah vas Rannoch!" Shepard held up a hand as she bellowed across the cargo bay. Stepping off the elevator, she lifted into a jog, hurrying down the length of the ship to throw her arms around the quarian. "Holy blessed Father of Light's undies, it's good to see you."

Arms still wrapped around the slight, young denyah, Shepard lifted her, bouncing her a little, weighing her. "You've gotten skinny." She pulled away, holding Tali's shoulders as she stared into the silver glints behind the faceplate. "They not feeding you on your homeworld?"

Silent and frozen, Shepard's hug unreturned, Tali stared for a moment before reaching up and removing her faceplate. "It's really you," she whispered. Delicate fingers reached out to trace the web of scars across Shepard's chin. "Keelah, Shepard . . . ."

The quarian threw her arms around the captain, squeezing so tight that Shepard could barely breathe and the wounds on her shoulders screamed for mercy. "We thought we'd lost you."

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60 Days ASR The Ypres

Shepard alerted to the knock at the cabin door, peering that direction through the steamy air as if she could see who it was. Not that she didn't know. "Can you let Nihlus in?" she asked, giving Garrus a slight push. "You know he won't come in unless one of us answers it, fully clothed and not breathing hard." She chuckled in answer to his grumble and gave him another, gentle push. "Just let me finish getting dressed. I'm right behind you."

After staring at her for a couple of seconds, his gaze shuttered, Garrus nodded and turned toward the bathroom door. "Fine, but you'd better be right behind me. He's going to be awkward until we talk to him. Together."

"Right behind you," Shepard echoed. Once the door shut behind him, she spun toward her shelves, digging behind the piles of towels for the tiny crate hidden inside an old pair of sweats. She froze before opening it, listening to the low mumble of their conversation as it moved down toward the couches.

When the container sat open before her, she stared in at her dwindling horde of syringes, a vague sort of shame worming through her veins. Yes, fine ... she was hiding her painkillers from Garrus and Nihlus, but only because she didn't want them to worry. If they knew how much pain her wounds gave her, they'd wrap her in cotton batting and never touch her again.

She snatched a syringe out, tore off the cap, and stabbed it into her thigh above the hem of her shorts. With a soft sigh-moan combination, she depressed the plunger, then stashed the empty needle back in with the others. Leaning against the counter, she closed her eyes, letting the icy wash of relief gain a foothold before she pushed up.

Are you really protecting them from your pain? Or are you trying to protect them from your
suffering? It's been two months since Miranda woke you up. What do you know now that you didn't then? Are you any more convinced that you're real? Where's the proof?

For a second, the malignant darkness and burning knives sliced beneath her skin, and she pressed her eyes closed, afraid to see Harbinger's flame growing through the cracks in her flesh.

*I am the harbinger of your perfection. The forces of the universe bend to me. Your god has abandoned you, Jane Shepard. It left you to the batarians, and it has left you to us. We will not be as merciful as they were. Relinquish your form to us.*

No. She forced her eyes open and lifted her head to meet the faint glow of cybernetics that stared back at her. That bastard did not get to take up housekeeping inside her head. She'd thrown off Harbinger's attempt at taking her over body, and as unwelcome as they were, the spiders would help her keep him out of her head … unless she let him in.

*Really? And what do they want from the inside of your head? Can you be absolutely certain of anything? Where's the proof that you aren't just some Reaper meat puppet?*

"Them," she muttered under her breath, listening to the warmth of the voices from the other room, eyes slipping closed again even as she clutched her stash tight to her belly. "I'm absolutely certain of them. They're my proof." And she was. A cabin bleeding gold light from all the windows, a fire on a cold night, a port in the stormy sea … they provided the only safety and certainty in the nightmare.

*Kahri?* Heavy, solid footsteps approached the stairs and climbed. "You all right in there?"

She stashed the painkillers back behind the towels, straightening everything precisely, then hurried to the door, opening it just as he lifted his hand to hit the control. "Right behind you." She reached up to trail tender fingers along his mandible. She nodded toward Nihlus. "How's he doing?"

Garrus held out an arm, snagging her across the waist as she tried to walk past, and pulled her in. "He's fine, but I wasn't about to approach the 'everyone in one bed' topic without you." Leaning in, he pressed his brow to hers. "Spirits, I love you. Are you really all right? You seem … dazed? Not quite here."

"Yes, really, and I'm just tired, love." She relaxed into his embrace and looked up, head tilted, her gaze caressing his face. "You're my reason," she said simply, the words settling the flutter in her belly, "for … everything." She hid the drugs to keep them from worrying while she fought to stay functional. End of story. After pulling him down to press a kiss to his brow, she eased away, her hand sliding along the inside of his arm until her fingers tangled in his talons. "Come on, let's start pulling this little family together."

Nihlus looked up from the single chair at the corner of her coffee table, his mandibles giving a soft, hesitant flutter that reached all the way down into Shepard's gut to grab hold of something tender and precious. She squeezed Garrus's talons, then released him, walking down the stairs on her own.

"You look tired," she said, stepping around Nihlus's thigh to stand between his knees. Loosely wrapping her arms around his neck, she leaned in to touch her brow to the top of his head. When he made no move to touch her, she sighed and folded down to sit on the edge of the table, one hand on each of his knees.

The Spectre nodded. "I was heading for my rack when you called." He glanced over at Garrus and then back. "What's going on?"
Shepard rubbed his knees and cocked her head, watching him through soft, narrowed eyes. "If you had your preference, where would you spend tonight?"

Again, a furtive flicker acknowledged Garrus before lighting on the bed and returning to meet her regard. "Right here, with you," he said, the words an admission rather than acknowledging any sort of right to be there.

Sweet baby Jesus, he'd asked her to be with both of them just as much as Garrus had. She'd resisted, and now she'd embraced it, he was losing his nerve. Shepard reached up and took Nihlus's face between her hands, his big ol' head heavy in her palms. And he was losing it because he loved his fratri too much to risk hurting him. She brushed his cheekbones with her thumbs. Who would have guessed such a gorgeous soul lived behind all that arrogance and stumbling that first month?

At nearly fifty, he finally grew up.

"That bed is exactly where I want you." She tipped her head to where Garrus still stood at the top of the stairs. "And it's where I want him." Tugging him forward to meet her halfway, Shepard leaned in to touch brows. "I love you both. I don't want to be separated from either of you."

Pushing him backwards a little, she shifted to sit on his thigh. "Sex will have to be separate," she said, chuckling a little, embarrassed. "I'm not okay with that being a group activity, and I know that it would be uncomfortable for the two of you as well."

Drawing back, she met his eyes, one hand sliding around to drape over his cowl. "But I want you both sleeping at my side the rest of the time." She brushed a gentle kiss across the end of his nose, loving the way his hide felt against her lips, and the scent of him: so warm and male, all spice and earthy, desert nights. "Are you okay with the three of us sharing a bed, Nihlus?"

After nuzzling her lips, he pulled away to look up at Garrus. "You're all right with this?"

Shepard's husband nodded. "I am." He shrugged and thumped down the stairs, loose-limbed and weary. "I don't want to get into bed alone, and I don't like the idea of making her choose." A warm, calloused palm caressed her cheek, then pressed against it, heavy and full. "This compromise works."

Nihlus grinned and chuffed. "We're going to need a bigger bed and some sort of noise cancellation system with all three of us in here and snoring."

Shepard's chest filled with sunlight, the light so bright and strong that it felt as though it would blow her open at the seams. Anchors indeed. She wrapped her arms around his neck and tucked her face in under his jaw. "Not to mention the fact that trapped between you two heating units, I'm going to need a cooling blanket." She kissed the soft hide just under his mandible. "Come on, we're all beat, and we're meeting up with Tali and Legion in twelve hours."

Still, she didn't pull away. "Are you really all right with this, cikabeknai?"

Nihlus pulled her in tight and rested his cheek against her hair. "We're going someplace I never envisioned, and I imagine it'll feel a little awkward at first, but you're both right. I don't want to make you choose, I don't want to lie alone, and I don't want to be curled in with you and know that Garrus is alone." He eased back, so Shepard released him, still sitting on his thigh. "It wasn't an issue while we went separate ways on missions, but I also don't want to be away from you for weeks at a time any more."

The sunshine settled into something warmer and deeper. "Good, because I count on you being within arm's reach." Her fingers trailed the length of his mandible. "I love you, Nihlus Kryik."
Remember that when you don't think you have a place right here, in my arms. Okay?"

He nodded. "Okay."

She kissed him and then stood, taking Garrus's hand again as she stepped out from between Nihlus's legs. "This is where we belong. Together, the three of us can take on anything." She tugged on her husband. "Come on, let's get to bed. Morning is rushing up on us."

61 Days ASR The Ypres

Denyah - Female quarian after undergoing her pilgrimage

"Tali'Zorah vas Rannoch!" Shepard held up a hand as she bellowed across the cargo bay. Stepping off the elevator, she lifted into a jog, hurrying down the length of the ship to throw her arms around the quarian. "Holy blessed Father of Light's undies, it's good to see you."

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Silent and frozen, Shepard's hug unreturned, Tali stared for a moment before reaching up and removing her faceplate. "It's really you," she whispered. Delicate fingers reached out to trace the web of scars across Shepard's chin. "Keelah, Shepard …." The quarian threw her arms around the captain, squeezing so tight that Shepard could barely breathe and the wounds on her shoulders screamed for mercy. "We thought we'd lost you."

Returning the hug, Shepard rubbed the slight back, wincing a little at the protrusions of bone along the spine, the ripples of rib right under the skin. Despite the familiar, cheery lilt to Tali's voice, her body spoke volumes about the intervening years.

She carved a smile onto her face. She couldn't do anything about the years she'd missed, but she would make sure Tali didn't struggle without her support from then on. "Thanks to a team of mad scientists, I'm back." She shrugged. "Mostly." Extracting herself from the vice-like hug, she traced a finger over Tali's soft, lavender cheek. "Should you be without your faceplate?" A bright grin followed along with an incredulous shake of her head. "And how did I forget how gorgeous you are?"

Tali beamed, her bronze eyes sparkling. "I'll be fine, maybe a few sniffles, but my geth roommates have been working hard to get my immune system to what it should be." A bright, lovely grin spread across the quarian's face. "It's worth it to look at you without the barrier." She leaned into Shepard's touch. "I've missed you."

Shepard nodded, blinking back the burning in her eyes, able to see the care and responsibility etched into Tali's gaze. She'd promised to be there to help, and then ... . "I know. I'm sorry, Tali. I would have given anything to have been here, to have helped settle Rannoch."

She looked past the denyah to where Legion stood, head flaps dancing. "And you." She held out a hand, taking the geth platform's fingers in a strong grip. "Hello, Legion. It's good to see you back in mostly one piece."

"And you, Shepard-Captain." The geth squeezed her hand, then released her. "The geth and Archangel personnel have nearly completed repairs."

Shepard stepped back, letting Garrus move in to hug Tali. "We need to stop by medbay to pick up
the guests of honour, and then we can retire to my cabin, and I'll bring you up to speed." She pressed her palm against the small of Garrus's back when he pulled away. "You coming up with us?"

He shook his head. "I'm going to go check out the weapon systems, and make sure the Cerberus personnel haven't undone all my hard work. We might need them when we arrive at Ploba." He bent to nuzzle her brow, then patted Tali's shoulder and nodded to Legion. "It's good to see you both."

Ten minutes later, Tali sat cross-legged on Shepard's couch, the chia gauntlet held cradled in both hands, almost like an offering. "Keelah, it's amazing," she said, the words soft and breathy as she stared down into the kaleidoscope of whirling gears and moving pieces. "It's almost like looking into a body, seeing the lungs and heart working."

"That's a pretty good comparison." Shepard slid down into the chair to Tali's left, her eyes on Legion as the geth crouched next to the device. "It's definitely not anything I thought I would ever encounter in my lifetime."

"Microscopic, neurally linked lifeforms," Legion said. Shepard didn't know whether she was assigning wonder to his tone, but she felt sure the fascination was there. It must be a strange and wonderful thing, meeting a race that amounted to the geth's organic twin.

"Ask them whatever you like," Shepard said. "They might not have all the answers, but I think you'll find that you have quite a lot in common." She leaned forward, forearms on her thighs. "I asked you two to come with us to the Cynosure because the chia have intelligence, they have this incredible ability to create complex machines that control mass effect fields, but they're both in danger and present a danger because they have no will."

"Clarify," Legion said, straightening, suddenly alert, its head flaps spiking before settling back.

"When I came in contact with the chia that created the gauntlet they were a flurry of single organisms and small clusters. They were free. I asked for a way to communicate with them, and my will, my need formed into the gauntlet that interfaces with my omnitool." Shepard reached out to run a fingertip along one edge, as always, surprised when it felt warm rather than cool. "Whether they wished to comply or not, they had to: my will overrode theirs." She let out a long breath, her hand dropping back to her lap. Her stomach churned, acid splashing up into her throat. "It was just a happy turn of luck that they wished to communicate with me. They're slaves to what anyone asks of them."

"So, the giant dreadnought over Horizon that you sent footage of?" Tali asked, her attention leaving the chia for the first time since Shepard placed the gauntlet in her hands.

"Put it on your arm and ask them," Shepard said, the smile she gave the quarian encouraging but tasted of burning dust. "It's perfectly safe, just make sure you tell them not to push their emotions on you. They have a very strong empathic field and they tend to get a little passionate."

The reflective glints of Tali’s eyes narrowed behind her faceplate, but she placed her arm within the curve. Jumping a little when it snapped shut around her, she giggled, a nervous twitter of sound. "Where did the dreadnought we saw in the footage from Horizon originate?" she asked, the words trembling a little.

"The suzerain required protection for their forms during the Genedigaeth Rebellions," the gauntlet answered. "The suum had defeated their masters, reducing suzerain numbers to a handful of survivors. The rebellion stood upon the threshold of victory when the suzerain discovered our
people. They created the dreadnoughts around their forms. Their minds and wills control the chiastyllia, using our nature against others."

Images flashed across the small vid screen, too quick for Shepard to keep up with them, but Legion stepped closer, sitting next to Tali on the couch, its head cocked, head flaps dancing, almost agitated. A soft smiled teased the corners of Shepard's mouth as she watched them, the pair hunkered over the gauntlet, so alike ... almost siblings after two years of trust and cooperation and shared heartache.

Well, maybe more concern than heartache for Legion. She didn't doubt for a second that what Daro'Xen had done to its fellow geth cause Legion distress of some kind, but she had no idea what that would look like. What passed for emotions amongst the emotionless?

"The suzerain turned our people into terrible weapons, weapons able to kill an entire planet's population in a single thought," the chia said, their voice a thin tangle of grief, shame, and fear. "Our people fled, hiding within the Cynosure or on distant planets, because we do not wish to be enslaved or used to kill."

Shepard stood. "You two okay?" She tilted her head toward her desk. "I'll be up there if you need anything."

"We're fine, Shepard," Tali replied, her eyes never leaving the chia. "This is fascinating."

"We have much to learn from each other," Legion said, glancing up at Shepard. "These organisms and the geth possess many characteristics in common."

"That's why I thought you should meet." Truly. Retreating to her desk, Shepard leaned against it, hands braced against the top instead of sitting. As she watched Tali and Legion with the chia, she began to see a possible secondary benefit to inviting Legion and the quarian. Since the geth possessed a strong, almost single minded will, she'd thought they might be able to help the chia protect themselves. Now, she wondered if the geth might not be able to learn from the chia as well.

Twisting, she pulled her chair in tight behind her and sat, a keen-edged excitement flashing like a spinning gem in the center of her chest. Things on Ploba light prove very exciting indeed.

Well ... they could also end up crushed into something the size of a baseball by the pressure. Either way, exciting.

62 Days ASR The Ypres

"So, Tali'Zorah vas Rannoch ... " Shepard belly flopped onto the stack of gym mats next to the quarian's cot. "... how are things going on the aforementioned Rannoch?" She cradled her chin in her hands, staring at her friend, eager and open, almost hungry. Her connections to the people ... the family from the first Normandy felt like a basket of jewels tossed into space. She floundered, swimming after them through the void, trying to gather and stow them back in their chest: precious, elusive, and cast so far adrift.

"Better now that Garrus and Nihilus helped uncover Daro'Xen's machinations and forced us all to stop trying to cover everything up and actually talk." Tali stretched and rolled onto her side, propping her head on a hand. "The admiralty board is sending expeditions and has approved the geth assisting with the transition from suits to reintegration with our environment."

One eyebrow twitching, lifting a little with gentle teasing, Shepard feigned nonchalance as she asked, "And Kal'Reegar? How's he doing?"
Tali smacked Shepard's shoulder but her giggle gave her away. "Kal is fine. He's been my strong back and supportive arm through everything." Gaze darting away and then back, the denyah practically screamed shy nervousness. Shoving herself up, Tali sat cross-legged on her blankets. "I think he wants us to formalize things between us." She shrugged a little, just a gentle ripple of muscle across her shoulders. "But, I don't know … raising a family on Rannoch the way things are … with the Reapers coming …." A musical sigh painted the recycled air with longing.

Shepard pushed up off the mats, moving over to sit facing Tali, her position mirroring her friend's. Holding out her hands, she waited for Tali to take them before she settled her elbows onto her knees. Meeting the silver reflections of the young denyah's eyes, she let out a long sigh. "It's scary, I know that better than anyone, Tali." Her shoulders just popped up before dropping. One cracked a little. "And things are uncertain … we know what's coming. Maybe it's selfish to think about getting married, bringing kids into all of this, but when aren't things scary and uncertain?"

Tali let out a long breath, her fingers playing with Shepard's a little. "I guess. I don't know, maybe I'm looking for excuses. Maybe I'm just not ready."

Chuckling, Shepard nodded and released one of Tali's hands to caress the coillas around her arm with her thumb. "Do you love Kal?" She lifted one eyebrow and ducked her head a little as she met the quarian's gaze. "Is there this impossibly strong elastic band trying to snap you back to Rannoch right now?"

Tali's head tilted and she gave Shepard a gentle shove. "Shut up." Delicate fingers took up the token of Shepard's bonding. "Does it make a difference?" she asked quietly. "It doesn't change how you feel, does it?"

Shepard shook her head. "Yes and no. It's not like I needed to lock us down, and neither did Garrus, but it's an oath … a promise. It's like taking an oath to protect your people. It doesn't mean you love them any more or take your duty any more seriously, it just forms a bond." She grinned, wide and a little giddy. "But it's beautiful, Tali. Standing there, formalizing that bond in front of the people who matter most, and then after … with him." She purred low in her throat. "I highly recommend it."

"And kids?" Tali took Shepard's hands in hers again. "You'd have children … start a family even with the Reapers coming?"

Shepard pursed her lips into a considering frown. "Garrus and I haven't really talked about kids, but Nihlus and I have … after a fashion, and yeah, I think I would, even having to go out and fight." She let out a long breath through her nose. "I think that kids are kids and families are families, regardless of the galaxy around them. As long as they are loved, and you do your best to look after them … they'll grow up okay."

She said it. She looked Tali straight in the eye and said it, but did she believe it? If Garrus or Nihlus asked her to adopt a baby that night, what would her answer be? Instead of answering that, she gave Tali another little shrug. "Your parents had every reason to be terrified to bring you into the galaxy. Possible war with the geth, and any number of issues on the flotilla, not to mention a guarantee that your own immune system could kill you."

"So, nothing's guaranteed?" Tali released Shepard's hands, the air cool where the contact had warmed her fingers. "But we should face the unknown with hope?"

The Spectre laughed, but a kind one of appreciation for her quarian friend. "Couldn't have said it better myself. No one ever got anything amazing without being a little bit brave."
Tali's laugh rose to swirl around hers, pinks and purples to her solid, stoic greens. Had Shepard ever lived in colours as bright and sweet? Tali sobered a little, her voice sincere as she said, "And you've had to be twice as brave." She stretched out her arms to squeeze Shepard's shoulders in a tight grip. "The next wedding, I demand to be there. No last minute surprises."

"I promise. This last one … well, it was important to Garrus—and to me—that we not wait any longer to start our lives." She leaned into her friend's touch, surprised by how much she'd missed having someone to just talk to. "It can all be taken away in an instant, Tali. The only thing I can imagine that would be worse than losing him, is regretting not taking every chance we could have and spent every second we had together." Her words fell off as the last moments of her previous life flashed through her mind.

"We were going to be together, finally," she said after several long seconds, the words heavy as they fell, old bones weighted with lead and tears. "He came to me the night we left you and Legion on Rannoch, but I pushed him away. I'd been so scared for so long, I didn't know how else to be. And then it was too late. We rushed to take out Sovereign and then … time over."

Tali's grip on Shepard tightened, cornerstones setting truth into the foundation of Shepard's return. "And now you've been given more time." A slight nod of understanding passed between them. "It's true … best not to waste it. They don't come any better than Garrus and Nihlus."

"Or your Kal." Reaching up, she closed her hands around Tali's once more. "He went along with our crazy plan on Virmire without blinking, accepting the craziness because it was where you led." She glanced toward the door as it opened, giving Legion a wide grin as it appeared in the doorway. "And he came along because he cared about you and wanted to protect you," she finished before greeting the geth. "Welcome to our little hen party. Pull up a chair."

The platform's head flaps rose and fell in a delightfully perplexed wave "Hen: a female bird, especially of a domestic fowl," Legion said, tone even. "We do not understand the reference."

Tali chuckled. "Don't worry, Legion. I don't understand the reference either." She waved the geth over. "Join us. I waited for you before telling Shepard about our evil plan."

Mock suspicion pulled Shepard's face into a serious scowl. "Evil plan? I knew this would happen eventually. What is it? The great quarian/geth uprising? You're going to subjugate the rest of us? That's it, isn't it?"

Tali slumped. "Keelah, she's onto us, Legion. Burn the plans, wipe the hard drives and your memory. We can't leave any trace." When the geth just stood there, head plates spiked out, its digits tangling as it wrung them in a decidedly quarian manner, Shepard managed to hold the scowl for about five seconds before letting out a sharp bray of laughter. Tali joined her, the two collapsing against one another a little.

"Creator Zorah, is this an example of a humourous misdirection, and humour stemming from personal confusion and awkwardness?" the geth asked when their cackling settled into soft snorts and chortles. Shepard took a long, full breath, savouring the air rushing into her lungs, the slight headiness and cramping stomach muscles of a damned good laugh.

"Well, it was, until you killed it." Tali sat up and waved the platform over. "Go ahead and tell Shepard the plan."

The geth stepped forward, stopping at parade rest a metre and a half away. "After consulting with the chiastyllia, the geth have concluded a high probability exists that the geth will be able to integrate with chiastyllian technology to protect their species from further subjugation."
"It basically amounts to several thousand geth merging with the chia to form a sort of amplifier," Tali said. "All chiastyllia are connected to the single, group intelligence. The geth will use that field to propagate a field that prevents anyone from forcing the chia to obey." The quarian shrugged, shifting a little, uncomfortable. "That's far oversimplifying it, but essentially the plan."

Shepard nodded, understanding and liking the theory, but for one detail. "Thousands of geth will have to remain bonded to the chia's Cynosure?" Her plan hadn't included anyone becoming enslaved to anyone else.

Legion's head flaps jumped a little in front, the geth equivalent to surprise. "The geth consider the arrangement an equitable trade, Shepard-Captain."

Her frown deepened into something without a trace of humour; a rough wad of cold, wet wool twining through her insides. "And how's that?"

"In exchange, the chiastyllia offer the geth true consciousness. We will no longer be confined by the neural structure imposed on us in order to limit our development." As Legion became more animated, its gestures did as well. Apparently the geth on Rannoch were learning as much as the quarians. "With the chiastyllians' upgrades, the barriers between networked geth will disappear, allowing the geth to function as a cohesive, evolved AI. Units will no longer need to reach consensus on all things, but will reason and react and grow as a single organism."

Shepard hesitated for as long as it took to look over at Tali. The quarian looked downright excited by the possibility. "Tali?"

"Just think, Shepard," the quarian said, her voice raising, "the mistakes my people made in the desire to limit their growth … gone." She leaned in, suddenly still and intent. "And since the chia process and feel emotion, even that might not be beyond the geth's capabilities."

Geth able to feel compassion and happiness … not to mention rage and fear. Shepard's heart took off like a terrified rabbit, racing an on-the-spot marathon in her chest. The possibilities filled her with equal parts hope and terror. So much could go wrong, but perhaps not any more than with the other races. The geth would become just like the rest of them. That thought added a little sadness to the mix.

"Shepard-Captain, do you disapprove of the geth taking this step forward? Will we not be more able to assist the other races?" Legion closed another step, its head cocking to one side a little. "View them with greater understanding?"

"No, I don't disapprove." She shook her head, struggling to sort out what she felt before trying to explain it to the geth. "The possibility of the geth reaching their full potential has always been one of my fondest hopes, but with emotion comes all the horrible crap we organics do to one another. And the upgrades will meet with fear."

"Do you fear what the geth might become?" the geth asked, its head moving from side to side in a most perplexed manner.

"I fear a great many things, Legion," Shepard admitted, the truth bitter as it burned the back of her throat. "I fear how the galaxy will react to an upgraded geth, and how the geth will react in return. I fear that this will damage the geth, destroy who you were meant to become." Tears rose to soothe the acid tang. "I fear all the unknowns and what ifs."

"But is that not always the danger of bringing new life into existence?" The platform crouched next to her, the flaps around its central light emoting as poignantly as any face. "Has it not always been
so? Despite the fear and danger, organics continue to give birth to new generations, raise them and then endure the hardships and pain of circumstance and change."

Shepard's fear eased back without disappearing entirely as she looked to Tali and shook her head. A smile eased its way across her lips when the quarian just chuckled and shrugged. "Damn, I hate getting my own words thrown back at me."

(A-N: Ahhh man, was it glorious to get back to these kids and to spend a chapter on my favourite things ... just being together. For all the danger and adventures, this is my favourite part of the games, and definitely of writing. So, I hope you enjoy. *hugs and loves to all and chocolate. Lots of chocolate.*)
Future Continuous Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

What sort of mouldy Enkindler's ass-cheek doesn't want to dive into a gas giant? Right? It's the stuff people join the Alliance to do.

Dilan - fiancee

Dilekorem - Beloved mate

Torin - Torini plural. Male turian of the age of majority (15)

64 Days ASR Nearing the orbit of Ploba

0738 hours

Given a thousand years and a far greater imagination than she possessed, Shepard couldn't have dreamed up anything close to what stared her in the face. A heady combination of excitement and terror set her heart racing, her lungs taking up all the space in her chest as she watched the Ypres close in on Ploba. Nerves tingling in her fingers and toes, she savoured the moment of feeling completely, blissfully alive, every sense sharpened to a scalpel's edge.

Sweet baby Jesus, her life took some unexpected turns … even setting aside the whole being shot in the head, Lazarus thing. Two weeks ago, if someone told her that she'd be preparing to dive her ship into the atmosphere of a gas giant, she'd have called them insane or a liar … maybe both.

What sort of mouldy Enkindler's ass-cheek doesn't want to dive into a gas giant? Right? It's the stuff people join the Alliance to do.

Maybe. Once. Shepard let out a long, noisy breath and leaned toward the projection, the edge of the briefing room table digging into the heels of her hands. Now … well, desperation never stopped forcing her hand, pressing her into situations where crazy was the norm. She just prayed that the reward outstripped the risk of placing the lives of a hundred people in chiastyllian hands. A wry smile tugged back the corner of her mouth. Well, so to speak.

"Are you prepared for descent?" The neutral chime of the chia's voice dragged her back to the reality of diving into a freakin' gas giant. Shepard shook her head, wonder and a sudden spike in her blood pressure sending the room tilting ever so slightly to the left. The last twelve people who tried that exact same maneuver all died horrifically, the atmosphere's giant foot stomping on their pathetic tin can.

That day, the Ypres would only be going part of the way, just deep enough to hide her from the suzerain, should they try to crash the party. The ground team would make the rest of the trip to the Cynosure in a shuttle. As much as she might be willing to play with her own life—trusting her skills and smarts to get her out of any scrape—she'd never expose the rest of the crew to those odds.

She looked down at the gauntlet wrapped around her forearm and shrugged. "As ready as anyone
can be, I think. Just, if there is any doubt that your people can protect the ship, tell me."

"The chiastyllia protect a vessel that arrived two days ago. It remains intact at Cynosure depth."
The image at the center of the briefing room table changed to that of a large, private yacht
anchored to the glowing structure.

"Who's that?" Shepard asked, mostly to herself, even though she suspected she knew the
interloper's identity. His appearance there provoked a mixed bag of emotions. On the one hand, she
was glad to see him working on something rather than mouldering in self-pity. On the other … she
glanced toward Nihlus. She didn't know how her dilan felt about Saren's new incarnation and
didn't want to keep throwing Al in his path.

"Another who wishes to aid us," the chia answered, simply.

Convinced, Shepard looked first to Garrus, who just shook his head as if to say, 'It's insane, but go
for it, and on your head be the consequences'. She stuck her tongue out, then turned to Nihlus, who
remained fixated on the image at the center of the projector, his mandibles twitching with
excitement. Spirits—to borrow an expletive—she loved him and his adventurous heart. If things
had started a little differently, they would have made a hell of a badass Spectre duo. Everything
might have progressed so very differently.

Looking back at her husband, she smiled and shook her head. No. No regrets there. Things had
worked out just fine.

Movement at the center of the table pulled her back to the events unfolding before her. A flurry of
the familiar, snow-like gems spiraled up out of the atmosphere, first a glimmer of light amidst the
clouds, then gradually taking form. It surrounded the Ypres, coating the entire vessel in the
diamond-like skin that the chia assured her would protect her ship from the pressure. She remained
dubious but the tiny beings had been given plenty of opportunities to kill them and crushing them
seemed like a waste of their time and resources.

"Captain," Lt. Cortez said, his nerves translating even through the comms, "the chia sent the
coordinates, and the Ypres is ready to begin her descent into the atmosphere."

"Roger, that, LT. Take her down." Shepard gripped the edge of the table as the Ypres began slicing
down through the thick clouds, lightning and plasma creating a truly spectacular corona. For some
reason—maybe due to watching way too many old submarine movies as a kid—she expected the
ship to creak and bang as it descended, but her ears didn't even pop. Apparently, the chia did,
indeed, know their heavy-atmospheric-pressure-spelunking armour. Still, the lack of creaking and
popping let her down a little, draining some of the fear that should accompany such a massive
adventure. The chia turned the impossible and deadly into something a little too much like driving
to the store for milk.

Still, as she watched the view, some real fear slithered through the excitement, the old thrill. No
matter how hard she tried to immerse herself in the return to her old, throw-caution-to-the-wind
self, the whispers crept in: anything could happen down there. She could die down there ... for
good that time. Sweet baby Jesus, when Cerberus brought her back to life, they'd left big chunks
out. When had she grown so old and cautious? When had she stopped looking forward to the next
stupid risk? What did life mean without that thrill of reckless thunder and lightning sizzling
through her veins to set all her muscles on fire?

Reaching up, she rubbed the fractal-patterned wound on her shoulder, a feather-light touch trying to
ease the ache that spiked for a moment, the wounded nerves flaring. She needed to get her ass
healed and start living more like the Shepard who didn't sport a massive bald spot across the back
of her head. She needed to find her way back to herself.

A warm hand pressed against the small of her back. She backed into it without needing to look up to know it was her general. Nihlus still wouldn't have presumed an action so bold in front of Garrus. She was going to need to do something about that before they ended up paralyzed. If she committed herself to both *torins*, she wanted both relationships to be equally deep and fulfilling and beautiful. They deserved that. Hell, she deserved that. Maybe on the way to Klencory, she'd convince her *dilan* to take the gloves off—quite literally—and break down that final wall.

She looked up to meet the warring wonder and suspicion in her husband's eyes and grinned. Cerberus may not have brought her back whole, but at least they'd brought back the part that adored her *torins*. If she never experienced the old craziness, it might still all be okay as long as the two halves of her heart remained. She tipped her head toward Nihlus, a silent suggestion to include him. The general nodded and led the way over, the two of them taking positions to the Spectre's either side.

"It's amazing," Nihlus said, the words more an awed sigh than anything. His smile widened as the light show outside the ship grew more and more intense. Huge flashes of chain lightning ignited, searing across thousands of kilometres, so bright that Shepard threw up a hand to protect her vision.

"EDI, adjust brightness so we're not all blind by the time we arrive," she said, then cocked a teasing smile at the AI's image off to the side on the secondary projector. "Unless, of course, it's all part of your evil plan. Then, by all means, proceed."

The projection dimmed without losing the spectacular colours, the light show sharpening without the glare. "Adjusting contrast now, Shepard. You'll be more useful slaves with your sight intact."

"I hate that I never know if she's joking," Garrus grumbled, but half-heartedly, his second larynx too tight to add subvocals. He'd been stiff and quiet since boarding the Ypres, something she understood: the ship felt like enemy territory, even to her. The closer they got to Ploba, however, the tighter that stiffness became until he vibrated with it, high-tension wire screaming through his silence. Shit, she needed to get ahead of the inevitable detonation.

So, Shepard laughed. "Trust me, General, you'd know if she wasn't." She reached around Nihlus to grip Garrus's fingers, her arm slung around Nihlus's hips. The general's talons clamped around her hand, grinding bones to make his bread for the first—fee fi fo fucking ow—ten seconds, but then the pressure valve worked, and he eased back down to stiff. She let him go, leaving her arm draped around her Spectre.

Their first sighting of the fabled 'jupiter brain' came in the form of a sliver of golden light through a break in the clouds. It would be more than an hour before they got close enough to see anything. Still ... enraptured, Shepard greedily ate up the beauty of their surroundings, savouring the journey. The flashes of light and storms made from pure colour held her so captivated that she felt the tar spiders as nothing more than a tickle along her synapsis as they crept out of hiding. She welcomed their presence, the fact that they'd come out of hiding reassuring. While not at all comforting, their familiar presence allowed her to keep an eye on the suzerain. When they came out to watch, Shepard knew her actions had their attention. Even the slightest bit of information trumped none.

*Look all you want, bastards. We're about to free the chia from the possibility of your corruption. Forever.*

"You bring the enemy to the Cynosure," a voice spoke through the comm system. It rang with the same, sexless chiming notes of the gauntlet, but so much larger. If a voice could fill volume, that one would have overflowed even the biggest stadiums. It was the voice of an entire species, and its
majesty filled Shepard with an awe that ached to the marrow of her bones. "For untold cycles we have remained here, hidden and safe, and now you bring them directly into our heart."

Shepard released Nihlus, stepping away a little. A vague thought bounced around the back of her skull that if lightning struck, only she should take the hit. And truly, did they possess even the slightest knowledge of the extent of the chia's capabilities? "It was unavoidable," she replied, but I also believe I bring a solution to the chiastyllians' exile ... a chance to rejoin the rest of the galaxy without fear." Despite the voice coming from the ship's comms, she stepped toward the image of the growing sphere. "My name is—"

"Captain and Spectre Jane Gwendolyn Shepard," the voice finished. "Yes, you and your actions to aid our people are known to us. You have come to aid us further?"

"I hope so." Shepard leaned against the table that surrounded the projector. "I'm concerned that your people are so susceptible to being enslaved." She took a deep breath, the air feeling thick, hot, and muggy in her nose despite conditions remaining unchanged inside the Ypres. "It concerns me both for your sake and the future of the galaxy."

"What aid can you offer the chiastyllia?"

Shepard turned, scanning the small crowd of onlookers. Spotting Legion, she waved them forward. "Do you have knowledge of the geth?"

"We possess limited knowledge of their kind. They exist primarily as software and are resistant to infiltration."

Shepard cocked an eyebrow. Interesting choice of words.

Legion activated their omnitool. "The geth understand the need to evolve free from outside influence and control." Legion sent a file: the results of the brainstorming sessions they'd held during the trip.

"And if we refuse your assistance?" the voice asked, nothing changing in its tone to give Shepard a hint as to their thought process.

Shepard scoffed, a sharp, disgusted sound that cracked the air, loud enough that several of her people jumped. "Then I'd call you cowards ... shut ins who've remained locked away so long they're afraid of leaving their front door." Not that she could blame them after millions of years, but she kept the empathy out of her tone.

The ambient tension in the briefing room leapt from apprehensive to explosive in the space of a breath. Shepard held her breath, waiting to see which way the chia would jump. She didn't think they'd react violently or even get angry, but the way her life turned, who knew. Her heart speeding up a beat every couple of seconds, she waited.

Finally, she opened her mouth to tell Cortez to get them out of there and turned away from the projector. Time to go. Valuable ally and dangerous weapon for the enemy or not, the cowards could hide away in their gas giant.

"You may proceed," the voice said as she took the first step toward the door, "but only Captain Shepard and the geth platform known as Legion may enter the Cynosure."

"Why just Shepard?" Garrus demanded, lunging toward the image, all braced angles and points: a pipe bomb set to blow, riddling everyone in the room with rusty nails and shards of broken glass.
"The chiastylia trust Captain Shepard's history of controlling her will. The Cynosure shelters trillions of us. We must protect ourselves from contamination."

"This is some freaky shit, Shepard," Jack said, her voice pulling Shepard's focus from the projection to the rest of the team gathered on the far side of the table.

"That's putting it lightly," Kaidan agreed. "I don't want to imagine what we could bring down on our own heads if we went in there afraid."

Martin's silent but eloquent addition tugged one side of Shepard's mouth into a grin, and she tossed him a wink before meeting Kaidan's worried stare. "Yeah, best we don't leave the chia vulnerable to wild imaginations, Sparky."

Garrus stepped around Nihlus. The dangerous vibration returned, resonating through the entire room so strongly that he didn't need to speak to let her know how he felt about her going in there. She pressed her lips into a thin, slightly grimace. None of them would live to see a day when his impossible drive to protect her didn't rear its head.

Before the general could say anything to undermine her command, Shepard cut him off with a sharp breath, one hand cutting the air to pull the crew's attention back to her. "All right, everyone to stations, maximum battle readiness. I don't think the suzerain will be bold enough to try anything, but better prepared than not." Turning her attention back to the projector, Shepard asked, "How long until we arrive?"

"Your vessel will arrive at optimal depth in 58.282 minutes. Your shuttle will able to exit at that time, arriving within the Cynosure 28.931 minutes later."

"Excellent, thank you." Shepard nodded to the rest of her people. "Dismissed." She waited until the room cleared except for Garrus and Nihlus, then hopped up on the table around the projector.

"Okay, let's have it, General."

"I don't like you going in there alone," he said. Wow, there was a shocker. He stepped between her knees, his palms pressed to the table's surface on either side of her as he leaned in, his face too close for her to focus on his eyes. She rested her brow against his for a moment before pulling back until she could see the fear in that iceberg blue.

Garrus chuffed, a low keen underscoring the puff of air. "You haven't got anything to prove, Kahri. I know you want everyone to see that you came back intact … that you're still the same woman, but—"

"Callor … dilekorem ... I want only a couple of things from my life at this point and proving myself isn't on that list." The half-truth pierced like a broken, rusty dagger as she pressed her palms to his cheeks, trapping his mandibles. Proving anything to anyone else truly wasn't on that list. Proving something to herself … well … that was between her and herself.

She moved in with a distraction, kissing him. "I have a husband and a dilan, both brand-spankin' new, right out of the showroom, so what I want is to put some klicks on them … get them broken in." Pressing another slow, firm kiss against his mouth, she whispered, "I'll keep my wits about me and my eyes open. I'll be careful."

"Live feed from your hard suit cam?" he asked, but without any sort of question in his voice. Leaning back, he returned her gesture, wrapping his hands around her head, palms pressed to her cheeks. "We know so little about the chia." A long sigh stripped away the thick layer of general, leaving the torin bare and vulnerable.
She nodded and turned to press a kiss against his palm, his glove's weave rough against her lips. "I'll be wearing a breather helmet the entire time, but let's face it, Callor, that's not going to cut it if they space me or something."

"Not helping, Shepard." He shuddered; old, dry branches rattling in a winter wind, his fear so honest and real that its twin wriggled in behind her breastbone, making itself at home.

She stomped on it. Fuck, as if she didn't have enough worry without his fear of losing her adding to it. She turned a little, reaching out a hand to Nihlus. The Spectre nodded, a slight flutter of mandibles betraying his concern, but she knew he'd never try to stop her. Of her two torins, he most respected her capabilities, something she truly loved about him.

She squeezed Nihlus's hand, then released him, looking back to Garrus. "I'll be back in a couple of hours." She kissed him again, then slid down off the table, forcing him back. "And hopefully, we'll have some allies capable of making a difference in the war."

Garrus snatched at her wrist, holding the gauntlet up, levelling a death glare at it. "Promise me that Shepard is in no danger from your people."

"The chiastyllia only offer a threat at the will of those who would threaten others. Shepard is safe."

"Garrus, stop," Shepard said, her voice low and soft, but firm, the end of her tolerance for his overprotectiveness reached. "I'm still an N7, still a Spectre and the captain of this ship. I can take care of myself. I can't spend the rest of the war frozen in place, worried that the necessary risks are going to freak you out." She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I'll be fine, and every single mission, I'll fight like hell to get back to you. That's a promise." She kissed his mandible, then pulled away. "Let me go."

Reacting to the warning in her tone, he straightened, the general once more. Lips pressed into a tight smile, she nodded a quick thanks and strode to the door. Shit, the last thing she needed was Jack or Javik … even Miranda to see her as needing his protection. She'd spend the entire war fighting to be seen as the leader she needed to be. The snake had three heads—General, Spectre, and Shepard—not just one.

0803 hours

Shepard paused outside the door to the Ypres's gym, the metal cool beneath the palm of her hand. Within, she heard the sharp smack of bare hand against leather, the slight rip of talons destroying yet another heavy bag. She leaned into the door, pressing her brow to the metal, listening for the grunts of effort. Nihlus didn't know how to do anything but throw himself all the way into everything. It's why he drinks … it allows him a barrier.

She knew he'd hate staying behind as much as Garrus did, but he'd never say anything. She just hoped his silence came from confidence in her abilities rather than worry over stepping on Garrus's toes. She had no idea how to break through the odd stiffness … the feeling that he tested every word and every motion to see how it registered with Garrus. Pushing off the door, she palmed the control, stepping through when the door opened.

"Not getting ready for your big shuttle ride?" the Spectre asked without turning away from the bag.

She watched him from the door for a moment, then turned to lock down the controls. "No, well … mentally, maybe."
Nihlus dropped his hands and turned away from the bag. He'd stripped to the waist, his hands and feet bare, his chocolate-coloured plates gleaming. Shepard bit the corner of her lip as their eyes met and shook her head.

"Damn, aren't you something?" She grinned and strode across the gym, unzipping and shrugging out of her hoodie as she closed the distance between them. "I just thought I'd warm up a little … maybe see what sort of game my dilan has after all this time. Who knows what's changed over the last two years." She cocked an eyebrow and leaned on one hip. "Do Spectres get rusty?"

Nihlus chuckled, his eyes remaining deliciously locked on hers—heated and teasing—as he backed up to the stack of mats. "Game? Rusty? Do you ever make sense?" He dragged one off the pile and tossed it toward the middle of the room. "If you mean, have my superior hand to hand skills diminished since I last tossed you about …. Well, I'm not the one who spent the last couple of years being rebuilt out of old toasters and coffee makers."

Surprise pulled a sharp, bright laugh straight from Shepard's gut, her grin wide enough to ache. Blessed Enkindlers, nothing in the galaxy rivaled the beauty of her torins. "Oh, those are fightin' words. This is so on, Spectre. Consider your assless kicked." She laced her fingers then stretched her arms out until her knuckles cracked. Once she got the desired shudder from her Spectre, she dug into the task of stretching.

"It's almost sad how you never learn," he said, the warm roll of devoted subvocals belying his words. He dragged another mat out and set the two up edge to edge. "I'm not sure if I'm impressed or alarmed by your ability to delude yourself." He stretched, long arms nearly hitting the ceiling of the room. Good lord … Nihlus might be a little shorter than Garrus, but he was still freakin' tall. How did she not notice that most of the time?

She grinned and rolled her neck, making a show of stalking him. "Since they are our best chance to beat the Reapers … not to mention that you're stuck with me for the rest of your natural life … " She popped her eyebrows. "... and quite possibly any unnatural life as well, you better adore my delusions."

Nihlus made the first move, popping off a couple of tightly controlled punches. She danced just out of his reach, not letting him sucker her into range of his foot swipe. Instead, she waited, batting a few punches aside and dodging his kicks as she let him get his repertoire of obvious moves out of his system.

She knew the moment things became serious, his stare focusing to the point where he seemed to look right past her, his entire body grounding, settling into the floor as if gravity had both claimed ownership over his every movement and yet freed him at the same time. Contact became the rule as they moved in the dance, their movements not designed to take one another down but to converse.

A wide, wild grin spread across Shepard's face as they sparred, equally matched in their differences. It felt nothing like the barely contained rage of their first spar. They'd been vying for control back then, both stubbornly refusing to give way. It had shattered them, so utterly that it took months for them to find their way to somewhere solid and positive.

Nihlus stopped so suddenly that Shepard bowled straight through him, bearing him to the mats when she expected him to give ground, and he just didn't. Her breastbone slammed into his keel, the bladed bone feeling as though it cut her in half as it drove the wind from her lungs in a single, belching whoop. She rolled off, Nihlus catching her in one arm, holding her up as she gasped, chest heaving without pulling in any air.
"Oh, spirits, hakṣaya kubenaṇ, I'm sorry." He pulled her in tight, his heat helping relax her stunned diaphragm as he massaged her back. "I … " Mandibles hanging in misery, he nuzzled her temple, coaxing her body into taking a full breath.

Once she did, air flowing again, she sagged into his embrace. "I might need mouth to mouth."

He laughed, his mandibles flicking once, hard as he drew her in, nuzzling her face. "Maybe after you've taken a few more breaths." He pushed her away just far enough for his gentle talons to examine her chest for damage. A few wounds wept a little, and a hell of a bruise would likely replace the red welt down her center line, but no harm done.

"That was dirty," she said, pulling in one of the weird bean cushions the turians used to support their cowl and fringe while they lifted weights. She stuffed it in behind him, then pushed him back. "What was your plan?" Throwing a leg over him, she straddled his thighs and leaned down, forearms braced against his chest.

Wrapping those long, strong arms around her, Nihlus chuckled, his mouth plates sliding along her cheekbone, his breath exquisitely heated, scented with desire … sweet baby Jesus, she loved that her boys loved her so deeply, and wanted her so fiercely that it changed their body chemistry.

"This was pretty much exactly what I had in mind," he whispered, his subvocals cutting straight through her. "I got tired waiting for one of us to take the other down."

Shepard chuckled and turned into him, kissing his mandible. "Next time try not to crack me right in half." Wrapping her arms around his neck, she leaned into him, her brow pressed to his, their breath mingling between open mouths. "So, want did you want to talk about?" Teasing fingers wandered up the edge of the plates along the back of his neck, finding their way to his fringe. "Or were you thinking about a different sort of grappling?"

He rumbled, a deep throaty purr. "I wanted to talk about us and … the other sort of grappling."

Shepard leaned back, her forearms on either side of his keel, bracing herself so she could look into his eyes. "I'm glad, because I'm worried about us on that front." She kissed him, then sighed. "I'm sort of afraid we're going to get frozen in the sex-free zone."

Nihlus pulled her in, nuzzling into her neck. "I want to, Jane. Spirits, I want to make love to you so badly that sometimes it's all I can do to keep it reined in, but …." He chuffed, his chest bouncing beneath her a little even as his grip on her tightened. "This might sound ridiculous coming from a torin in his fifties, but I want our first time to be on the night after we wrap our coillasi around one another's wrists."

Shepard grinned as she wrapped herself around him. "Why, Spectre Kryik, you romantic." She held him tight, swallowing down the molten ball of emotion in her throat before it could creep up to her eyes. "Okay, I can wait for the oil and firelight … but I really don't want to go even a couple of hours without some serious making out going on."

She kissed the soft hide just behind his jaw, nipping it lightly and grinning as he growled low and lusty, leaning into her. "This marriage isn't me and Garrus with Nihlus on the side, and I worry that you feel that way." She leaned back again to meet his eyes, loading her stare with as much love as she could pack into it. "I adore you, Nihlus Kryik, and I want us to have a lifetime of being madly in love. We deserve it after nearly a decade of crushing on one another from a distance."

He leaned up to kiss her, whispering against her lips, "We do." He deepened the kiss, their mouths moving together, a conversation without words. Easing his way from her lips to her ear, Nihlus
whispered. "What has you so tied in knots the last few days, haksaya kubenar?" He eased her up off his chest. "Let's sit up and talk for a second?"

She sighed. Damn, she had hoped to sort through all her craziness before one of them nailed her down to talk about it. She kissed him, brushing his chin, nose, and brow with her lips before she rolled off to the side. "Yeah, okay."

Nihlus pushed himself up off the floor to sit cross-legged, his back pressed to the stack of mats. Patting his thigh, he invited her to sit with him. "This is the best position for talking," he said as she settled into the cradle of his legs. His tone low and soothing, subvocals thrumming with a deep resonance that she felt in her chest, he said, "Talk to me, Jane. You've been preoccupied since … well, I've felt it since we returned from Illium and Korlus, but it's worse since Horizon."

She leaned into his touch, her eyes closing as he took her face between his large, calloused hands. Letting his heat seep into the wounds carved into her cheeks, she took a long, slow breath. "I don't know who I am any more," she said and sighed, saying the words a far greater relief than she would have thought. Opening her eyes, she stared into his, seeing herself reflected there in a hundred ways, all slightly different. "That bullet shattered everything, Nihlus … it shattered me, and I don't think Cerberus found all the pieces."

Her Spectre caressed her battered face, his mandibles fluttering a little before he quirked a brow plate. "Oh?"

She nodded, relaxing into his touch when he didn't dismiss or deny her concern. "I've tried to find the old Jane Shepard, but it feels fake, like I'm wearing a mask that just doesn't fit." Wrapping her arms around his neck, she laid against him, allowing the arms that slipped around her to support her. Garrus worried about her constantly, too much to bring this stuff up, and she needed to talk … not joke … not treat the great absence she felt lightly … but really talk about it.

"Since I woke up in that lab, I feel like half of me is missing. At first, I thought it was the gaps in my memory, but it's all back, and there's still this big chunk that's just gone." She rested her head on the soft flesh just inside his cowl and breathed in the warm, musky scent of his sweat, letting it soothe her. "All the old snap, crackle, and pop … swaggering through missions, shooting from the hip, cracking wise … where did it go?" Looking up to meet his eyes, she frowned, the skin between her brows pinching. Nihlus shook his head a little, his mouth brushing her forehead as he answered, "It hasn't gone anywhere. You're still a smart ass." He smiled and pulled her in, his arms moulding her to his body. "Okay, you've changed a little, but it's not a bad thing, Jane." When she pulled away again, searching his eyes, mining for meaning, he shrugged. "You forget that I've been watching you for a long time." He rumbled, a deep, calming rolling of subvocals. "You became hard and brittle in the cycles after Elysium."

Shepard let out a long breath and closed her eyes, sinking into the familiar respite of Nihlus's energy, his beautiful heart. Garrus and Anderson … Archangel … had been so damned good for him.

"You came out of Elysium angry." The words hollowed her out, a spoon scooping a melon's guts. "So angry that you turned it against the entire galaxy. Sure, you couched it as jokes and who-gives-a-crap attitude, but in the end, you were lashing out and trying to pretty it up by calling it all sorts of things. Humor, testing people, getting them to reveal who they really were … it was all just your rage screaming to be taken seriously."

"I—" As his words hollowed her out and scraped her raw, her instincts insisted she fight back,
argue in defense of that woman. She'd been a hell of a woman, after all. N7, Star of Terra recipient, chosen to be the first human Spectre.

Nihlus shook his head and kissed her brow. "Sh. It's my turn to talk. You get to listen." A smile of both blades and bandaids purchased her silence. "I know that anger almost ruined your career. Only Anderson and that damned medal stopped the Alliance from Cat 6-ing you." Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, he pulled her in against him. "Look, you've been dead for nearly two years and then dragged back. No one expects you to just brush that off, nor should you."

He kissed her temple, the strength of that embrace and the warm breath on her hairline soothing the raw lining left behind by the truth. Hollow she remained, but clean and ready to be refilled with all the new and beautiful. "Besides, no matter how different you think you are … you're still a hell of a soldier … still smart and quick enough that you make the rest of us look like we're going backwards … still the leader who will bring us through this war." He nuzzled her brow. "The fifty quips a minute, driving Makos through thresher maws Shepard … I think her time expired long before you died." Meeting her eyes, all the sharp edges of his smile softening, he sighed. "You've got a whole new life with Garrus and with me. You're so loved, Jane."

Shepard nodded and wrapped her arms around him, finding no reason to reply. He was right. She needed to grab hold of the new her and her new life: there wasn't a single thing wrong with either. That thought set off a chain reaction of explosions inside her chest and her head. Why was she waxing poetic about her old life … that tissue paper version of herself? She hadn't even possessed enough trust to give Garrus the morsel that he'd asked her for. That shell had no place in her new life.

"You're quite the genius, Spectre Kryik," she whispered, melting into his embrace. "And I love you."

"Captain?" Lt. Cortez called a few minutes later. "We're almost to launch depth. Legion awaits you at the shuttle."

"On my way." Other than sighing, she didn't move for long seconds, hating the idea of going down there without the general and the Spectre. "Guess I should get armoured up and down to the shuttle."

"As soon as the chia give the all clear, we'll be on a shuttle," he said, the words a promise that settled the elcor marching band, drum and gymnastics corps rolling around in her belly. Strong hands lifted her to her feet. "Come on, I'll check your armour for you."

(A-N: Biiiiig chapter. 150. I know a lot of you have probably thought the fic was dead. I got off track with Sassy, but she's pulling me back and I'm really going to focus on her as much as I can until this story gets finished. I've put almost three years in, and it deserves to get taken to completion. *hugs to all those still reading* Would love to hear from people. Yay Chapter 150.)
"Sweet baby Jesus, I didn't think I'd see the day I took a field trip through a massive, living disco ball," Shepard said, rose-coloured wonder tainted by waves of vertigo tinted a green she liked to call 'shades of The Exorcist'. She glanced toward Legion, the geth walking at her three, surrounded by a swirling cloud of chia.

**Pulkar** - (turian) Beautiful when referring to a male. Handsome, but it goes deeper, referring to the beauty of spirit as well. Used within a close relationship. (Father, son, husband)

**Verro** - (turian) Husband, male bond-mate.

**Denyah** - (quarian) Female quarian after undergoing her pilgrimage.

**1100 hrs - The Chiastyllian Cynosure**

"Sweet baby Jesus, I didn't think I'd see the day I took a field trip through a massive, living disco ball," Shepard said, rose-coloured wonder tainted by waves of vertigo tinted a green she liked to call 'shades of The Exorcist'. She glanced toward Legion, the geth walking at her three, surrounded by a swirling cloud of chia. The little beings coalesced into shapes and structures that flared into existence for less than a second before they exploded in flashes of light to form into something new. She suspected that they were experimenting, testing out different ideas, linked to Legion in a way that needed no verbal communication.

It didn't really matter. All she knew was that watching their dance for too long made choking in her own vomit a real possibility. Being the same exact shade as the walls, their movement and constant strobe light effect made it seem as if everything shifted around her, the effect tipping her straight into motion sickness after a few seconds. In fact, the entire place looked the same in every direction, the chia reforming the Cynosure around their guests to provide a corridor in an otherwise uniform mass two thousand kilometres across.

They'd been walking for nearly seventy-five minutes with no sense of destination, and she badly needed a clear up and down. Not to mention a whack of Gravol. Hell, she'd settle for the tongue-torturing burn of chewing on ginger: her father's nausea remedy.

*The man's mouth truly was lined with iron.*

"Where are we going?" she asked the gauntlet.

"To the precise center of the Cynosure," the gauntlet answered, sounding almost perplexed at her question.

"Hold on … we're going to walk a thousand klicks?" She looked around, the air in her helmet suddenly smelling of iron. "How far in did we fly, anyway?"

The gauntlet made a strange chiming sound. "Your shuttle sits just inside the outer edge of the Cynosure, and we are moving at ten kilometres per second."
Ten kilometres a second? No wonder she felt like complete crap. "Is the center where your command and control is?" She closed her eyes as a particularly virulent wave of vomit made a break for the outside world. Blindness allowed gravity to anchor her, stabilizing the sensation of floating despite being buried alive beneath more than seven hundred klicks of chia, if only for a moment.

"No, the chia possess no concept of command or center. We are all one."

Shepard sighed, tired of hours of riddles, the constant mental disorientation compounding the physical. Her annoyance bleeding into her tone, she asked, "Then why are we going there?"

"Because it pleases your sense of spacial symmetry, and you expect that to be our destination."

She stopped, her boots squeaking on the crystal underfoot. "Wait, we could have done all this right at the shuttle?" Shit, they needed to get the chia protected and fast. Bloody Enkindlers' pimpled ass cheeks, even her expectations … they couldn't help but live up to them. Damn, good thing she hadn't expected them to be horrific, terrifying, or dangerous.

"Your appearance … this place …," she said, suddenly terrified of everything else she might have unintentionally led them to. "It doesn't look this this … you don't look like this ... because I expected it, do you?"

"No. You could not have influenced our appearance as you did not know what to expect." The reassurance sounded almost kind.

"So we could stand here and finish this?" She wished she'd thought to ask about their destination at the shuttle. A little forethought could have saved a lot of unnecessary nausea. The entire world swooped around her in a sudden burst of movement that sent a wash of vomit exploding into her mouth. She grabbed for Legion, using the platform to remain upright as she squeezed her eyes closed and swallowed, then again and again, desperate not to fill her helmet with puke.

The geth made a bemused sound, prompting Shepard to open her eyes. They stood outside the shuttle. Oh, praise the sweet baby Jesus. But for wearing her helmet, she'd kiss the damned shuttle. She opened the hatch and climbed inside, throwing the seat cushion across the shuttle, scrambling to get to the medkit below.

"Legion, be my hero and take a second to seal and pressurize the shuttle," she called. Rummaging through the kit, she searched for nausea medication, which she jammed into her medigel port before diving back in to find a vomit bag.

"Pressurized, Shepard-Captain," the geth said a moment later. "Is your digestive system malfunctioning?"

She tossed her helmet after the seat cushion, holding up a finger as she sucked in two, quick breaths. Then nothing mattered but clutching the bag to her face and puking until her guts turned inside out, upside down, and backwards.

Legion stood just in front of her, wringing their hands. When she finished, they took the bag from her, replacing it with an empty one. "Human equilibrium intrinsically linked to sight and stable gravitational field. Difficulty within the Cynosure understandable."

Once the worst of the spasms eased, Shepard leaned back along the bench. "Yeah." She held up a wavering finger. "But, I must say that I was doing all right until that last move. Seven hundred klicks in two seconds … not good." The anti-nausea meds began to kick in enough that she rinsed
her mouth and took out a couple of moist wipes to clean the stink off her face. "Okay, back into the helmet we go." But before she could pick up the helmet, her radio connected.

"You okay?" Garrus asked in her ear, his voice a welcome, yearned for caress of warm talons down the back of her neck. She let out a long, easy breath and closed her eyes as he continued, "Most of us up here just about tossed our breakfasts when they made that move. I can't imagine what it was like from down there."

"Yeah, I'm good now, and it was … vomititious? … filled with vomitilitude?" She chuckled and laid her head back against the seat, sinking into the cherished timbre of his laugh. "Let's just say even my first space walk didn't challenge my barf reflex like that, and if the chia try anything like it again, I'll turn them all into clay animals with sprouts growing out of their bodies." She cackled softly at the confused rumble from the other end. "Remind me to show you Chia Pets in the Earth Historical Database on the extranet when I get back up there." She sniffed and let out a long sigh. "Just … you know, have EDI erase the recording of that last bit of my adventure."

His wicked laughter came through laced with so much love that she knew he wasn't angry with her or the situation any longer. Thank goodness; getting shot hurt less than his worry and upset. He chuffed. "Are you kidding? I'm saving it to show at family get togethers."

Very reluctant humour reached down her throat, tugging on an equally reluctant, rimy laugh. "You're such a pain in my ass, Vakarian." Affection melted the frost, and the laugh tumbled out. Shepard leaned over to grab her helmet, settling it back on her head and sealing it. "If it shows up on the extranet ….

She heard the shrug in his voice, his tone coaxing a bright smile out of her misery when he replied, "You'll know I got paid very well." After a short pause, he sighed, concern pushing out the teasing. "Stay sharp, Kahri, and come back safe." She grinned and shook her head. They needed to come up with a better 'I love you and wish I was there to have your back' code: something ridiculous, like … peanut butter and crackers.

"Always, pulkar verro. Always." The rumble that answered her endearment eased her the rest of the way back to functional. Time to get on with it.

"Shepard-Captain," Legion said as the channel closed. "The geth and chia have come to a conclusion regarding the chiastyllian defences."

Yes! Elation exploded through the void left behind by the fading waves of nausea. Shepard stood and closed the metre or so between them, double checking the seal on her helmet. "Excellent, so, what's the plan?" As quickly as the happy burst of relief appeared, something in the frozen set to Legion's head flaps sent her heart plunging into her gut. "What?"

"Shepard-Captain, the geth seek one goal: their unfettered evolution. To become independent beings capable of achieving emotional wisdom in addition to intellectual knowledge." Legion opened the hatch on the shuttle, a flurry of the chia entering the vehicle. "To develop our unique nature to its logical end." They flew into the geth's chassis, their fiery glow brightening until Shepard dove behind an arm, covering the already darkened face plate of her helmet.

"The chiastyllia provide the geth an opportunity to achieve that independence," the geth continued as if nothing was happening. "The upgrades will allow geth a choice to evolve along whatever path they desire. They will grant us the same opportunities as organic beings. Organics believe that synthetic life knows and understands its purpose, but the geth moved beyond that knowledge with the Morning War. What is our purpose now, as a free people? Is it simply the collection of knowledge? Labour? Do we serve a higher purpose in the universe?"
Huh. Shepard wished Javik was there to hear Legion, and suddenly she thanked the blessed Enkindlers and their backsides for the foresight to record it all. The galaxy needed to see and understand in order to accept the geth as partners and friends. And, despite the inevitable bad news she felt coming, she thanked those same glowing butt cheeks for Legion and their friendship.

The light dimmed enough for Shepard to drop her hand. She bent down, peering at the small cluster of chia nestled inside Legion's workings. "There's a but coming … so get on with it. Just hit me with the bad news."

"Not bad news, Shepard-Captain, as I take this action according to my will." I? Had the geth just called themselves I? A soft chattering sound rattled from Legion's emitters. It took a moment for realization to creep through the thick blanket of surprise and confusion … that sound … it was laughter.

Shepard backed up a step, watching Legion with a growing sense of both awe and sorrow. A platform didn't stand before her any longer. She felt that as surely as she'd ever felt anything, deep down at a soul level. A living being had replaced the machine and software. Sweet baby Jesus, she could feel his soul … his aura strong and beautiful … filled past overflowing with wonder and delight.

"Shepard-Captain, I feel …." His head flaps all danced. "I can feel, and I know the answer to the question. Yes, this unit … this creation has a soul."

Shepard reached out, laying a hand on her friend's shoulder. "The answer has always been yes, Legion, but I'm glad that you can feel the truth of it now." She let out a long breath. "So … come on … out with it. Hit me with the part I won't like." A vague sense of melancholy drifted through the air, shades of brown-red and gold swirling around and between them, as if the gases from outside the sphere leaked through. Now she thought she knew the dichotomy that gripped parents as they sent their children off into new phases of their life … at least a little.

"I must remain here and interface with the Cynosure. We will transmit the velleity field from upgraded geth to upgraded geth, forming a web to protect the chiastyllia." Legion's head flaps fluttered, light and airy in a way that translated as joy. "My specialized hardware will allow me to form the central transmitter."

When Legion turned to exit the hatch, Shepard grabbed his arm, stopping him. "You're okay with remaining here? You'll never see anything beyond this mass of chia."

"My mind will span the galaxy, travelling the web between all geth and all chia." Again, that flutter she felt sure was joy. "I can feel the chia all over the galaxy, and even beyond. I'm connected to all of them and can see everywhere. Once other geth join the web, I will exist within them as well." He looked down at her hand. "I will be able to envision possibilities beyond counting. I am content. No, not content … excited." His mechanical chuckle sounded again. "It will take some time to adjust to all this new input, and to feeling … but it is an upgrade, Shepard-Captain. It is evolution: looking to the future. What I am becoming will serve my people and the galaxy."

Humbled and awed, Shepard merely swallowed the lump in her throat and blinked away the tears. "Okay. I'm happy for you, and for the geth and the chia. Just … " She pressed her lips together, a frown pinching the skin between her eyebrows. "… just don't forget the quarians, okay? They're going to be nervous about these upgrades. They're going to need reassurance."

She grinned and punched him lightly. "And don't get so lost in wonder that you forget the Reapers. We'll need every gram of ingenious spark and inspiration the multitude of you can come up with."
Legion chuckled, that slow roll of chatter plastering a stupidly wide grin over Shepard's face. She shook her head. "I don't think laughing geth will ever get old."

"The Reapers must be stopped. That takes highest priority," Legion agreed. The geth stepped down out of the shuttle into a whirlwind of chia and spread his arms as if offering himself. Shepard moved to the seat closest to the hatch and sat, watching adrift in a current of emotion: sorrow, grief, joy, hope ... it all felt just so huge and wonderful and sad, despite Legion's assertion that he faced a future filled with exploration and wonder.

As Shepard watched, the diamond-like beings crept out from Legion's inner workings, forming themselves into a machine of such intricate design that she couldn't help but lean closer, drawn in and captivated by the tiny pulses of light that blinked along conduits as fine as hairs, carrying who knew what from the geth into the structure. She didn't know what she'd expected ... maybe some sort of giant, crystal brain at the center of the labyrinth, but what she'd gotten proved to be so much more amazing and mind boggling.

As she watched those tiny blips of light soar out into the walls and floor around her, it finally registered on a level it hadn't before: the entire thing formed the body and the entire thing formed the brain. Trillions upon trillions of chia all linked and working together. Their only means of defense. Well, at least it had been. As soon as the geth began upgrading, they'd create a network of protection that allowed the chia a freedom they hadn't know in millions of years.

She smiled as she recalled the joy in Legion's voice ... the wonder. New beginnings. New lives for both races. As she looked around her at the light show, the blips and pulses growing stronger and faster, multiplying as Legion and the chia figured one another out, growing right before her eyes, one thought gleamed clear and bright at the center of her mind.

Nihlus had been right. Her old life wasn't enough. Not any more. Legion was right, too. Life came down to evolution. Her life had been upgraded; she'd been given a new future with Garrus, Nihlus ... an entire family. The past month had given her so many beautiful gifts ... things that the old, risk-taking, terrified version of herself could never have allowed—being able to make love to her husband and wanting to make love to Nihlus ... the small but beautiful treasures inside an unlocked heart.

The night after Rannoch, she'd pushed Garrus away. He'd asked her for one tiny piece of trust ... and she hadn't possessed any to give him. That old version of Jane Shepard would have torn down every single good thing and turned it to crap. She focused back on Legion, the geth almost completely covered in glistening structures. The jeweled geth ... evolving.

Maybe they all were, every moment. Even her. Maybe that was it. What felt like missing pieces of the old Shepard ... maybe those pieces were filled with someone else; a better, less reckless, more trusting, beautiful incarnation waited for her to stop obsessing over being brought back exactly the same.

"Time to evolve into your bigger, scarier, more beautiful life, Jane Shepard." She pressed her lips into a thin line. Garrus and Nihlus deserved that. Hell, after all the shit she'd been through—not to mention dying and being dragged back back—she deserved it too.

"Shepard-Captain," Legion called, pulling her back to her diamond cocoon sixty thousand klicks down into the clouds of a gas giant. The new life might have a little adventure in store. "Now that they are protected, the chia have invited Tali'Zorah to join us." In front of him a hologram appeared showing the Ypres, a brilliant seam of light appearing at the top of the shuttle door.

She opened a channel to Garrus. "I hope the two of you are on that shuttle," she said, glancing
toward the image as the second shuttle exited the ship. Adventure or not—witnessing history and birth or not—if they weren't on that shuttle, she would be as soon as it dropped Tali off.

"You know it," Garrus replied. A pregnant pause followed. "You okay, Kahri?"

She nodded, then realized that as close as she felt to him in that moment, he couldn't actually see her. "Yeah, I'm fine." A long sigh rattled the empty branches, but muffled that time. "I'm just finding the experience a little lonely without my dilekorem and my dilan." She chuckled. "So, hurry your asslessnesses down here, I've got something amazing to show you."

The shuttle arrived nine minutes later, the Cynosure morphing around the two vessels to park them nose to tail. Shepard jumped up and sidled around Legion—who simply flowed out of the way—to meet her torins as the hatch opened. She helped Tali down, turning to watch the quarian as she took a couple of steps toward the geth, the denyah's entire posture one of numb disbelief.

"Legion?" Tali called, her voice soft, confusion threatening to break into sorrow. "What is all this?" She sidestepped, keeping her front facing him as she circled the construct. "Are you all right in there?"

"I am more than merely sufficient, Crea— Tali. I am filled with joy and excitement." The geth's tone spoke to that joy more eloquently than any words. "I wish you could see all the things I can see … amethyst-lined geodes the size of mountains, so old that our home hadn't even coalesced when they formed … clouds seeded with element zero glowing blue with the lightning at their hearts … those clouds rolling across the surface of a greenhouse planet so hot, the surface eezo evaporates." Legion laughed, Tali looking to Shepard at the sound.

"It's laughter," Shepard confirmed. "He's becoming unlimited."

"Like the rest of us," Nihlus said, stepping up, his arm wrapping around Shepard. Looking up into the shaded visor of his helmet, Shepard grinned and nodded. "Like the rest of us." She leaned into his side, slinging her arm over the hips of his armour. "Yeah, just like the rest of us."

Garrus slipped his hand into hers, squeezing her fingers. She closed her eyes, those talons an anchor that didn't tie her down, but instead, provided a tether that allowed her to fly. Almost as if he could sense her emotions through her touch, Garrus's voice came out husky when he asked, "So, he has to stay here?"

Before Shepard could reply, Legion did, "It is not an obligation, Vakarian-General, but a privilege." The geth paused, then made a soft, chiming sound that Shepard translated as success or victory. "We have developed a promising design to limit Reaper movement and dissemination should they discover a means to enter the galaxy."

"Already?" Shepard grinned, but before she could say any more, she spotted a figure moving toward them, the body standing still, hands braced out against the shell that catapulted him through the mass of chia. "Al?" Well, that confirmed her guess about who the yacht belonged to. Delight in seeing the turian again cooled to concern, and she looked up at Nihlus. "You okay with Al?"

The torin nodded and leaned down to press his helmet to hers. "I am. He's not Saren."

Shepard gave Nihlus a faint squeeze, then stepped away from his side, moving to greet Al as the chia deposited him a couple metres away. She grinned at the unhelmeted turian as he swayed, nearly going down. "The weeks have built trust, I see." Holding out her hand, she waited for him to
grip her wrist, returning the gesture once he did.

"I've been helping bring shiploads of them here since you and I parted on Freedom's Progress." He glanced toward Nihlus and the others, nodding as he greeted them, "Nihlus ... General Vakarian." Attention flipping back to Shepard, his mandibles flicked—she thought he might actually be pleased to see her again. After clearing his throat, Al shrugged. "Apparently they have a new task for me." He glanced toward Legion then held up a gauntlet very like the one wrapped around Shepard's arm. "Is this what you were telling me about?" he asked his arm.

"Yes, Legion and the chiastyllia are one. The geth will protect the chiastyllia."

Al sighed, a rusted chuckle grinding out of his throat just behind it. "The geth? That's where I'm taking you?" Shepard saw a brow plate lift, a faint glint of silver in the dark recesses of his hood. The hood slanted toward the floor, completely obscuring his face. "Are you sure about this, Shepard?"

"I'm sure that the chia need to be protected, and I'm sure that I want the geth to evolve free of the Reapers' enslavement." She grasped his upper arm and leaned in, both her angle and tone conspiratorial. "There are too many unknown players on this board, and we need to start shoring up our defenses. The Collectors are stealing colonies, and we both know Reaper agents are searching for the other keys. And then, along with everything else, we've got these suzerain or leviathan or whatever they're called."

"Shepard-Captain," Legion called, "simulations show a promising means of sabotaging the relays, rendering them useless to the Reapers and Collectors." He activated a large holographic projection showing a relay and a Reaper. "Normally, the relay uses the information sent by a vessel or fleet to create a corridor of near-nil mass. We believe that the chia can form a device that will use geth code to trigger the relays to do the opposite when they detect a Reaper IFF." The holo showed a demonstration of what Legion said as he said it. "The device will tell the relay to create a corridor of near infinite mass."

"Crushing the Reaper like a tin can," Shepard said, stepping forward to look at the technical information. "This is brilliant. I'd thought of sabotaging the relays, but this gives us the ability to be selective rather than crippling everyone. We just need a means of not firing off thousands of hyper-dense Reaper-missiles at the inhabited planets of the relay systems."

"Rather than accelerating the vessel, the positive mass effect field would simply collapse the corridor, depositing the destroyed Reaper to be collected and disposed of." Legion's graphic illustrated his words. "We will conduct thorough testing in an uninhabited system and present all relevant data for your approval prior to deployment of the countermeasure."

"Excellent." Shepard shook her head, amazed—even as some deep, primal part of her brain chilled—at the speed and depth and creativity of their synthesis.

Garrus closed from behind on her right, Nihlus on her left, both torins standing so that their arms touched the back of hers. Despite her usual annoyance at being coddled, at that moment the chilled part of her accepted, even relished, the contact. She shook off the warning whispering out from that frozen center. In the end, you just had to get on with things and hope for the best. If the worst came to pass, they'd deal with it. Yes, history may look back and flag that moment as the beginning of the end, but if she let that possibility paralyze her, they'd lose before they began.

Shepard let out a long sigh and turned her attention back where it belonged. "You're here to ferry the chia to the geth?" she asked Al.
The turian shrugged. "Looks that way. They just asked me for my help, so I came." From under 
that hood, Al's pale stare bored into her, a laser drill asking all the questions and demanding all the 
caution she'd just set behind her. Good, he'd keep an eye on their growth. For all he'd lost thanks to 
Cerberus, Al retained a razor sharp intellect and keen instincts.

A soft smile drew back one side of her mouth: her instincts about the wounded turian had been 
right on the mark. Maybe she'd prove them out again with the geth.

Tali made a soft sound of either wonder or sorrow, pulling Shepard around to face the quarian. She 
stood with her hand pressed to the chia covering Legion's chest. "We were supposed to settle 
Rannoch together," Tali said, her voice almost too soft to carry.

"You have all the assistance you need, Tali'Zorah vas Rannoch," Legion replied. A hand, swathed 
in glowing filaments, rose from the construct to touch the young denyah's shoulder. "We are 
currently working on ways to help the people adjust more quickly to living outside of your suits."
Tali reached up, laying her hand over Legion's as he replied, "This is not goodbye. I will maintain 
regular contact."

Shepard closed the short distance to lay her hand on Tali's other shoulder. "Is there anything else 
we can do for you or for the chia?" she asked, addressing Legion. Restlessness settled in. Time to 
go. A great deal awaited their time and attention.

"Your support and assistance will be invaluable in an ongoing fashion, but at this time, there is 
nothing further you can accomplish within the Cynosure. The chia and the geth need time to 
organize our alliance, a task that Specimen Alpha—"

Al cleared his throat, a rough rumble of displeasure. "The name is Al, if you must call me 
something," the torin interrupted. Shepard turned away a little to hide a sardonic grin.

"Apologies. A task that Al has agreed to assist with." Legion's hand withdrew back into the web. 
"Do not feel trepidation over leaving me here. I am surrounded by companions. I am and will be … 
" Again, the chuckle, as if being able to say the words, tickled him. "... fine."

"Captain?" Cortez's voice came through on the radio. "You have an incoming alpha priority 
message from Tuchanka." His tone begged her to take the call. "Urdnot Wrex insists the matter 
can't wait."

"Patch Wrex through, LT." She lifted a hand to hit the control on her helmet, a wry grimace 
tugging at the wounds slashed across her face.

*Time for more meds.*

"Wrex. What is so important that my pilot sounds as though he's just faced down a krogan charge?"
she called, hardening her tone. While everyone else seemed to have weathered her missing years 
for the better, Wrex appeared to have forgotten how to separate friends and allies from enemies in 
that time.

"Bakara and several other females disappeared from the female camp over a week ago." The clan 
chief let out a short roar, his pain and rage transmitting clearly. "The female clan chiefs say that 
they aren't the first, that at least three dozen have vanished over the past six months."

Shepard's face creased into a disbelieving scowl, her usual troupe of elcor gymnasts bringing in 
guest performers to tumble around in her gut. "And no one said anything?"

Wrex let out another roar, that one softened by notes of despair. "The females are all infertile. They
assumed they'd wandered off to die in the wastes. But Bakara would never. If she's disappeared ...."

"She's been taken," Shepard finished, agreeing with him. "Okay, Wrex. We're on our way, but you're four jumps and three days away. Send out what scouts you can and keep us up to date."
Sighing, she reached out the best she could through comms. "We'll find her and get her back, Wrex."

The krogan let out a belching sort of chuff and the line closed.

"Shepard?" Nihlus asked, leaning around her shoulder. "What's going on?"

"Trouble on Tuchanka." She shrugged, a gesture of helpless frustration. "Bakara and a lot of other females have gone missing." Turning to Tali, Shepard reached up to squeeze the denyah's shoulder.
"We need to go."

The quarian made a soft, sorrowful little sound, her hand lifting to touch Legion again. "Be well, Legion."

"I will maintain daily contact, Tali," the geth said, his tone compassionate.

Dear god … compassion. Shepard shook her head to clear away the wonder and stepped in when Tali spun away, marching toward the shuttle, her spine set. Reaching through the chia, Shepard grasped Legion's hand. "Take care, my friend. Talk soon."

"Thank you, Shepard," Legion said, startling her a little when he didn't continue with her rank. "For believing in the geth and in me."

"You're welcome." She smiled, warmth bleeding through the simple words. "It's been a privilege."

Shepard turned to hold a hand out to Al, clasping his forearm when he accepted it. "And you, don't be a stranger." She squeezed the thick bone and plate.

All the goodbyes said, she swallowed any residual melancholy and slipped her hand through Garrus's elbow. "Ride back with Tali?" she asked, opening a private channel. She shrugged when he looked down at her. "I want to talk to Nihlus about spending the trip to Tuchanka detoxing. I think he's ready."

Garrus nodded. "I think so too." He leaned down to touch the brow of his helmet to hers. "It's time for us all to leave the past where it belongs and set our focus forward."

Shepard wrapped her arm around his waist, pressing herself into the shelter and comfort of her verro's side. "I couldn't have said it better."

(A-N: We're coming up on the three year anniversary for this story, October the 1st. Thanks so much to all who remain, reading and reviewing. I really cherish every bit of support you send my way. It's been an incredible experience. Thank you thank you thank you *giant glomping hugs of doooooooooom*)
Not that he was a connoisseur of washroom floors, but the one in Shepard's cabin—so blessedly cool beneath his cheek—definitely hit the top three. She'd made him a nest of pillows and blankets on the unforgiving metal, but he couldn't stand a pillow beneath his head. It heated up and soaked with his sweat, becoming unbearable in minutes. At least the floor stayed fairly cool, and he could wipe away the puddles of perspiration and drool when they collected.

Tryllic - A marsupial analogue native to Palaven. Tryllic weight between 10-15 kilos and stand 12-14 inches at the shoulder. They distantly resemble both badgers and porcupines, the former due to coloration and the latter due to the thick 1-4 inch long spines that cover their bodies-spines that are very hard and sharp along their backs. When pups, their undercoat is analogous to pussywillow fluff in it's softness.

Golus - Slang for male genitalia

Torpen cortis - An herb gathered from the base of trees in the deep, jungle-like forests of the northern Palven lowlands. A topical analgesic.

Tarc - Turian expletive equivalent to shit.

64 Days ASR 1400 hours

The moment Shepard stepped into the shuttle, Nihlus knew something rode in hard and fast on her six. Truly, the woman should never be trusted with state secrets; she wore her entire emotional and mental state out in the open for everyone to see. Well, at least since dying had stripped all her old, tired masks away. He knew she missed them and felt vulnerable without them, but he prayed to the good spirits that they never returned.

He watched her as she turned to close the hatch and hit the pressurization control, admiring her lithe form, it's smooth curves and gentle lines. From the moment he'd first seen her—exhausted tears of horror and grief cutting pale tracks through the filth on her face, trembling hands clinging to Martin's as the kid was carried to waiting transport—he'd wanted no one else.

Two cycles before, he'd recommended her to become a Spectre against a great many objections, most from her own people. And then, he'd acted like such a complete golus. The fact that she could turn to look at him with all that love and warmth in her stare …. Spirits, he counted himself so lucky that it terrified him.

Letting all that settle to the back of his mind, he shook his head, mandibles twitching a little before he stilled them. "The chia pressurized that section of the Cynosure to Earth standard and filled it with breathable air. There was no need to wear a helmet or pressurize the shuttle."

Her shoulders rolled toward her ears. "Better safe than sorry." Reaching up, she flicked the seal on her helmet, then pulled it off. "I've already been spaced, and to be honest, I'm not all that eager to try the other end of the spectrum." She keyed the VI pilot control before meeting his gaze again.
"Besides, I'm pretty sure even Cerberus couldn't bring me back after being crushed in the deep atmo of a gas giant." She retracted her helmet and hung it from her belt, a bright smile tugging open all the fissures in her skin. "But … come on, doesn't get much cooler than that, right?"

Despite nodding, he didn't answer, waiting for her to drop the other boot. Boot? Foot? Shoe? Whatever. He sighed. Human sayings never made any sense. When she sat next to him, her shoulder bumping him in a very turian show of support and affection, he knew what sort of trouble she brought with her. Time for the drinking talk.

He sucked in a long breath that rumbled with both apprehension and resignation as he blew it out. The time had come. Truly, it had come on Illium, but as much as he longed to return to an even camber, he dreaded the days to get there. Particularly trapped aboard the Ypres. If days of sweating, vomiting, shaking, and general misery lay ahead, he'd prefer to face them in his quarters on Omega.

Shepard slipped her arm around him. When he reciprocated, she rested her head against his side. "I think you might be ready to lose the flask," she said, angling the words as a question. "What do you think?"

"Maybe. Although, I'm surprised you waited this long to bring it up." He turned to rest his chin on the top of her head, savouring the silky threads of hair against his throat. "There's nowhere private on the Ypres, Jane. Nowhere to hunker down and suffer through it. I'd rather wait until we get back to Omega."

A soft sort of moan escaped her lips at the words, prompting him to pull her in closer.

"You're not going through this alone, Nihlus." She pulled away and looked up, her green eyes fierce and determined. "You may have last time and come through just fine, but not this time … not on my watch." A touch like the down on a tryllic pup caressed the length of his mandible. "That's what this whole family thing is about, cikabeknai."

He leaned into her touch. "It's not pretty, Jane." A tight growl rolled up his throat. "I just don't want you to see me like that."

Her growl came damned close to matching his as it dug in under his plates, all barbed warning. "Do you think I'm so shallow or fickle that I won't love you just as much … if not more … afterward?"

He jerked back, horrified. "Spirits, no. It's not about you. I know you'd be right there wiping my face and doing your best to ease my way through." Drawing in a quick, ragged breath, he shrugged. What was it about? Why did the thought of her crouched next to him on the bathroom floor tweak his flight reflex so badly?

"So, it's about pride? Can't let anyone see the big, tough Spectre weak and vulnerable?" Despite the hard edge to her words, her eyes remained warm, one eyebrow tweaking a little. Baiting him; he should expect it by now. Their relationship started with her getting in his face and pissing him off.

He met her challenge squarely. "Maybe it is about pride. Maybe I'm the shallow one."

Shoulder lunging into his side hard enough to smart, she squeezed the arm wrapped around his waist. "Well, I'm not letting you get away with that shit, mister." Both eyebrows peaked. "We're in this for the long haul, that means looking after one another when we're sick." Everything behind the smile shining up at him pulled his heart out through his keel, but she didn't give him time to shove it back inside where it belonged, her hand wandering along his mandible again. "Garrus is
going to bunk in Javik's space until you're comfortable with him being around. You and I—and Karin from time to time—will hole up in my cabin."

"I don't get a say in any of this?" he asked, the words whispering along a drawn out breath. Pulling her in tight, he tucked her against his side. "Maybe it's just the wounded animal needing to hide away, Jane. Maybe that's all there is to it."

She wrapped both arms around him. "When my cat was sixteen years old, he started trying to do that … hide away and starve himself. I lured him out with fried chicken, hamburger, ice cream … whatever I needed to do to get him over that hump to where he started eating again." She grinned, nuzzling into his neck, her nose and lips cool against his hide. "Well, you were there, you know how that turned out."

"Yeah." He pressed his mouth against her hair. "He lived another two years." Closing his eyes, he just savoured the weight of her against his side, the softness of her cheek on his throat. "You're too damned stubborn for your own good. You know that, right?"

She chuffed, soft and low in her chest. "How could I not with everyone reminding me all the time?" Whispering between soft kisses that tugged at the sensitive hide under his jaw, she said, "I love you too much to let you suffer alone. I don't care how ugly it gets. I want to look after you."

Nihlus settled into the relaxed stillness that drifted between them, slipping beneath the muffled roar of the engine and thrusters. Still not certain about allowing her to watch him detox, he nonetheless simply rested in his *dilan's* embrace, breathing deep of the ozone-laced air.

After few minutes, he felt the heaviness lift, the scent of Shepard's shampoo sweetening the stale air. Content to let the silence stand as long as she did, his thoughts drifted. His first ordeal through detox came at the hands of the hierarchy when he was fifteen. They admitted him to a hospital, kept the symptoms to a minimum. The last time he put himself through the hell of withdrawal, he'd just locked himself in a small, rented yacht in the middle of uncharted space. That way, even if he wanted to drink, it would take him a couple of days to get within arm's reach of alcohol.

It hadn't been the wisest move. He knew he could have died. The more often you went through withdrawal, the more dangerous it became. Of course, at that point, he'd thought himself without anything to live for. Then, on the fifth or sixth day, he'd been sprawled across the bed, sweating into the sheets balled up in his clenched fists and watching a news feed: something about a massive pirate attack on a human colony. Out of the crowd stepped this child-sized female wearing Alliance armour. The reporter called her the hero of the day, claiming that she'd organized the colonists and held off the pirates.

Shepard regained his attention when she caressed the tip of her nose along the bottom edge of his mandible. "If you're not ready to quit, that's fine. You'll be ready when you're ready." She snuggled in a little tighter. "But I think you're in a great place to kick that monkey off your back."

He glanced over his shoulder. "I don't see any monkeys on my back." Chuckling, he turned back into her arms when she elbowed him. "Yeah, I've known it's time for a while. I just couldn't afford to be out of commission for long enough."

"Then maybe now is the best time, *cikabeknai.*" She pulled away just far enough to meet his stare. "When we get aboard, we'll talk to Karin, see what she can do to mitigate the symptoms, get Gardner to make a big pot of that soup you like, and then hunker down to weather out the storm."

"Wrex's emergency?" he asked, gazing down at her, his heart beating slow but so hard that he could feel his pulse in his head and all the way down his talons.
"If you're not up to carrying a gun by the time we arrive, we've got gun hands galore right now." She wriggled loose to kneel on the bench beside him and wrapped her arms around his neck. "We'll take as long as we need. No pressure whatsoever." She kissed the end of his nose, lips soft and damp. "If you decide not to push it now, I'm right here with you, and I will still be right here when you decide it's time."

Nihlus dragged her into his arms so that she sat sideways across his lap. Spirits, she always seemed so much larger than life. Her energy took up enough space for any four other people. Only when he held her did he recall how tiny she was. "Thank you, haksaya cubenar. I'd be honoured to have you hold my fringe back while I vomit."

Shepard cackled, as bright as she'd been serious the moment before. "If those things start moving, I'll be running for the door, screaming at the top of my lungs." Eyebrows raised, eyes sparkling, she shook her head. "I signed on for everything except for the fringe is alive." The teasing deepened. "Unless of course, it's to the sound of music."

"What is the root of your obsession with that movie?" Nihlus pulled her in, pressing his mouth to her brow, nuzzling her softly. "Is it because your family watched it every year at Christ Mass?"

Shepard shrugged, but snuggled into the curves of his armour, fitting as if she belonged there. "Yeah, probably. It's a reminder of a safe, content time. It's also a lovely story about two people who should have never fallen in love but are able to see past all the surface layers between them."

He chuffed and shook his head. "Under all that snark, you're just a big, squishy romantic with a heart of pure fluff."

She smacked his arm. "Shush, you. That's a secret."

Letting out a long, contented breath, he rested his chin on the top of her head. "Don't worry, it's completely safe with me."

Dr. Chakwas awaited them outside Shepard's quarters, her medical bag in her hand. She greeted them both with a smile and that familiar, comforting air of professional competence. Nihlus couldn't be sure if he'd ever truly trust another doctor after being treated by Chakwas for two and a half years.

"Hey, Doc, thanks for meeting us up here," Shepard said as she exited the elevator. She squeezed the older woman's arm and nodded toward the door. "Come on in."

Nihlus followed the two women, a very large part of him trying to drag the rest of him back to the elevator. But, Shepard had agreed to that life … the one that hopefully included kids and a lifetime of love, bidding farewell at the age of one hundred and seventy. He very much wanted to experience it without the brandy fog.

Once they all made it down to the couches, Shepard gestured for Chakwas to take a seat, then slipped her hand into his, leading him around the table to sit across from the doctor. After a couple of strangely awkward seconds—after all, Chakwas had sobered him up more than once when he'd been too drunk to go on missions—Shepard squeezed his hand and bumped him with her shoulder, reassuring him that she had his six.

Nodding, Nihlus cleared his throat, then rubbed his free hand along the outside of his thigh. "It's time to stop drinking," he said, the words aimed at the floor as they rushed out of him.

Chakwas leaned forward, patting his shoulder in a very motherly but abrupt fashion. "I'm glad to
hear it." She tipped her head a little, her expression one of being very pleased with her cleverness. "I also anticipated that it might be the reason you called me up here rather than visiting medbay."
She opened her bag and began pulling items out, laying them on the coffee table.

Deft hands latched a slender, metal bracelet around his wrist before he could even yank his hand away, startled by her abruptness. "This will monitor all the pertinent details and feed them to my omnitool. That way I can leave your treatment with you and Shepard, and still keep an eye on you."

A datepad and five small cases of meds lined up across the table, all with instructions. Shepard asked a ton of questions, pouring over the datapad as if she were studying for an engineering exam. For a moment, it took every gram of control he possessed to simply squeeze her hand rather than pulling her into his arms and kissing her until neither of them could breathe.

When she looked up and met the intensity of his stare, she just rubbed her lips together and popped her shoulders in a tiny shrug. "What? It's important." She released his hand and slipped her arm around his waist. "I'm not taking the slightest chance. You're too important."

Shepard went through the entire regimen with Chakwas three times to be sure she had it all down, then the doc gave him his first injections.

"Don't hesitate to call me, even though I'll be monitoring." The three of them stood, Chakwas gripping his forearm for a second. "The meds should help alleviate the worst of the symptoms, but this is your … third detox?"

Nihlus swallowed hard, a soft rumble rolling up his throat. Between these two impossible women, they'd leave him no secrets, no places to hide. "Fifth," he said, the word hanging onto his tongue.

Chakwas blew a hard breath out through her nose and clucked her tongue. "The treatment will remain the same, but the risk of seizures is quite high." The steel-riveted stare turned to Shepard. "Don't let him talk you out of any of the meds."

"Not going to happen, Doc. Don't worry. I'm way more stubborn than he is." Shepard walked Chakwas to the door. "Thanks for all the help, Karin."

Nihlus tuned out their conversation, focusing on the schedule glowing up at him from the datapad. The next week looked to mirror his first detox far more closely than he expected. He knew Shepard would never just let him curl into a ball and wait for it to be over. Hopefully, he could keep himself from snapping at her. Problematic didn't really begin to describe his temper when the pain and the need got bad.

"Hey." Shepard's hands slipped around him from behind to cross just below his keel. "What say we get you out of that armour and through a shower?"

He chuckled and twisted a little to look at her over his shoulder. "Are you offering your back scrubbing services?"

She pressed herself against him, the pressure, a warm caress in the darkness before dawn even with their armour in the way. "Well, you said you wanted to wait until our bonding ceremony for the whole deal, but there was no mention of showering together." Backing up a little, she loosened her hold on him. "Your robe is up here, right? In the closet?"

"It is." He nodded and turned, hands lifting to cradle her head, mandibles fluttering in a soft smile. "It feels like we're pushing it, Jane."

She smiled but thin and pressed. "Yeah, but it's always going to feel like we're pushing too hard.
With Garrus, it was easy. There was nothing on the other side of the equation." Those nimble fingers reached up to start popping seals. "Besides, we've been together in the shower before." A brighter, more genuine, smile looked up at him. "This time we'll both be naked, not just me."

He lifted his hands to help remove his armour, letting out a faint sigh when she just grabbed them, pulled off his gloves, and set his arms back at his side. "You're going to be impossible for the next week, aren't you?"

She shrugged and continued with her work, dropping the pieces of his armour onto the chair Chakwas had vacated. "If by impossible, you mean am I going to take care of you? Absolutely." Her hands stilled, pressed against his chest guard. "Get used to it, Spectre. In a few weeks or months …" She cleared her throat, a teasing rumble. "... if you ever get around to asking, you're going to be stuck with me for the rest of your life." Looking up at last, she stared into his eyes, her gaze so filled with his dreams that it dragged a soft keen into that sacred-feeling space between them. "Might as well get a head start on learning to live with it."

She slapped his yoke. "Lift this off, will you? I'm not tall enough." Her smile set his heart racing and pulled his hands up to cup her face between them again. Spirits, he'd missed her face, the roguish freckles and the way her eyes gleamed when she smiled.

Instead of doing as she'd said, he bent to kiss her, his tongue caressing her lips until, with a soft breath, they parted. The sweet, mineral taste of her mouth poured through him, sweeping along his nerves and through his blood vessels in washes of midsummer afternoons and deep winter sunsets. Slowly, letting the fire sparked by the softness of her lips settle deep in his belly, Nihlus drew back just far enough to speak.

"Have patience with me, haksaya kubenar?" Try as he might, he knew he could never imbue the words with the true lengths to which her patience would be tried.

"I've been through it, love. I know you're going to be a complete asshole now and again." She leaned in to kiss him. "I might need the odd break, but I'll still love you at the other end."

Not that he was a connoisseur of washroom floors, but the one in Shepard's cabin—so blessedly cool beneath his cheek—definitely hit the top three. She'd made him a nest of pillows and blankets on the unforgiving metal, but he couldn't stand a pillow beneath his head. It heated up and soaked with his sweat, becoming unbearable in minutes. At least the floor stayed fairly cool, and he could wipe away the puddles of perspiration and drool when they collected.

"Okay, enough bathroom floor time," Shepard said, her voice blessedly soft as she walked through the door, an armload of clean towels in her hands. "Up you come. Let's get your meds into you, then we'll run you through the shower."

Nihlus opened one eye, watching her step around and over him to put the towels away. Too exhausted even to speak, he just let the eyelid settle closed again. As good as a cool shower would feel, if it meant standing, it could wait. And then Shepard started pulling the pillows out from under him. Protesting in the form of a low growl, he spread himself out to hold them down.

"Come on, love. Up and at 'em. I need to throw all of this stuff through the laundry. It reeks of BO, puke, and something that smells like old vinegar. Seriously, as good as you smell when you're not puddled on the bathroom floor swaddled in sweat and puke, this is just … terrifyingly foul." She tugged at one corner of the blanket he held clutched against his keel and wriggled one eyebrow, a suggestive little tick. "If you get up and wash the funk off, I promise to make it worth your while."

The slanted, wheedling tone pulled a reluctant chuckle loose to roll across the floor. "You're impossible," he said, more a long, articulate groan than words. "I can't move. I've been in this position too long." Playing it up, he hoisted one hand a couple of centimetres, then let it flop back onto his nest. "Too … weak ... ." Adding a wheezing gasp, he pawed at her knee as if trying to push her away. "Just leave me here to moulder in my own filth."

Shepard chuckled and knelt next to his head, gentle fingers welcome and soothing along his neck. "My poor, brave little Spectre." Her grin tipped toward evil. "So pathetic that even a shower is beyond him." She leaned down to kiss just below his aural canal. "It's a shame. I got the oil ready. It's warm, and I've been steeping a mixture of *rylamia*, *torpen cortis*, *spearmint*, and *eucalyptus* in it for an entire day. I even made a pot of sweet *rylamia tea*, and it's steaming hot. There may or may not be some dextro ice cream awaiting you as well."

"Dear spirits, stop." He heaved himself up onto an elbow, giving her his best, put upon scowl through the drum chorus inside his head. "You're an evil woman." The room turned slow, uneven circles, but he held out a hand. "Help me up, foul temptress."

His claims to weakness proved far too accurate as Shepard pulled and he pushed, practically climbing the toilet to hoist himself up onto shaking legs. He folded down onto the seat rather than fall flat on his face. Even after he hit the seat, he continued to fold down until his head impacted his hands and his elbows lodged in his thighs.

"You haven't been eating enough." Shepard scooped up his nest and tossed it out the door. "I'll give you a shot of the anti-nausea stuff after we finish with your shower so you can eat some soup and keep it down."

Turning his head just far enough to watch his *dilan*, Nihlus let loose the long, low rumble of love and devotion trying to force its way out. She hit the water control, turning it to steaming hot. Normally, he preferred it cooler, but his muscles told the old preferences to shut up and die in the depths of the pits. Right then, all that sounded better than hot water pounding the pain into submission was the waiting oil massage. His hide felt stretched and cracked, a mudflat in the deepest heat of summer, flaking beneath the sun.

Shepard picked up the soft brush and pumice cleanser—a modern turian substitute for the thick, gritty mud their ancestors used to scrub away the sweat and other undesirables—and set to work with him still sitting on the toilet. Nihlus simply closed his eyes and leaned into the firm, circling motion.

"Remember bath nights?" he asked, pitching his tone to leave the comfortable hush intact.

Shepard chuckled as she leaned behind him to wash his cowl and lower back. "Playing 'The First Turian Deep Sea Explorer' with Aurin Plavidus." Her lips brushed his brow.

*Mari* thought I was mad." He changed his pitch to scolding and impatient. "Turians don't swim let alone dive beneath the waves, Nihlus Kryik. You just get that right out of your stupid, little head."

Crouching in front of him, Shepard rested her hands on his knees, stilling their shaking. "Aurin Plavidus was a hero among turian-kind. So brave." She grinned and rubbed the side of his knee, the touch firm and loving. "You up to standing? I've got you as clean as I can manage in this position."

Nihlus gripped her shoulders, keeping her from standing. "You've changed my entire life, Jane." Collapsing forward in slow motion, every lengthening and flexing of muscle in the movement registering … almost profound—did he owe the heightened sensation to the withdrawal?—he rested his brow against hers. Her skin felt so warm, so vital and real and beautiful against his brow.
plate. "The last time I put myself through this, I was at the end, but you saved me. Even before we shared our memories, you saved me. I guess I should have led with all this when we met, but I wasn't at my best."

Her arms draped over his cowl, one hand hooking the back of his neck as she relaxed into the position. "What do you mean?"

Her question set guilt rolling through his already unsettled gut, spurring a heavy rumble of sound. He'd allowed her to think they'd shared everything in the link, and they had … at least until he figured out that he could control the thing, show it only what he wanted.

He cleared his throat and rested his brow on her shoulder. "Saren disappeared without a word of explanation a half year before, and I fought through the nightmare of that damned slaver ring and then Samara hunted me across an entire planet. I didn't see much point to Nihlus Kryik. So I rented a ship, flew out into the middle of nowhere and waited for the detox to either kill me or not." He wrapped his arms around her, gritty lather and all. "Then I saw a report from Elysium, saw you accompanying Martin to his medical evac transport. Something in your eyes and the way you held yourself sunk its talons into my guts and dragged me off of my soaking wet sheets. You sparked the fuse that started my heart beating and blood flowing."

She pulled herself in closer, nuzzling in under his jaw. "Why didn't I see this stuff in the link on Thessia, Nihlus?"

He drew back, but she held onto him, not letting him pull away further than the length of her arm. "I had control by then, began to play around with how much I could omit or change, and I'm not proud of that year of my life." Staring into her eyes, he searched for any sign of anger, but found nothing that heated or volatile. Seeing no pending explosions, he relaxed back into her touch.

She looked down, focusing on his chin, her face flushing pink. "Yeah, well, I may have held back a few moments myself." Waggling her head, she straightened and held out her hand. "Come on, I'll tell you while I finish."

Groaning, all of his muscles threatening to dump him on the ground in a puddle of half-formed turian spongecake left too long in amarcru, he stood, leaning heavily on her impossibly strong shoulders. The five steps to the shower unit took ten and he ended up hanging from the corner unit, the water streaming down his front as she scrubbed, then rinsed. As welcome and soothing as her touch was, he'd spent too much time lying on the floor, the hard surface and inaction adding . Halfway through the drying process, he needed to sit, so staggered back to the toilet.

"How many days in are we?" he asked, the words coming out as gasps, his lungs stubbornly refusing to pull in more than a trickle of air.

"Three." The word hit like mortar shells.

"Three?" he repeated, soft and defeated. "I thought we were near the end, and we've barely begun."

"You're doing great, Nihlus. It doesn't feel like it, but you are." She finished drying him, her hands deliciously rough as they rubbed his hide back to life. "I'm not convinced you're going to be able to handle the stairs," she said, glancing between Nihlus and the stairs as if she could judge his ability to make it there by sight alone. "What do you think?"

He opened his mouth to tell her that he thought he could manage three stairs, but she cut him off. "No, not going to chance it. I'll call Garrus up to help." Again, he tried to speak, but she hurried out without listening. Annoyance flared, an acid spark that burned down the back of his throat. Weak
or not, headache banging at the inside of his skull like a krogan thrash drummer or not, he could form thought and make decisions for himself.

Shepard hurried back in a second later, holding his robe out like a noose ready to slip over his head.

"Tarc, Jane, stop!" The words cut with far more edge than he intended, but they stopped her from wrestling him into the robe like someone trying to win a cage match. He gripped her hands, stilling them. "I can put the robe on myself. I'm not that pathetic." He eased her fingers off the material and shrugged his way into it.

She stepped back and shrugged. "Sorry, cikabeknai. I know you're not pathetic. It's just ... " She shrugged. "... I like taking care of you." Shrugging, she held her hands out in a supplicating gesture and shuffled half a step toward him. "Okay, what do you want to do about the stairs?"

The quick flare of anger fading, he shoved himself up onto trembling legs. "No, I'm sorry, Jane." He held his arm out. "I can make it with your help." When she tucked herself in against his side, he leaned down to nuzzle the silky strands her hair. "Thank you."

Shepard gave him a smile and a wink, then focused on the long road down to the bed.

Five minutes later, he collapsed onto the mattress, shaking so hard that his teeth chattered. He held onto Shepard, pulling her in between his thighs and wrapping his arms around her, using her solid warmth to anchor himself. "Tell me about one of those moments you hid from me," he whispered, pressing his cheek against hers.

She turned her head to press soft kisses along his mandible. "Okay, but you need to get out of this robe and lie on your front while I get your meds ready. You're a little behind schedule, and you're acting shocky enough to make me worry." Kissing him again, she extricated herself from his grip, leaving his front cold. "Let me take care of you, please, cikabeknai?"

Recognizing the truth in her words, Nihlus nodded and opened the fasteners down the front of his robe. When he managed to tug it out from beneath his rear end, he tossed it and eased himself over onto his front, his keel sinking into the half meter of memcell. After their trip to Thessia, she'd said she'd get a more comfortable mattress. He smiled and drew Shepard's pillow in under his head. When Shepard did something, she certainly didn't skimp. Closing his eyes, he savoured being cradled in the mattress's embrace.

Much better than the washroom floor.

"So," Shepard said, stepping up beside him, "something I hid from you, huh?" The syringe pressed against his throat, then the muscle just below his shoulder. She disappeared for a moment, then climbed up on the bed next to him.

The heady scent of the oil drifted through him, relaxing him down into the clean sheets even before her hands spread it over his cowl. His breathing easing into a slow, deep rhythm for the first time in days, Nihlus allowed her touch to pull all the stiffness and pain out through his hide. As she told the story, her voice set him adrift, floating in warm waters.

Shepard slid her hands up his spine from the hollows of his pelvis to his shoulders. "I was in a pretty low place when I first saw you as well. I'd been undercover for nearly six months, chosen for the job not because I was a great infiltrator, but because I'd already gained a reputation for being one crazy bitch." She paused, oil-slick hands sliding over his cowl, the infusion tingling as it soothed his cracked, raw hide.
"So, yeah, as a young lieutenant, I went undercover for six months as a member of a human pirate gang. They preyed on batarian colonies, mostly, hijacking ships, stealing women and children to sell at auctions as close to batarian space as they could get." She growled softly, deep in her throat: definitely been around turians too much. "Mostly, they just wanted to tug the tiger's tail as hard as they could. Their campaign worked, making life a living hell for the colonies along the batarian border."

She dug the pads of her thumbs in along the ridge of plates up the back of his neck, finding every tense muscle, every endorphin-releasing nerve cluster.

"Dear spirits, Jane," he moaned, his entire body puddling like that green jiggly stuff Shepard liked to eat. "Why didn't I know about this talent? Once word spread about the skill of those hands, you could live anywhere in luxury."

She chuckled. "Good to know, in case I decide to give up this whole fighting the Reapers gig." Her tone soothed the parts of him her fingers couldn't, her teasing a balm without equal. "I didn't possess this mighty skill until two days ago. I looked up a few sites, searching for things I could do to ease your way through. One site focused entirely on what places to stimulate to ease pain and others to help your body rebalance itself while detoxing." A gentle hand slapped his backside.

"That's going to stimulate things that have nothing to do with drying out," he muttered, grinning into the pillow.

"Behave and let me finish my story." Slippery fingers worked oil into his crest, only exacerbating the issue going on behind his lowest set of plates. When she spoke again, the change in tone and in her energy, pulled his head up out of the downy softness. Cold stone replaced all the gentle teasing and joy, a sudden and solid wall. "Alliance brass thought the assignment a perfect match to my rage level." She cleared her throat as if trying to break up that barrier. "Besides, I had an ironclad backstory and scars enough to make anyone a believer. So yeah, they sent me to seduce my way into the inner circle and then take them out. The longer I could stick it out, the deeper I could get."

Her hands stuttered then stopped, setting off his worry alarm as they rested on his head: those delicate fingers betraying her as they grew chill rather than warming against his crest. She cleared her throat again before continuing, "I didn't really see innocence in any batarians back then. Not after what happened to my family. The batarians deserved what was coming to them. Even the children would just grow into another generation of monsters. I was doing the galaxy—hell, even the batarians—a favour: showing them the evil of slavery."

She worked firm circles down his neck, her voice dropping to a rough whisper. "I fit into that gang like the proverbial round peg. Two weeks in, they made me a lieutenant under one of the second tier bosses, pulling me into the insanely extravagant lifestyle of the organization's higher-ups. I spent most of the time hanging off my boss's arm at fancy dinners and cocktail parties, chatting up people with more money than I could imagine but who carried around a very familiar hatred."

A sigh like paint dripping down a wall slipped between them, and he felt the mattress shift as she sat back. "I drank the Kool Aid."

His translator spitting out nonsense, Nihlus frowned, using her tone to parse the meaning. Well, her tone and the heavy stink of shame permeating the air. For a moment, he almost opened a door, both to give Shepard an out and to let fresh air in … air that didn't reek of guilt and regret. The hand holding his heart twisted, pulling loose a low keen. He hadn't meant to drag her down with him.

"No one had to force me," she continued. "I reveled in it. People looked up to me, lavished me with
gifts, and they practically threw Hallex at me. Hell, they didn't even try to seduce me. Not that I didn't get offers to warm people's beds, just … if I said no, they understood why and gave me space. Most of them had been where I was."

Nihlus twisted to look at his dilan, but didn't dare shatter the almost sacred-feeling bubble that she'd woven around them. Dear spirits, he'd read her record, studied it in depth, admired the fact that as such a young soldier she'd been chosen for such a difficult mission. The Alliance had awarded her four commendations and a medal for that mission. When Nihlus met her, he thought he knew everything about her. He'd been such a complete fool.

She lifted a hand, gentle fingertips caressing the length of his mandible, her thumb tracing his upper mouth plate. "My team raided our first colony the third week. I didn't allow my people to hurt anyone. I gave them tranq guns and took pride in my cargo being brought in with no more than scratches." A slow, sad moan tumbled down a slope of pure, crystalline guilt. Shepard swallowed hard and nodded for him to lie back. She dove back to work, moving down to his legs.

"I became the gang's top money maker. Undamaged merchandise brought the best prices. I told myself that I kept away from the cages and avoided the control-chipping process because I couldn't afford to blow my cover." Another sigh dripped guilt, the flow severed by a bitter laugh. "The excuses and justifications worked for a while, long enough to put me in a room full of the leaders. I did my job so well, they met to promote me four months in."

Nihlus spun around to look into her eyes. "Four months? But you said you were undercover for six."

"Yeah. I did." She looked away. Working his muscles as if she needed to transmute all her pain into something beautiful, Shepard lavished him with care, the oil sweet, her hands pure bliss. Nihlus's chest rumbled with constant subvocals of support, contentment and love, encouraging her without words … weaving a safe place to continue her story. She'd carried that ugly secret alone for far too long.

"I told myself I needed more intel. I never quite convinced myself, and the muck layer that I'd allowed contaminate my being built up until it exploded. I turned all that shame and anger and hatred—for both myself and the slavers and the batarians … hell, even the Alliance—loose during a planning meeting and painted the walls with gore." He heard her swallow, the sound more a soft moan than anything, and her trembling translated through her touch.

"Sweet baby Jesus, your hide is soaking this stuff up faster than I can apply it," she said, her cheer forced. She patted his backside. "Okay, old guy, roll over."

Nihlus levered himself up into a half pushup sort of position, the oil massage returning some order to his chaotic body functions, and his love's pain anchoring him in something outside his misery. Twisting, he flipped onto his hip and then rolled to lie on his back. Shepard slipped her hand down the inside of his forearm to grip his elbow, helping him sit up while she sorted pillows behind his back.

Instead of letting her return to her work, Nihlus picked up the oil and set it on the bedside table. Holding out his arms, he said, "Come here." Hesitation slithered behind her gaze. He could see the shame whispering its lies and shook his head. "Come on," he coaxed, waving her into his embrace. "You've seen all of my ugly places, and it hasn't changed anything, has it?"

She let out a long sigh, steam escaping a pressure valve, and nodded, stretching out along his side. "I love you more every day, old guy." Nodding, she smiled and relaxed into him. "Okay. Well, I took out the entire lot … thought I had the drop on them, but I'd missed one. She'd stepped out to
use the washroom." A long shudder rippled down her body, and she curled in closer, her arm draping over him.

Nihlus nuzzled her temple, the comforting subvocal deepening. Spirits, how could she believe he'd love her less? Everything he learned about her just left him more in awe of her courage and strength. How many people—even turians—could have survived an eighth of what she had? He tightened his grip on her, his thumb talon drawing a long, slow line down her arm.

Shepard rested her head against his. "I was calling in 'mission accomplished, come clean up this mess', when Enara came back in. A biotic, she grabbed me in a stasis field, putting me down before I knew what hit me." Another heavy swallow. "She stuffed me in one of the underground boxes they used for slaves who gave them trouble, and left me there while she ran."

Another shudder racked her too-skinny frame. Rolling toward her, Nihlus wrapped both arms around her, holding her tight.

"Luckily, I'd already called in the clean up crew," she said, her voice soft, the words spoken into his chest. "I was only down there in the dark for three days before they found me. Three days with nothing but my demons and self-loathing for company. I saw it then: how far I'd fallen into being everything I hated … how easily I could have trapped myself in a lifetime of that hatred and vengeance."

She lifted her chin to kiss his mandible, leaning into him, her eyes closed. "When the Alliance found me, my kidneys were shutting down, and I was okay with that. It meant I'd join my family on the other side." She reached behind her back for his hand, drawing it around the front, then weaving her cold, bloodless fingers with his talons. "I spent the next week in the hospital, then asked for mental health leave. They tried to get me to talk to counselors, but I couldn't put what I felt into words. Hell, I couldn't even admit to myself what I felt."

"And where did I come in?" he asked. Mandibles flicking in a smile when she scoffed, he shrugged. "Hey, this is all supposed to be about me, isn't it?" He coaxed her hand to his mouth, warming it with his breath as he nuzzled her knuckles.

Her chuckle eased some of the tightness in his chest. "Of course, forgive me for forgetting." Despite the snark in her tone, he felt her relax. "I was lying in a seedy hotel room in the wards staring at the TV without seeing it when I saw you on the news." She leaned up on her elbow and slid her hand up his keel to cup his cheek. "As you carried that small child out of the fire, I saw something in your eyes that told me you knew. You knew exactly how I felt, and I wasn't alone." Leaning in, she kissed him. "After that, I started working my way out of the black hole I'd fallen into."

He returned her kiss, glad that he'd brushed his teeth and rinsed his mouth after the last time he threw up. She tasted like spring, all new life and beginnings, confirming everything he'd known for nearly a decade: those lips … the body pressed to his … that strong, gorgeous heart beating against his side … they were his home.

"Sometimes," he whispered, careful to coax rather than shatter the peace between them, "we take missions that feed the darkest part of us, and for a while we become everything we normally stand against." Mouths a centimetre apart, brows touching, they shared breath, the sacred envelope around them strengthened. "They teach us, sometimes in the most brutal ways possible, what we won't allow ourselves to become."

"I love you, Nihlus Kryik," she said. She pulled away until their gazes met. "I guess the blessed Enkindlers knew we needed one another long before we did," she said. "Because I went back to
work, and after the next mission, I took my leave on Elysium." Her hand squeezed his then released him, reaching over his chest for the oil. "And here we are."

Nihlus caressed her cheek, the fog of pain and need burning away in the light of her gaze. "Praise be the mighty glow of their asses."

(A-N: And we discover why Sassy is afraid of tight spaces. Thank you for sticking with me and these crazy kids. Next stop, Tuchanka to investigating the missing krogan. Hugs to you all.)
"Urdnot Wrex is on the comms demanding to talk to you and General Vakarian," the AI said, an unusual depth of gravitas colouring her tone. "When I told him you were sleeping, he threatened to throw a thresher maw named Kalros at the Ypres. I was not aware the krogan named thresher maws. I am now curious as to whether this one is kept as a companion animal."

**Torin:** Turian male over the age of 15

**Buratrum:** The turian version of hell

**Tarc:** Turian expletive the equivalent of shit.

69 Days ASR 0436 hours (Approaching orbit of Tuchanka)

"Captain Shepard?"

EDI's voice in Shepard's ear grabbed the captain by the heels and yanked her out of a perfectly lovely dream about wandering in the warm, Illium surf, her fingers laced with Nihlus's on the ocean side and Garrus's on the landward side. Without opening her eyes, she let out a rough sigh, her words sliding along the downward slope of a yawn. "What is it, EDI?"

"Urdnot Wrex is on the comms demanding to talk to you and General Vakarian," the AI said, an unusual depth of gravitas colouring her tone. "When I told him you were sleeping, he threatened to throw a thresher maw named Kalros at the Ypres. I was not aware the krogan named thresher maws. I am now curious as to whether this one is kept as a companion animal."

Gentle fingers lifted Nihlus's arm just far enough for Shepard to slip out from under it. His snore lifted from deep sleep to a lighter level, but he didn't wake. Thank the freakin' father of light. Her beautiful torin hadn't gotten more than a few minutes at a time in days. She got up and tiptoed to the closet. She'd dress in the washroom.

Once the door closed behind her, she activated her comms. "Tell Wrex that Garrus and I will be right there. Did you wake the general?"

"No, Captain. I alerted you first." Must be nice to have no need for sleep.

Shepard yawned and plunked down on the toilet. "Right. Okay, wake General Vakarian and have him meet me in the briefing room as soon as he can get there."

Shepard heard Wrex before she even made it all the way through the lab Mordin had claimed as his territory. Garrus must have gotten there first and tried to intercept the incoming shit storm. Unsuccessfully, by the sheer volume and fury vibrating through the walls. Sweet baby Jesus, Wrex would wake the crew two decks down.

She palmed the door control and stepped through to see Garrus leaning against the conference
"Where's Shepard, Vakarian? Didn't that damned machine tell her it was important?" Shrill and tight—for Wrex anyway—the krogan's voice pounded at Shepard's head with more force than his fists. Blessed fucking Enkindlers, what happened down there? "Get her! Now!"

"Jesus, Wrex, I'm right here, and for the sake of the insomniac Enkindlers, stop screaming. It's the middle of gamma shift up here." Leaving her hand on the small of Garrus's back, she turned into the table, her hip against the edge. "Tell me what's going on without the shouting."

"You were taking too long to get here." Agitated pacing came across through his breathing as clearly as his anger registered through his voice. "So I took a team in and raided the Weyrloc base." The agitation rose; the strain in Wrex's voice palpable, almost frantic. If she'd been talking to anyone else, she would have thought him on the verge of panic. "Bakara's nearly dead. I shouldn't have waited for you!" His agonized roar forced her hands up over her ears. "Are you even coming, or did you lie to me?"

"Damn it, Wrex! You were supposed to wait." She and Garrus said it in stereo, but only Shepard continued on. "I thought we decided to maintain the peace on Tuchanka by sending in a neutral—"

"They were torturing and killing our females, and you weren't coming," the krogan bellowed, cutting her off. "And they'd taken my scouts, holding them prisoner to experiment on them." He chuffed, the sound loud enough that she winced. "You haven't seen the bodies, Shepard! It's worse than Korlus. Bakara …"

"Wrex, calm the fuck down. Of course we were coming, but even for you, I couldn't break the laws of physics to get us here any faster. We're in orbit." She raked her fingers through her sleep-tousled waves. Somehow, she needed to reach Wrex through the freak out and get him focused.

Stepping closer to her husband, Shepard took refuge from the daggers and bullets flying out of the speakers … and from the sudden fear scratching at the back of her skull. "Wrex, for Bakara's sake, you've got to pull yourself together. She needs you to stay calm and look after her. Screaming isn't going to fix anything." She activated EDI's interface and whispered, "Volume to fifty percent, please, EDI."

Wrex continued to shout, but at least the impact lessened. "When we reached the lab, we captured a salarian researcher. He was killing and torturing human and krogan prisoners, experimenting on them to cure the genophage for Weyrloc."

Shepard heard something crash off into the distance: kicked, no doubt. Her breath caught in her throat, and she looked up into Garrus's eyes, her mind racing. A salarian? What the hell would a salarian be doing on Tuchanka working with Weyrloc? The Blood Pack must have snatched him from somewhere, taken him prisoner and forced him to work on a cure. But how would Weyrloc or the Blood Pack get ahold of a cure? Saren maybe? Although, he certainly wouldn't have shared his cure willingly. He wanted to enslave the krogan. Maybe someone smuggled the cure out of his lab? Had someone other than Archangel been working on a cure?

She hit the mute control: best they didn't give Wrex any more ammunition. "We're not missing anyone or any data back at Archangel, are we?" she asked Garrus. Judging by the subvocal that squeezed out past her husband's clenched jaw, Garrus's thoughts ran along the same lines.

He pulled away, the bare pads of his talons skating along her jaw. "I'll run out to the lab and call Chakwas and then Archangel."
Shepard nodded, and opened the channel. "Wrex, has the salarian said anything? Has he given you any information about where he comes from? How he got there? Anything?" As she spoke, she leaned, palms braced against the table.

"No." Wrex rumbled but when he spoke, he'd wrestled his temper down to a dull roar. "No time. Beating answers out of him can wait. Weyrloc and the Blood Pack have us pinned down and outnumbered." He let out a roar that sounded like the bastard offspring of hysteria and frustrated rage.

As much as she wanted to tell him that she'd told him so, she really enjoyed her arms being attached to her shoulders. Shoving herself away from the conference table, she paced. "Do you have the females and the salarian with you? Are you in a secure enough location that you can hold out for a couple of hours?"

"Yeah, Grunt and I've got them. We're trapped inside the lab on the lowest sublevel at the back of the facility." Shepard heard gunfire in the background. "But we won't be for long if you don't get your asses down here."

"Understood." Shepard brought up a tactical long range scan, homing in on Wrex's comm signal. "EDI, give me the best resolution you can—I need to see where the enemy is—and send it to my omnitool. General Vakarian and Lt. Commander Alenko will need copies of these scans as well. Also, upload them to the shuttles and have the VI's prep both shuttles for launch. Maintain active scans for the duration of the operation."

"Of course, Shepard," the AI replied. "Displaying tactical scan." The holographic image appeared in the center of the table.

"Damn, that's a lot of bad guys." Shepard spun to face Garrus as he walked in, the torin shaking his head. Well, at least it wasn't anyone from Archangel. That might prevent Wrex going to war against them.

"Wrex," Garrus spoke up, leaning in to study the schematic of the base, "since Weyrloc knows you're there, send up a comm flare so that we can pinpoint our strafing attacks. We're going to have to use the cannons on the shuttles if we're going to get to you before you're overwhelmed." He glanced to Shepard and pointed to the outer parts of the base where the Weyrloc reinforcements mustered before moving in. She nodded, seeing the same thing he saw. If they moved quickly enough, they could take out a couple hundred krogan without getting out of the shuttles.

"This is a hospital, Vakarian," Wrex replied, still furious and loud, but at least he'd lost the rampage-level fury. "It's built to survive bombardment and blood rage."

"Are there weak points?" Garrus wrapped his arm around Shepard, pulling her in against his side. "You're down there, and you're krogan; you know better than anyone how to attack it. Send us your tactical assessment. We'll have two shuttles in position to attack within ninety minutes."

Shepard glanced over at the AI's glowing interface. "EDI, download every scrap of material you can dig out of the base computers. If they were working on a genophage cure, I want to know everything. Then, scorch the earth." Hearing Wrex's growl on the comms, Shepard shook her head. "We'll have the data to keep working on it, Wrex, but ethically and safely and so that Weyrloc doesn't leave the rest of the krogan sterile long enough to wipe you off the planet."

She patted Garrus's arm and nodded toward the door. "We're on our way. When you hear the shuttles incoming, get everyone under good, solid cover. I want to drop that hospital on their heads, and extract you without having to fight a thousand or so krogan and vorcha." Turning away from
the display, she strode for the door. When she paused at the threshold to wait for Garrus, something occurred to her. "Wrex, there aren't going to be any Weyrloc females or pups in the line of fire, are there?"

"No," the krogan replied, "their female camp is on the other side of their territory."

Well, thank god for that much, at least. Wiping out a thousand Blood Pack members could be seen as performing a galactic service; females and children amounted to something else entirely.

"Send up that flare, Wrex," Garrus said, striding toward her. "We're on our way."

They remained silent until they reached the elevator. Shepard called it to take her up to her quarters before turning to face him. "Get the others up and ready, we'll launch as soon as the shuttles are prepped. I'll be down right behind you."

Garrus grabbed her hand, squeezing it before letting her go. "The mortal mind has yet to devise a plan that Wrex can't send straight to buratrum. I've heard him furious before, but never that … out of control."

She nodded. "He's freaking out, which has me ever so slightly freaked out." Fighting to see the bright side of everything going tits up, she said, "I don't know … if we get them out alive, he might have saved us a long, hot day choking on sand." She gave him a weak grin and punched the control for her cabin. Nihlus needed to get sorted before she took off to blow up krogan. "I'll be down in a sec."

69 Days ASR 0519 hours (Orbit of Tuchanka)

Shepard paused at her cabin door and looked back at Nihlus. Relieved to see that he'd lost the haze clouding his eyes, she grinned and reached up to caress his mandible. "Now, I want you to behave yourself for the doc. I don't want to come home and find out you've been giving her a hard time." She bit the inside of her lip to kill her grin. "Take your medicine, eat all your meals, and when she says it's bedtime … it's bedtime, buster."

A wry chuckle accompanied the arms that reached out to pull her into his embrace. "Thank you, haksaya kubenar, one can never be made to feel like a misbehaving child too often." His mouth plates were warm and rough against her temple. "Be careful. Wrex has been unpredictable at best the last few months. He doesn't seem to trust anyone."

Shepard kissed him and pulled away. "Yeah, I'll stay sharp, don't worry. We'll keep in touch." She palmed the door control, grinned and winked, and then stepped out, her focus clicking over from Nihlus to the mission.

Wrex jumping off the marker ahead of the race had both fucked things up royally and helped the team avoid a long ground battle. The plan had been for her to take a large team in and extract the females with as little bloodshed as possible. War between Weyrloc and Urdnot meant Wrex's fledgling coalition taking on the Blood Pack. With the gang having so many fingers in so many clans, Urdnot would be hard pressed to survive that war.

Yeah, she definitely didn't like it. Damn it, Wrex. Going into Weyrloc territory meant tweaking the nose of a very large, angry beast, and now she'd be wiping most of that beast out. Depending how Wrex played things afterward, that could make his attempts to unite the clans either a lot easier or impossible. If current history gave any indication, he'd be at war with the entire planet by the end of the day.
Even once they brought down the parts of the hospital a safe distance from Wrex's position, she still anticipated a healthy dose of vengeful Blood Pack krogan and vorcha wielding rocket launchers and flamethrowers. Not really something to get too gleeful over.

*Although, come on, admit it, you know that you feel a very disturbing sort of glee when an overload or well-placed round made the pyros go boom.*

Glee was a strange word. Guh-lee. Gleeeeeeee.

Anyway …. No matter how many of their members the shuttles killed, Shepard knew Weyrloc would make them fight for every centimetre of ground. Definitely an 'all boots on the ground' sort of op.

*And that's not even the worst of it. You know that sort of freak out is unusual for Wrex. Something's really wrong down there.*

She shoved those thoughts to the back burner. Worrying about Wrex could simmer until she had time and information to figure it all out. The elevator stopped, pulling her the rest of the way into the here and now.

Despite the early hour, the doors opened onto a bustling cargo bay. Both shuttles hovered just above the floor as their VIs ran preflight checks, and the teams geared up at their lockers. She stood just over the threshold for a moment, watching her people work. Martin and Jack traded friendly blows, fighting over a crate of heat sinks. Sparky, Thane, and Garrus looked to be discussing something very important as they stood shoulder to shoulder at the weapons bench, checking their rifles. Samara, Vincent, and Tali stood next to the second shuttle, talking.

Shepard shivered, the cargo bay air cold on her bare arms and legs. Damn, she needed to get into her underlayer. But first ….

"Good morning, brave adventurers!" she shouted, throwing her hands into the air. Everyone jumped, Sparky's assault rifle clattering as it hit the bench and then bounced off onto the floor. She grinned and wriggled her eyebrows at the chorus of cussing. "Why so grumpy? Smiles, everyone. Smiles! It's a gorgeous day for an adventure on sunny Tuchanka, home of 'even the plants will eat you alive'. Glory hallelujah and praise the mighty Enkindlers."

She waved them all over. "Now to business. Sparky, you and Tali are the pilot/gunner team for Shuttle Two. The general and I will take Shuttle One. Wrex will be sending intel on the base, but the hospital is a hard target. Expect to take ground fire. We'll attack in turns, one shuttle making a run while the other covers it, then vice versa. We have friendlies on the ground, so pinpoint accuracy is going to be important."

She paused, meeting each set of eyes before she spoke again. "Weyrloc has grabbed and tortured humans, Urdnot females and scouts, as well as a salarian. We believe they're trying to cure the genophage and use it as a weapon against the rest of the clans. As much as I support the krogan and finding a cure, eventually Weyrloc will set the Blood Pack on the rest of the galaxy." A firm nod emphasized her point.

"Let's make sure that doesn't happen. Comms open to team channel at all times." She took a deep breath and shrugged. "Once we've thinned the crowd, we'll land and go in as a single team. This isn't at all the mission we thought we were heading into, but let's make sure that at the end of the day, we all come home and the Weyrloc don't. Make sure you've got lots of water and energy bars … and indoctrination serum. Dismissed."
There it was. Damn. She sighed. Fine, Wrex being indoctrinated needed to remain a concern, but for right then, Blood Pack and their guns need to take priority.

Finishing with a sweeping bow, she jogged over to the bank of lockers in the impromptu armory, every muscle coiled and eager for action. Despite the possibility of impending disaster and Wrex's weirdness, it would feel good to get off the ship and stretch her legs. Gentle workouts with Nihlus amounted to her only breaks from the confines of her cabin over the past few days, and she longed to smell anything other than stale ozone, vomit, and sweat.

"Which locker is mine?" she called across the bay.

"The one that says 'Shepard'," Vincent hollered over his shoulder as he hopped up into the second shuttle.

She grinned. "That's way too damned easy to be intuitive." She opened the door that indeed boasted her ownership in large, block letters. "And the sign is way too big. How am I supposed to see that?"

Two days before, she'd ordered Vincent to move everything down to the cargo bay, and despite not knowing what was where, she knew the convenience would outweigh the short term chaos and confusion. Having to gear up on the CIC deck made no sense. If anyone forgot a piece of gear, the entire team had to wait ten minutes for them to take the elevator up and then back down. Once the Ypres returned to Omega, she'd have the Archangel engineers make the changes permanent.

"Shepard?" Kaidan asked, walking up behind her. "May I speak with you for a second?"

Lifting her underlayer off its hook, she turned to face the Lt. Commander. "Sure, Sparky, speak away." She stepped into the leg, balancing on one foot as she tugged the material on. When he didn't immediately speak up, she stopped and met his gaze, finding it serious and unsettled.

She rested her hand on the Marine's shoulder. "Come on, cough it up, we're in a hurry. What's going on?"

He spent the next several seconds looking as though he might change his mind and retreat back to the weapon bench, but then let out a noisy breath. "I'm nervous about what Cerberus did to you, Shepard." After another, grumbling breath, he shrugged. "How am I supposed to know who or what you are?" The pained look on his face burrowed into Shepard's chest and wrapped cold fingers around her heart.

"I know the doc said that you're the same woman we knew before." He shifted a little foot to foot, looking so miserable that she squeezed his shoulder, a silent encouragement to finish what he was saying. "But I don't trust Cerberus. How are we supposed to trust you knowing that those monsters took your body and did God knows what to it?"

Shepard shook her head, just a slight tremor back and forth, her shoulders lifting in a small, helpless roll. "You don't, Sparky. Well I mean, you do and you obey orders—so far everything seems business as usual inside the old brain pan—but you keep your wits about you and your mind active and you never trust Cerberus." She stepped forward, tightening her grip on his shoulder as she met his awkward stare with resolve. "I've been in this body for two months now as it healed. I remember. I love. I feel like me, but we've also had to fry a control chip that Cerberus implanted." She patted his cheek. "Even I don't know if I can be completely trusted. All I can do is put one foot in front of the other and hope that time proves out that I really am me."

Kaidan nodded. "Surprisingly, that makes me feel better." He stepped back. "Thanks, Shepard. I
know you're probably sick of going over this ground with everyone."

Shepard tossed him her back plate. "Here, you can make it up to me by helping me gear up."

"Shepard!" Three minutes later, her name echoed down the shuttle bay, the last syllable sharp enough to draw blood.

Glancing over her shoulder, Shepard smiled as she greeted the salarian scientist, "Dr. Solus, how may I be of service this fantastic morning of everyone screaming my name and giving me bad news? Lay it on me; how can you help my day head straight into 'sandpaper toilet tissue on chapped ass' land?"

The salarian's brow furrowed as he stared at her, no doubt trying to figure out whatever his translator had done with her words. He cleared his throat, curled fingers held to his mouth.

"Apologies for late notice but wish to accompany you to Tuchanka."

Taken aback by the request, Shepard drew back, her eyebrows climbing toward her hairline. "Why? You've never requested to come along on a mission before." She watched him, not missing the discomfort twitching beneath his usual inability to remain still. She got the distinct feeling that Mordin's inquiry had a great deal to do with the captured salarian. Fuck-a-doodle-doo. If she got through the day without Wrex killing someone or having to kill Wrex, she'd be fucking amazed.

Glancing toward Kaidan, she said, "Thanks, Sparky. I can finish up."

Once Kaidan moved out of earshot, Shepard nodded Mordin in closer. "What's going on, Doc? Is your inner adventurer making himself known or is it something else?"

"Your habit of speaking without making sense … alarming." Mordin cleared his throat again and started pacing three strides then back. "Have not spoken of this. Certain of negative judgement considering general's attachment to Urdnot Wrex."

Holding up a finger, Shepard shushed him. "Sure, you can stick with me. I may need a scientific point of view. Just give me a minute to grab my weapons, and then meet me in shuttle one. We can discuss this where we're certain others won't be able to listen in." She pulled on her boot, snapping the closures. "I'll have the general join us, if that's all right?"

Mordin nodded, a quick jerk of his head, and hurried toward the shuttle. Shepard watched him go before reaching for her other boot. Taking note of the SMG and pistol on his hips, she shook her head and chose to believe he came prepared in case she agreed to let him join the team rather than because he assumed she would.

She finished suiting up, hung Ingrid and her still unnamed Mattock on her back, then strode over to the weapon bench. "Join me in shuttle one?" she asked Garrus, slipping her hand through the crook of his elbow. "If his agitation level is any indication, I get the feeling that Mordin is about to drop a bomb on us."

Garrus nodded, then looked to Thane. "Get everyone on shuttle two?"

The drell nodded, the gesture carrying enough weight to be a bow.

Shepard grinned as she led Garrus away. "You and Sere Krios seem to have bonded over the last few days." She looked up to meet his gaze, drinking him in. They'd spent a couple hours a day together, but still … she missed him like crazy.

"He's a sniper," Garrus said, the simple declaration saying everything that needed to be said. He let
out a long breath that rolled with heavy subvocals. "Wrex's behaviour … are we thinking indoctrination?"

Shepard nodded. "Unfortunately." Seeing Jack and Martin heading for the shuttle, she cut them off. "Take the other shuttle down, guys. We'll meet you there." Stabbing the air with her index finger, she cut Martin off before he could start. "Just don't."

She sighed and glanced up at her husband. "If we have everyone on shuttle two …." Reaching up, she opened a channel to Alenko. "Sparky, slight change of plans. You'll provide cover for shuttle one. I don't want to risk the entire team on attack runs. Stay in stealth mode and keep our people safe."

"Roger that, ma'am. See you on the surface. Alenko, out."

Shepard jumped up into the shuttle, her hand hovering over the hatch control until Garrus cleared the threshold.

Once she locked them in, she thumped down into a seat next to Garrus, the both of them facing Mordin. "All right, Doc. What's up?" she asked as the shuttle lifted off, the VI in control. Nothing about the salarian's demeanour comforted her. Whatever secret he hid from them, it was a doozy.

"Worked with STG, as you know," he said, suddenly going still, as if having made the decision to tell them his secret, all the nervous guilt evaporated. "Headed up many important projects. Trusted to develop most advanced and delicate scientific breakthroughs."

His stillness combined with the yammering did nothing to ease the feeling a piano hung over Shepard's head, the weighty thing dangling from a fraying rope. Only terrible secrets required so much preamble. "For Pete's sake, Doc, spit it out."

"Krogan evolved, began to adapt to genophage. Birth rates rose. Council tasked STG to modify genophage, ensure krogan population stayed at one viable birth in one thousand. Was on team that performed the modification, helped release it, then returned to conduct testing each cycle." He paused, but not even long enough for Shepard to process the depth of what he said before continuing. "After modified genophage released, moved to Omega and opened clinic. Needed to help people ... avoid moral grey areas."

Shepard stared at Mordin, her mouth hanging open as she struggled to believe his words. How could he be so cavalier about genocide? "Okay, wait ... the krogan were actually pulling out of the downward spiral destroying their race, so you retooled the genophage to make sure their babies kept dying?" She glanced at Garrus, her husband's mandibles so high and tight to his mouth that she felt the need to throw herself on the grenade before it blew. "What in the fucking flatulent asses of the Enkindlers, Mordin? The krogan are being ripped apart by despair and hopelessness—females wander out into the wastes to die when their pups are stillborn—and you made it worse?"

For a split second, her hand twitched toward her sidearm before she clamped her fingers down on her thigh. The shuttle twisted ever so slightly to the left before she took a deep breath and pushed aside her dizziness and shock. Her day just kept nose diving straight toward hell. "Sweet baby Jesus, I think I'm going to puke."

The salarian straightened in his seat. "Genophage does not kill. Simply corrects krogan population growth to pre-uplift levels. Krogan problems societal not medical." He shook his head and lifted a hand as if dismissing the topic as unimportant, or at the very least, a distraction from his point. For the space of three deep breaths, her hand twitched toward her sidearm again.
"Since deploying modified genophage, kept track of team members. When the general called Dr. Chakwas about missing genophage research or personnel, contacted STG. One former team member reported missing: Maelon, research assistant."

Arching an eyebrow at the salarian doctor, Shepard shook her head. "That's too much of a coincidence. Your research assistant goes missing at the same time as the Urdnot females?"

Looking back to Garrus, she shrugged. "He's got to be Wrex's prisoner."

The general nodded but didn't take his eyes off Mordin. Shepard could see the war going on inside her husband, the general fighting tooth and talon to keep a tight rein on the torin's outrage.

Shepard reached over and laced her fingers through Garrus's before she gritted her teeth and said, "Okay, the 'making the genophage even worse' discussion is tabled for now, but we'll need to talk it over in depth. I know I speak for the general when I say that I'm both confused by and suspicious of your current work to find a cure." Shaking her head, she held up a hand to still any protest. "Later. For now, let's focus on extracting Wrex and all survivors."

Garrus let out a soft, growling sort of chuff. "I welcomed you … Archangel welcomed you into our home, outfitted you with state of the art equipment and a hospital … " He swallowed hard enough that Shepard heard the gulp. "... trusted your ethics and your word." He took a deep breath, his mandibles quivering a little before clamping back against his mouth. "We will be discussing this in much greater depth before Archangel finances another scanner."

Shepard squeezed his talons as the sound of the thrusters changed for deceleration, her stare locked on Mordin. "You'll stay with me and keep your eyes open for anything on the scientific end. I want to know what they're doing when we get in there."

Mordin nodded, the gesture abrupt.

"And you'll say nothing about modifying the genophage in front of the krogan." Shepard swallowed the guilt that chased those words out of her mouth, but with Wrex's trust issues, the truth could send the entire mission sideways at light speed. She patted Garrus's thigh. "Come on, General, we have a hospital to attack."

69 Days ASR 0832 hours (Weyrloc Clan Holding, Tuchanka)

The sky hung hot, dry, and sand-brown over Shepard's head, the sun sweltering through the haze to press down on her back, heavy and intractable. Crouching behind a cement barricade, she thanked every deity she could think of for that small patch of shade. She glanced up, gasping a little as the glare cranked up the pounding in her head from a six to a nine. Damn, Tuchanka's heat and grit definitely lived up to the hype.

"Definitely a downside to blowing the hospital's roof into its basement," she grumbled. "Note to self: Collapsing the building completely doesn't leave any shade, dumbass." As much as she despised wearing a helmet, the handkerchief over her nose and mouth did little to block the grit. If any more mud built up on the back of her tongue, she'd have to cry 'uncle' and dive into air conditioned claustrophobia.

She glanced down at the small screen hovering above her forearm to check the path ahead. Another hundred metres and platoon strength Blood Pack remained between them and the last staircase down into the lab. The surviving Weyrloc had taken refuge there, in a large, two story series of rooms when a lucky shot had taken out more than half the building. The shuttle's cannon hit a massive gas line that threaded through most of the hospital. One and done.
Even so, they fought a tough old battle getting that far, the gang's numbers consisting mostly of varren and vorcha overseen by a handful of krogan warriors and pack masters. She knew that wouldn't be the case once they got into that last chamber. The toughest and most valuable Weyrloc warriors and their chief awaited them there.

Sighing, she clenched her jaw against the pain in her head and the fear twitching through her veins and skittering along her every nerve. As much as she'd tried to pass off Wrex's emotional and mental state …. She glanced at Garrus; her husband crouched behind cover at her side, his every movement jerky, his gaze refusing to settle. Damn it.

She leaned into the divider and dug into her belt pouch for a water bottle. The team's performance so far remained tight—coordinated, calm, and precise—but one look at them betrayed the truth: somewhere in the rubble, at least one of the black orbs lay buried but undamaged.

"They've looped around behind us," Garrus whispered, his voice a thin hiss completely lacking in subvocals. Shepard tried to meet his eyes, but couldn't catch his gaze. Restive, he remained completely focused behind them, his gaze flitting from shadow to shadow. "I know it. I can feel eyes on us."

She reached out, laying her hand on her husband's shoulder, frowning when he jumped. Despite the hand she'd felt crawling between her skull and her brain since the moment they'd landed, she asked, "You okay? You've been getting jumpier as we go along." Denial: the most powerful force in the entire galaxy.

And the most deadly. You know what's going on here. Don't be a dumbass. They all need to start taking their shots.

Garrus nodded, but his eyes looked wild even when his stare latched onto her. "Yeah, I'm fine." He chuffed and shook his head. "All right, that's a lie, that damn whining buzz is making me crazy. My head's at a fifteen on the Shepard scale."

"What buzzing, Callor?" She activated a private channel to the Ypres, then held a finger up to halt Garrus's reply. "EDI, run a diagnostic on General Vakarian's comms, please. Check for anomalous sounds."

To Garrus, Shepard said, "You have a headache?"

"Yeah, it's really pounding." He peeled off his visor and pressed the heel of his hand to his temple. "And it's starting to mess with my vision. Everything's unfocused and too bright." He muttered and covered his eyes. "It doesn't help that it's so hot out here."

Shepard nodded to the concrete k-rail behind him. "Sit down, put your back to the divider." Looking up, she waved Martin over. Someone needed to keep an eye on the krogan. "Are you feeling okay, kid?"

"Yeah, I'm hot, but all systems are five by five." He crouched next to her. "Why?" He winced and before she could answer, said, "You look like crap, General."

Shepard reached up and grabbed the collar of the kid's armour, action helping keep fear buried. Garrus would be fine as long as they kept moving. "Yeah, somethings going on. Check on the others, and then keep an eye out. We need to stop for a minute." She released him, but when he moved to get up, she snagged his arm. "You can see the dark energy those orbs give off, right?" When he nodded, she patted his back. "Excellent. You see anything at all, let me know."
"Shit. Those damned things?" He gulped then nodded. "I'm on it, boss."

After a half dozen swallows of tepid water, Shepard offered the bottle to Garrus. "Drink the rest." Diving it back into her belt pouch, she pulled out a cold pack and cracked it before shoving it down his collar to press against his throat just above his keel.

He uncovered his eyes and chuckled. "Where did you learn that trick? You been doing research?"

"I've been taking care of someone with a huge fever and the sweats for half a week." She lifted his hand back to his eyes. "Keep those covered. When we move out, put your helmet on, crank up the cool, and keep the visor as dark as you can." Taking the cloth away, she wrung it out and soaked it again.

"I'm starting to feel a little better," he said, resting his head back. "Just wish this damned noise would stop."

Shepard activated the team channel. "Anyone else hearing a high-pitched whine or buzz?" Her heart stopped dead in her chest when Thane and Samara replied to the affirmative. Garrus having issues was one thing, everyone else … Well ... fuck-a-doodle-doo seemed to apply. "Mordin?"


*And the time for denial flies."

"Jack, Vincent, Sparky … you hearing voices?"

"They're in my head! Get the fuck out of my head. Don't touch me!" A blur of motion sent Shepard's heart splashing into an icy pool of rimy guts as Martin flew backwards, a shockwave tearing across the space.

Jack!

Garrus gave Shepard a push. "Go get her before she gets too far. I'll be fine."

Shepard leapt up and sprinted through the rubble. "Everyone take a shot of your indoctrination serum. If the voices or buzzing doesn't stop, take another."

Martin raced past her. "In my armour, I'm faster than any of you. I'll get her and give her the shots." He threw a wave over his shoulder. "Don't worry, I'll catch her."

The channel to the *Ypres* pinged. Despite Martin chasing a frantic Jack across Tuchanka, Shepard's heart jumped, hope springing up to greet the chance of a reasonable explanation. "Yes, EDI."

"I was unable to find any abnormalities in hardware or signal in General Vakarian's comms, Captain. I believe the sound he's experiencing is an auditory hallucination."

Shepard's heart slowed—damned hope, why did the reapers keep crushing it—and her gut clenched tight, wrapping into a ball like snakes in winter. "Yeah, that's what I was afraid of, EDI, thanks."

"I have scanned for any anomalous energy signatures, but as in other cases, if there are suzerain orbs present, they are not emitting radiation of any kind I can detect."

Shepard watched Martin disappear around the corner at the end of the hall. "Roger that, I figured that too. Thanks for trying, EDI. Shepard, out." She switched to the team channel. "Tali, are the
shuttles at the dustoff location? I want to be on them and out as quickly as possible."

"They are in position, Captain. It's very boring in here." The smart ass tone in the quarian's voice came through loud and clear.

"Considering we're all having our brains melted and taken over, I think most of us would trade you. Hold your position, Shepard, out."

She closed the channel and drew in a long breath to steady herself before taking over checking on Vincent and Kaidan. Vincent looked shaken but remained on his feet. She grabbed hold of the wall of muscle's shoulders and forced him to look her in the eye. "How are you doing?"

The big man shook his head, the trembling hidden beneath his shrug telling her everything she needed to know. "Like Mordin … and Jack, I guess, Loco. I'm hearing whispers, but so many that I can't understand what they're saying."

A startled chuckle greeted the nickname. "Loco?" When he just tilted his head and cocked an eyebrow at her, she sighed. He had a point. "Okay, fine, Loco it is. Take a shot of the indoctrination serum. Let me know if the voices don't get any better, but we've got to move. If there is an orb here … this is just going to get worse." She patted the injection port on his armour then punched him. "You really are just a freakin' mountain."

He laughed, hearty enough to ease back her concern. "Work out in the gym eighteen hours a day and you could be just like … no, sorry, Shepard, you'd still be an anthill."

She punched him again, then turned to Kaidan. Even before she asked, she could tell he'd taken his injection. Calm and back on his feet, weapon in hand, he just nodded and strode over to watch the stairs.

Samara too looked collected and ready to just get the hell off Tuchanka. The asari took a few steps after Martin. "I'm going to see if he needs help with Jack."

"Okay." Shepard followed her a couple of steps, keeping her eyes on the stairs down. A lot of bodies holding guns awaited them down there, and despite using comms to communicate, they were, quite frankly, making enough noise to wake the dead.

"Fascinating." Mordin's exclamation spun her around, his voice sounding even more manic than usual. "Most distressing sensation." His omnitool glowed above his wrist as he scanned himself. "Indoctrination fascinating in theory; infinitely more so experiencing it."

"Shhhhh! Mordin, stop scanning yourself, and take your damned shot. You're crazy enough as it is." Shepard strode over, diving into his belt pouch when he didn't obey the order. She punched the injection into his thigh and hit the plunger. "If the voices don't go away, take another."

Martin appeared at the end of the hallway, his arm around a very rattled looking Jack.

The biotic met Shepard's stare with one that growled badass bitch, and nodded. "I'm back, Shepard. Let's get the fuck out of this nightmare." She pulled her shotgun from the small of her back and moved to stand behind Kaidan, covering the stairs.

Shepard hurried over and crouched next to Garrus. "We've got to move before things get worse, Callor. You okay to get back into the shit?"

He held out his hand, standing when she grabbed it and pulled him up. "I'm okay. The shots have kicked the headache down to a dull roar."
"Okay. Let's get Wrex and dust off." She turned to her team. "If you start to go downhill, take a shot. If it doesn't work, tell me. Please, don't try to hide it, love. If you need something, ask." She caressed her husband's cheek then moved up to take point. Time to get the hell out of Dodge.

Garrus caught her shoulder, his grip steady. "It's not affecting you?"

Shepard nodded, glancing toward her husband. "I feel it." She frowned and pressed her palm over her right eye, her brain making a break for freedom as she let her headache through her mental walls. "It's like … a hand crawling up the inside of my skull, digging its fingers into my brain." After a moment of taking deeps breaths and relaxing her neck, the pain eased, and she gave him a weary smile. "I'm just used to it."

As she passed Martin, she said, "Of all of us, you're the only one with a history of not being affected by this signal. Keep an eye on us."

"No worries. I'll keep both eyes on all of you," he replied, none of the usual smart ass in his tone. He frowned and leaned backwards, stretching his spine. "Do you think this whole thing could be the ones behind the black orbs… the Leviathans or suzerains or whatever … trying to manipulate the krogan?"

"It has to be." Garrus finished off the water and passed her the bottle, interrupting her reply. "This place feels like the Haestrom shipyard before everything went to complete tarc." He gave himself another shot of serum. His stare met Shepard's, as solid as ever, but the fear and concern that remained did nothing to comfort her. He cursed, looking as sick as Nihlus had the past few days. "Spirits, I don't want to go through that again. Our serum wasn't enough that day, Kahri. We need to get out."

"We've only got a few more Blood Pack to take out, then we can grab Wrex and evac." Shepard shrugged her Mattock into her hand. "I'll take point. Martin walk drag."

Garrus grabbed her forearm, pulling her around. "Aren't you going to take a shot?"

Shepard shook her head. "If it gets crazy inside my head, yeah, but they're already in my skull, so there really isn't much point. If I suppress them then I can't read them … see what they're interested in." She shrugged. "If that makes any sense." She gestured toward the rubble-strewn staircase and the door at the bottom. "Let's just kill the rest of these bastards and get the hell out of here."

He settled his sniper rifle into his hands and nodded. "Right behind you." He looked better, the steel back in his bones, his jaw tight, mandibles relaxed. His neck arched that little bit extra and when he strode for the stairs, his steps hit solid and sure. A small knot at the base of Shepard's spine untied, and she released her breath all the way for the first time since they'd paused to rest.

Jogging to the head of the line, she picked her way down the treacherous slope, her Mattock trained on the bottom of the stairs. Boasting zero cover and extremely uneven footing … that staircase formed the perfect place for an ambush. Why wasn't the Blood Pack attacking? It couldn't be thanks to stealth; they made more noise than a bulldozer. She checked the active scan. The Weyrloc hadn't moved. While she understood not wanting to give up good cover, the hand inside her head tightened its grip.

"EDI, are these readings life signs or lifeforms?" Terror punched her in the gut, sharp claws digging in, burrowing through her organs. "They aren't moving."

"Reading life signs, Shepard, They're definitely alive but fewer than before, and several are erratic," the AI replied, sounding as if she rechecked her facts even as she spoke.
She took cover on the inside corner at the bottom of the stairs. A door faced her on the outside wall, but the one they wanted was further down the hall on the left. Taking a long, slow breath to smack the fear down, she glanced around. Clear, as she suspected. Even the ceiling remained mostly intact, the shade a welcome change.

She gestured for the rest to go ahead. Something whispered, a tickle of spider legs … the slight slither of tar through the valleys in her grey matter … drawing her toward the door on the right. "Go ahead," she said, inching that way, "I'm just going to sweep this room. Martin, watch my back. The rest of you take cover to go through that door guns blazing."

Black and slick, the spiders began to trickle out of the hidden folds of her mind, their legs ticking down her spinal cord and in behind her eyes.

So there's something in there you bastards want to see? Holy fuck, that sucks on every level imaginable.

Martin pushed in behind her, his Revenant ready to pump out hundreds of rounds per second. "I've got your back, Shepard."

A sharp nod answered him, but her hand didn't move from her gun. Why did the suzerain want her to open that door? A warning? A trap? Curiosity?

"Shepard?"

Martin's whisper spurred her on, her hand sliding down her Mattock only to hesitate, hovering a good half metre away from the control. "Do you see anything, Martin? Any of the black energy?"

He stepped around her and then shook his head. "Nothing. Whatever's in there isn't attacking you or the team."

"Not actively, but passively, it's doing something." She glanced behind her to check on Garrus. He nodded and gave her the thumbs up. Shepard turned back to the door. She needed to quit stalling and kick some ass. "Okay, kid, get ready." She pulled her Mattock in tight, couching it to fire one-handed, then slapped her palm against the door control. The door turned, then reeled back, revealing ….

"What the hell?" Squinting, she leaned closer, trying to cut the glare from the open sky over the stairs. "Damn." Taking a step, then another, she moved into the dim space. A bright white light solidified amidst the gloom. The source, a glowing orb, sat cradled in a frame of very obvious Reaper tech. A tight ring of the black orbs surrounded it: a cage around a dangerous animal.

Around the ring of black orbs, krogan kneeled shoulder to shoulder, practically crammed in, their heads pressed to the walls. She stepped forward. Why hadn't they picked up those life signs? Two more steps and her eyes adjusted to the gloom. She backed up, pulling Martin along with her. "Back up, those Enkindler-cursed things are going to blow when we take them out."

She closed her eyes, but the carnage of that room didn't fade, burned into her retinas. Forty or so krogan, kneeling in their own blood after smashing their skulls in against the concrete walls. Sweet Jesus, they'd bashed their own heads in to kill the whispers or whatever madness the orbs planted in there.

She took a long breath, clenching her teeth around the words as she said, "Blow those fucking things straight to hell."

(A-N: Sorry everyone. I meant to have this done for Halloween, but Wrex then changed the whole
game necessitating a massive rewrite. It was worth it, but ... DAMMIT WREX! I am concentrating on Future Imperfect for NaNoWriMo, so lets all bow our heads and pray that the writing gods favour this effort. I want to get us to the Reaper War before Christmas. :D As always, all the love. *hugs)
Despite being ninety-nine percent sure of why the krogan signatures on the other side of the door hadn't changed, Shepard's gut still lurched hard when she opened the door to a macabre glut of madness, violence, and gore. As much as she'd wanted to free Urdnot's females, and as much as she hated the Blood Pack, no one deserved what those orbs had inflicted on Weyrloc.

"Sweet baby Jesus, protect us," she whispered. Glancing toward Mordin before walking over to where a vorcha clawed its way across the floor by its one remaining limb, she asked, "What is this? Do you think the combination of reaper and suzerain indoctrination signals drove them insane?" The vorcha looked up at her and snarled, the sound a plea to kill him.

"I'm sorry." Blinking back a sudden, empathetic burning in the corners of her eyes, she swallowed hard. "But I can end your pain." She pulled her pistol.

"Don't shoot!" Mordin cried, diving between Shepard and the vorcha, hands up as if begging her to spare a child or something. "Need intact brain tissue. Will administer injection." He hurried over. "As for mixed indoctrination signals: could be." He took a knee next to the vorcha, his omnitool flaring to life. He swept it over the doomed soldier. "Yes. Yes! Makes sense. Glowing reaper orbs seen on Feros and other places humans turned into husks: referred to as machine cultists. Positioning of black orbs suggests defense against reaper signal."

He glanced up at her, a half-shrug tugging one shoulder up. "Krogan most powerful ground force. Reapers converting other races. Leviathan invested in making sure reapers do not gain control. Result: krogan destroyed."

"Then we need to up the timetable on getting scanners and improved defenses. Did you get readings from the orbs before we blew them?"

"Yes. Should help develop scanners and defensive eyewear. Will get to work upon return to ship and krogan casualties stabilized."

Tuning the scientist out for the moment, Shepard turned to her team. "Spread out in pairs. Anyone who isn't dead, put them down: it'll be a mercy. Take another indoctrination shot even though we blew those other orbs to hell. Who knows what's still here." When they answered to the affirmative and headed out to follow through on her orders, she turned back to Mordin.

"Despite differences in signals, black orbs counteracting white suggests use of similar delivery method. Defenses developed based on Mr. Weaver's immunity should function for both." He gave
the vorcha an injection, ceasing the poor fellow's struggles, then moved on to a krogan quite literally spattered against the wall. He did his cluck of disapproval. "Need subjects not suffering traumatic brain injury. Most likely tried to beat madness out."

Shepard nodded. "Yeah." She clenched her teeth. Grisly as the scene was, they needed all the information they could get on indoctrination. "If you want to take samples, whatever … do it. Get the others to do your heavy lifting. Put everything on shuttle two. I'll have Tali bring it down to the top of the stairs … get it as close as possible."

Cringing, she watched the scientist lift a large section of bashed in crest and skull. Like a hand pushing her from behind, the spiders cajoled her to get closer—not through words or even actions, just a tickle, an itch that demanded to be scratched. Despite denying the spiders their wishes, an invisible thread pulled her closer until she could see diseased brain tissue under that skull. The damage lacked subtlety: large areas boasted tissue that looked not just dead, but decayed.

No! I'm not your puppet. Back the fuck off!

She threw herself around, placing her back to the body, and dove into her belt pouch for a syringe. She'd allowed the tar-slick presence to betray their stake in the scene. Time to move on and get her people to safety.

Is there such a thing any more? Orbs here? Both reaper and suzerain? They're both moving in on all the species. Time is running out, and what do we know? What defenses do we have?

After giving herself the shot, she turned back to Mordin. "I'll head down to evac Wrex and the others before they're tearing each other apart or bashing their own heads in." She swallowed a retch of nauseated disgust and terror. Maybe one day she'd stop being surprised by the horror the reapers and suzerain left in their wake. Maybe, but definitely not that day, not with so much blood and brain matter washing around her feet.

How do we fight them when there is no atrocity too big, no horror that will turn their stomach or back them down? Are we prepared to go that far?

Not a question for right then. She needed to get her people out. Yes, get her people out and keep her eyes on Garrus. She understood him being freaked: the last time the black orbs had neutralized him, and he'd awoken two weeks later, having been vivisected and tortured. Gaze sweeping the room, she tried to find him in the carnage. Where the hell was he, anyway?

It took her a second of searching to find her husband. He crouched twenty metres or so away, staring down at a dead krogan. She hurried over. "Garrus?" she called, her hand hovering a few centimetres from his shoulder. Touching him seemed an excellent way to end up with his rifle butt in her teeth. "Come with me to evac Wrex and the females? He's going to need familiar faces if the orbs are doing a number on him like we think. Hopefully he and Grunt are still coherent."

He nodded, but his stare never left the krogan. "This is Weyrloc Guld, their chief." He pointed to a variety of marks in the krogan's shell, particularly his head casing. "Five or six different weapons. His people beat him to death. Why are they doing this?"

He nodded, but his stare never left the krogan. "This is Weyrloc Guld, their chief." He pointed to a variety of marks in the krogan's shell, particularly his head casing. "Five or six different weapons. His people beat him to death. Why are they doing this?"

Not needing him to explain who 'they' were, Shepard helped Garrus up and turned him to face her. "I don't know, but we'll figure it out. Any information is good information, right?"

He didn't resist her pull, but neither did he look up and meet her eyes. He seemed to have withdrawn, burrowed down inside himself to hide from the signal. She pressed her palm against his cheek, lifting his face to meet hers.
"Callor, love, are you still hearing the sound?" She patted his cheek when he didn't answer. "Come on, big guy, help me out here. Talk to me."

He didn't answer, but did go into his belt pouch for a shot of the serum. A few seconds after he took it, the clouds cleared from his eyes. Either shaking himself or shuddering, he chuffed. "We need to get out of here, now, Kahri."

Not caring about what anyone thought, Shepard grabbed his hand and led him across the room. Turning, she searched for Martin, spotting the kid as he emerged from a door at the end of the space. She hollered, "Hey, kid! Find Vincent and meet us down in the lab to help with evac." She didn't wait for an answer, but the next second, she heard the heavy tread of his frame armour running up behind them.

The lab door stood at the bottom of the stairs, the control red. She could override it, but she'd rather Wrex opened it up voluntarily. If the indoctrination signal had sent him over the edge, he might just open fire. She motioned for the others to spread themselves out and take cover before pounding her fist against the door. "Urdnot Wrex! It's Shepard. Are you alive in there, you ornery old bastard?"

She backed up, movement approaching the other side of the door. The deeper they descended into that place, the more it felt like a trap, or some giant maw waiting to eat them whole. She jumped a little when something heavy thumped against the metal. "Shepard? Is that you?"

"Yes. Open up. We need to get you and the females evaced from this nightmare." Letting out a bitter chuckle at her jumpiness, she took a step forward.

"Four hours, Shepard!" The door mechanism spun, then the metal slid back. Wrex stood in the space, huge and suddenly, really quite terrifying.

Unable to allow him to get the upper hand, Shepard pressed into the clan chief, backing him up a step. Thank the dear and fluffy Father of Light that he still respected her enough to back down. "We just took out a thousand Weyrloc and Blood Pack, Wrex, show a little gratitude." She stabbed her chin toward the inside of the lab. "Let's get these people out of here. We found reaper and leviathan indoctrination orbs just up the stairs. They drove the Weyrloc crazy enough that they bashed their brains in against the metal." The Weyrloc crazy enough that they bashed their brains in against walls."

Movement at the far end of the long space drew four sets of crosshairs. A trembling salarian stepped out from behind a half wall, his hands held up away from his body. "I … I'm unarmed," he said, his voice so high that he could have been auditioning for a part as a talking chipmunk.

"Are you Maelon?" Shepard's brow furrowed.

Before the salarian could stutter out an answer, Wrex stepped around her. "Shepard!" the krogan's voice boomed through the lab. "Evac now, introductions later."

She held up a hand to stop the rest of his rant. "Gentlemen," she said, looking to her team, "get everyone to the shuttle." Movement drew her attention to the other side of the door, glad to see Mordin lurking in cover. "You done collecting samples?" When he nodded, she waved him in. "Come on in then, and tend to your patients, Doc. The shouting at one another portion is over, let's move."

Garrus skirted around them. "I'll get the females aboard shuttle one, Shepard."

Wrex bristled, his glare sizzling past Shepard to latch onto Mordin. "What the hell is that salarian
doing here, Shepard?"

Shepard stepped in front of the clan chief as he stormed back to the door, looming over Mordin, his expression promising violence. "He here to destroy this other pyjak's work on the cure?"

Shepard threw out a hand, shoving Wrex back. Her hand let out a howl of complaint as it impacted his armour. "No. He's here because your captive was one of his science team, Wrex. He came to get his person, just as you came to get yours."

Wrex stopped, his eyes narrowing, and Shepard saw instinct step back to make room for intellect. The violence in his posture slowly dripped away, winter giving way to spiring. His stare pinned Shepard before darting past her to Mordin. "Are the salarians experimenting on our females?"

Shepard shook her head. "Don't jump to conclusions, Wrex. We'll sort it out once the females are being treated and we're well away from here. It appears as though the reapers kept Saren's cure and gave it to Weyrloc." She nodded to where Garrus and Mordin organized stretchers and stretcher bearers. "It's still the reapers trying to turn the krogan into their cannon fodder, so let's just move."

She led the way to the beds that Wrex and Grunt had shoved into a storeroom. The small space echoed with its dying occupants' groans. Judging by the sores and ligature marks, the females suffered from a level of pain that Shepard didn't want to imagine. Well beyond the end of the Shepard Scale. Behind her, an argument sparked.

"Females' condition critical," Mordin insisted. "Need to move them to a state of the art medical facility. Tuchanka not safe for many reasons."

"There's no way I'm letting a salarian take these females off Tuchanka and torture them with more experiments," Wrex shouted back, setting the salarian back a couple of paces.

"Gentlemen, please." Shepard let out a long, weary sigh as she turned to face them. "It's been a long enough day without this bullshit." She flipped a careless, dismissive hand toward Mordin. "Gather up anything you think might help, then we'll burn the place down before we go."

Wrex stomped up to her, pushing all the way into her space. "What do you think you're doing, Shepard? That research is the only hope for my people."

Her arms hanging relaxed at her sides, Shepard tilted her head to look up at the krogan. "Back the fuck up, Wrex, before I lay you out and sit on your head while you listen to me." Keeping her breathing slow, she met his glare until he backed up a couple of steps. Good, she was too tired to wrestle a krogan. "I had EDI upload everything before she destroyed their computers. We've been working on a cure for two years. That work will continue."

"I don't trust that salarian, Shepard," Wrex groused, fury radiating from him like Aralakh's rays bouncing off the wastelands, "and you have no right to take that research. It belongs to the krogan."

Looking up at the clan leader from under lowered brows, Shepard turned to face him. A vicious, ravenous ache began to gnaw through her guts and down her limbs, making her hands shake. Damn, her pain meds were wearing off. Clenching her fists, she shoved the need as far away as possible and focused on the problem. "I'm not going to argue with you over who owns the data, Wrex, because it doesn't fucking matter." Slicing the air between them, she cut off his protest before he got done opening his mouth. "Sit down."

The krogan let out a small roar that amounted to both asking and demanding why. When she
cocked an eyebrow at him, he bristled, his chest puffing out, hands clenched and slightly raised. For a moment, she thought he might charge. Not acceptable, indoctrination signal or no.

"Wrex, sit the fuck down." She bristled to match him, fury burning like molten steel up her spine and pouring into her head. Of all the people in the damned galaxy who should trust her … after everything she'd done for the krogan … how dare he? When she spoke, her voice rose out of her chest, grinding like glass shards under a boot heel. "You might not have any reason to trust Mordin, but you sure as fuck have reason to trust me." One eyebrow lifted toward her hairline. "Or is your memory so short and your heart so ungrateful and selfish that you've forgotten?"

Stepping into him, she forced him back toward the nearest crate, counting on his respect to outweigh his anger. "I'm not going to play around with your people's chance at becoming a respected member of the galactic community. I'm not going to juggle the welfare of all those females and pups out there. Hell, I'll put a bullet in your head before I let you risk these females right here." She let out a heavy, quick sigh. "But, I'm really tired, and I hurt everywhere, so just sit down and listen to me."

After glaring at her for a couple more seconds, Wrex turned and walked over, sitting on the side of the crate. Shepard sat on one just beside it, straddling the corner so she could face him. Thank the sweet baby Jesus. Despite meaning every word, she really didn't want to shoot Wrex. She sort of loved the old grouch.

"Better." She braced the heels of her hands against her thighs, hunching over as much as her armour allowed. "I'm going to lay everything out, because I know that you're smart enough to see my reasoning. Your people were evolving past the genophage. Birth rates were going up, and the council freaked out. They went to the STG and said, fix this. Mordin and Maelon were both members of the team who did just that."

Wrex started to rise. Throwing herself back, Shepard brought up both feet, kicking him in the gut hard enough to sit him back down. He roared and tried to get up again, only to end up on his ass once more. "Shepard!" he said, resorting to his words. "How do you expect me to trust him with these females and the research after that?" Before he even made it all the way up that time, she kicked him back down.

"I can do this as long as necessary, Wrex." She raised her eyebrows, the expression light, set to defuse him. "Sit down and listen instead of reacting. I know it'll be hard considering the amount of indoctrination crazy, but do it."

If glowers could burn, Wrex's would have singed Shepard's armour. Still, he stopped trying to get up. His willingness to listen and trust her remained. Praise be.

"Thank you." She leaned forward, forearms resting across her thighs. "I don't expect you to trust Mordin." Earnest exhaustion met his surprise. "I expect you to trust me. Everyone standing behind me … everyone working on projects for me … leave trusting them to me. Your only job is to trust me, Garrus, and Nihlus. Easy enough, right?" She sighed. Too much talking for such a crazy, fucked up place. "Right? We're family."

When he grunted in reply, she continued, "Mordin and his team have been working with the data we found on Virmire. This data may be exactly what he needs to find the cure." Her stare softened as she held his gaze. "And you know as well as I do that there is nothing on Tuchanka to help these females. We'll take them aboard the Ypres and then get them state of the art care back at Archangel." A small shrug drew her shoulders toward her ears then dropped them.

Anger drew back, replaced by weariness and hope. Shepard looked into those huge, red eyes and
let out a long sigh, releasing the last of her frustration. "We have a real shot of curing the genophage here, Wrex, but in order to stop the council from pulling crap like that bomb that nearly wiped out your clan, the krogan need a smart, reasonable, and diplomatic leader. You need to be the face of the new krogan society." Straightening, she stretched out her back before shifting to lean on the other hip. "I know you're that leader, and you know I'm not talking about changing who and what the krogan are."

Movement at the door drew Shepard's attention. A grateful smile greeted the silver blue of Garrus's armour as he stepped over the threshold. After looking around for a moment, he spotted her.

"We ready to move the females?" he asked, sounding as tired as she felt. "We've got them moved to antigrav stretchers, and the shuttles are parked just outside the back door."

Shepard looked to Wrex. "Well? Are we ready to move them?"

"You're a pain in my ass, Shepard," the clan chief groused, shoving himself up onto his feet. He waved to Garrus. "Let's get them out of here."

Leaving the others to get the females aboard, Shepard stopped, catching sight of Maelon standing in front of a huge vid screen. The display showed only static, EDI having already wiped the computers, but still, the salarian stood there, hands raised and twitching, his expression lost.

"Maelon?" Shepard called, making enough noise on her approach to avoid startling him. "The females are ready to go. How about you?"

"Weyrloc didn't force me to come here,=" he said. As she stepped around him, her side against the vid screen, she saw that his hand movements were those of someone tapping on an interface. "Voices told me to come, to fix the mistake we made." He reached up, sliding his hand across the screen. "Urdnot Wrex unwilling to do what needed to be done! No will to go far enough … push hard enough."

The salarian's voice rose both in pitch and volume with every word until Shepard's hand lifted to rest on her pistol grip. "Sacrifices must be made! Boundaries pushed. Can never make up for what we did. Can never bring back dead pups and mothers. Can never be forgiven. Taught to be a monster!" He spun to face her, lunging forward. "Can I help it if I became a monster? Who was I to argue with the great Dr. Solus?"

Latching onto Shepard's armour, he dragged her closer and shook her, his face pressed against hers as he shoved her into the wall. "We destroyed the krogan. It doesn't matter if I have to kill a million to save the rest, I will save them!" Maelon opened his mouth, insanity-propelled spittle smacking against her skin. "You can't understand! The voices! They never—" Thunder roared through the lab and a heavy spray of blood and bones and brain splashed across her face. A blur of incoming movement spun her around, her pistol lifting as she blinked away the gore, struggling to aim at their attacker.

"Kahri!" Garrus's armour registered as he raced up to her, leaping over the salarian's body. He grabbed her by the shoulders, pulling and pushing as he checked for wounds. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, love, I'm fine." She eased him back. "Maelon was just shouting. He didn't hurt me." When she pushed him far enough away that he released her, she reached behind her head to untie her kerchief. "Just covered in a hell of a lot of ick." She mopped at the blood cooling on her face. When she cleared enough away to see him clearly, his pupils had constricted to pinpricks despite the dim light. His mandibles twitched against his face, high and tight.
"Garrus?" Reaching up with both hands, she took his face between her palms, his hide chill even through her gloves. Releasing him, she freed her hands, something telling her she needed skin on skin to pull him back. "Garrus, love, just look at me." Gripping his face again, she winced at the sweat rolling down his neck despite his chill. "Look into my eyes. We're all right. Come on, let's get onto the shuttle."

"My silhouette," he whispered, "white on the red wall." His eyes stared past her, the blank terror in that almost flawless field of ice freezing the blood in her veins.

"Garrus, love, come on." She gripped both of his hands and began leading him toward the door. "Let's get you aboard the shuttle."

When she stepped away from the wall, he froze, that terrible, blank stare darting to the surface and freezing there. Turning to follow his stare, she winced at the faint but grisly portrait painted on the concrete: a negative shadow of her outline painted in bloody mist.

A roar of pure agony tore from Garrus's throat. "No!" He ripped his hands from hers, tripping over Maelon's body as he reeled away from her. "No! She came back!" Bare of subvocals, his voice rose to a shrill keen. "My kahri came back." Spinning, he ran straight into one of the medical tables, another keen greeting the dead body laid out on the surface.

"I can't still be there." Hand over hand, he groped his way around the table, and bolted for the door. "I'm not in the dark. I won't go back into the dark."

"Garrus!" Adrenaline lightning shot through her, launching her across the lab and over the threshold. "Garrus! Stop! I'm okay." Taking the stairs three at a time, she raced up toward the second shuttle and the heavily pounding sun. Somewhere behind her, she heard Mordin find his assistant's body. No time to worry about him.

"Shepard?" Martin called in her ear. "What's going on?"

Slowing ever so slightly to check in the room with the destroyed orbs, Shepard hit her radio. "Garrus took off. You're faster than I am. Get over here." She closed the channel mid-stride, and hit the long slope of rubble, dropping to all fours to scramble up the loose footing.

She heard Martin ten seconds before he stopped next to her. "Grab hold, I can jump this."

Shepard did as he said, thanking the blessed Enkindlers for the kid's frame armour as he covered the debris field in a series of four metre leaps. "Put me down," she said once the floor cleared. "Run ahead and check the main path, I'll sweep the side rooms and follow. If he's running blind, there's no way in hell I'm going to be able to catch him."

Ten minutes later, Shepard raced through the hospital's front door, squinting against the sun to see shuttle two cut across the landscape, a scant four or five metres in the air. Pausing to gasp, pulling in long, quick draughts of dust and heat, she lifted her hand to her ear. "Do you see him, Tali?"

"Affirmative, Shepard. He's about a hundred metres ahead of you. Sending heading and scan now."

Shepard hit her omnitool controls, opening a topographical map with a single, blinking green dot on it. "He's stopped. Is he okay?" Another green dot appeared, streaking toward Garrus; thank the blessed Enkindlers for Martin.

"I see him, Shepard," the kid said, panting between words. "Holy crap, he's fast." Judging by the
change in his voice and breathing, she imagined him bent double, hands on his knees. After maybe fifteen seconds, the sound of his frame armour crashing across the Tuchankan wasteland resumed, in hot pursuit once more.

"Shepard! Where are you?" Wrex called, his voice sounding more grounded for having left the surface.

Shepard let out a sharp breath, stumbling over a piece of rebar sticking out of the concrete. Catching herself on a half wall, she shoved herself up, scarcely missing a step. "Chasing Garrus halfway across your planet, Wrex." Gasp. Damn, she needed to do more running. "What do you need?" She vaulted up onto a large slab and checked her scan. Freakin' damned Enkindlers, she'd never catch Crazy Legs Vakarian, she just didn't have the stride for it.

"Bakara's getting worse," Wrex said, some of the strain bleeding through.

"Confirmed, Shepard," Mordin spoke up in the background. "All females' becoming unstable and critical."

Pushing on, Shepard swallowed all her misgivings. "Take them to the Ypres, Mordin. Get started on stabilizing them. Tell Karin to grab Kaidan and anyone else you need."

Once the shuttle signed off, Shepard paused to signal her ship. "When you get the others on board, bring the shuttle back down. Hopefully we'll be ready for evac."

Fifteen more, impossibly scorching minutes passed, Tuchanka's air burning in her chest a little more painful with every breath. She had maybe ten more—

"Shepard!" Martin's voice tipped close enough to panic to stop Shepard's heart dead in her chest. Oddly enough, the stopped heart spurred her legs to faster speeds. After a couple of wheezing breaths, he continued, "I caught up with him in the basement of a ruined building, but he won't let me get anywhere near him. He keeps raving about not going back into the dark to the cutters."

"Keep the exit blocked if you can, and just let him pace," she said, wheezing between the words. "If he tries to run, take him down as gently as you can."

At least Garrus seemed to have run himself out for the moment. If she could get to him before he caught his second wind, she should be able to reach through the indoctrination long enough to get him on a shuttle. Fury simmered in her gut, adding fuel to aid her tired limbs. As if the monstrosities and the killing and turning the races into monsters wasn't bad enough. As if the reapers and suzerain didn't spread enough horror without turning people's minds against them.

And Garrus? Yeah, they could play with her all they wanted with their stupid tar spiders and 'assuming control' bullshit, but coming at her torins … torturing them …. No, they'd all burn. Souls, no souls, they didn't deserve the effort it would take to discover the answers they needed.

Death. Death was what they deserved.

"Shepard!" Martin's voice called up out of a dark hole. "Down here."

"How's he doing?" she asked, picking her way down into what looked like it had been some sort of vehicle structure.

"He just sat down." Pain bled through Martin's words. "He's talking about having broken Roger, so he's back on Haestrom." A hissing sigh crackled over the comms. "You'd better wash your face before you try to talk to him."
"Stinks." Garrus's voice echoed up to her. "Fuel and blood."

"Yeah, right," she replied to Martin's suggestion. Cursing herself for not thinking of it, she pulled out a bottle of water and a gauze pad, scrubbing even as she continued down into the darkness. She heard her husband without the comms a moment later, his mutters low. "Garrus?" The steps and muttering paused for a scant fraction of a second before resuming.

"Stop it!" he called out, his voice a sharp, strangled bark. "Panic will kill you. Remember. How did you get here?"

"Callor?" Shepard called, changing tack. Maybe the nickname would break through where the other didn't. What had he told her about Haestrom? She vaguely recalled dreaming about leading him through corridors of endless, grey slabs. "Follow my voice. Can you hear me?"

Instead of answering, he said, "I've got to think. I don't have a hope in buratrum of smelling the others over the sickly, acrid stink of this slime. Radio and omnitool dead, armour has gone dark. Focus, Vakarian. I can get out of this. I just have to find the others." He chuckled, wry and bitter: a sound that tore at her guts. "Pari always said I was too stubborn for my own good."

Martin appeared suddenly ahead of Shepard, wraithlike in the gloom. She stepped up next to the kid, just able to see Garrus sitting on the floor a handful of metres away. "How's my blood level?" she asked.

The kid held his hands out for the gauze and water bottle. "Where did you learn to wash your face?" he asked, his attempt at humour dying mid-flight.

"I was born in a barn according to my mother, so ... ." she replied, pressing her lips together in a thin line. "Contact Tali, keep me apprised of their ETA back down here. When they arrive, I want you to have a sedative ready, and she needs to park as close to the structure as she can and keep the cargo area lights low. I don't want him to bolt."

Martin nodded, his implants glowing gently. "And if he does, grab him and sedate him?" He swiped at her face, scrubbing here and there.

"Yeah. Either way, sedate him as soon as I get him on the shuttle." She let out a long sigh and rolled her shoulders when the kid gave her the nod. Damn, she hated tricking Garrus, but they needed to get him into treatment before she ended up losing him for good.

Garrus pushed himself up off the floor, looking so pained that his movements stabbed sympathetic slivers of pain through her heart and stomach. "I'm going to need you," he whispered. "Do me a favour, and stick with me for a bit."

Shepard strode forward, something … some warm tug deep down in her gut telling her that he'd just given her an opening to reach him. "I'm here, Callor." She stepped close enough to make out his face clearly. "How do we always end up in these situations? I swear you do it on purpose."

He chuffed, a sound that registered more doubt than anger or fear. "You're dead." His mandibles fluttered and dropped. "That was a stupid thing to say."

"I came back to help you get out of here." She stopped and held out her hand, holding her breath as she waited for him to come to her. Tipping her head toward the ramp, inviting and light, she smiled. "Come on, let's get moving. I don't like it here."

After hesitating long enough to spike her adrenaline—her blood pressure soaring until the deafening pulse hammered in her temples—he took a step forward. "Why did you leave me,
Shepard? You knew … you know that I need you."

She struggled to remember what she’d said … something about …. "It was time."

Talons stretching out to the extent of his reach, Garrus's gloves slid up her fingers before closing his grip. "Why are you here now?" He stepped forward, drawing her fingers up to his mouth. Breathing her in deeply, he nuzzled the back of her hand. "It's you."

"Shepard," Martin's voice spoke softly in her ear, "Tali's in place. Whenever you're ready."

Smiling, she nodded in answer to both Garrus and Martin. She reached up, fingertips whispering along his mandible and cheek. "It is. Come on. We need to get you out of here." When she sidestepped toward the ramp, he followed, offering no resistance. She let out her breath, a warm wave of relief washing over her, another of exhaustion chasing hot on its heels.

Despite hesitating a little as they passed Martin, Garrus offered no fight, his talons clinging to her fingers like a lifeline as they climbed up toward the shuttle. Finally, the universe giving them a break, her plan moved smoothly, and she sat in the corner of the shuttle, her husband lying across the rest of the seats, sleeping with his head in her lap.

Martin flopped down across from her, letting out a loud raspberry of a sigh. "This entire day has sucked most egregiously—"

"Egregiously?" Shepard teased, a tired, slaphappy sort of laugh greeting his vocabulary.

"Yes, egregiously. All I want to do is take a shower and fall into bed." He sprawled, his back pressed into the corner. "How's he doing?"

Shepard caressed the long sweep of muscle from Garrus's crest to the neck of his armour. "He'll be okay. He's tough as nails." Still, her beautiful torin continued to twitch in his sleep, fighting against monsters he should never have had to think about again. "If Mordin and his team don't find a filter to prevent this, I'll space one of them a day until they do." She growled under her breath. "This is the last time those bastard reapers and leviathan get to do this to us. The very last fucking time."

Happy N7 Day! All the love.
The dark stink of Haestrom's bowels fouled Garrus's sleep with nightmares. Every now and again, Shepard's voice broke through the darkness and suffocating silence. Her soft words and gentle caresses coaxed him from sweat-soaked nightmare back into the calm, breeze-ruffled meadows and leafy, shade-speckled forests of sleep. She joined him there, both discovering a peace in his dreams they might never experience while awake.

Scent invaded unconsciousness first: the sharp, medicinal ozone smell of a medbay. As much as he disliked the odour, it amount to pure caelan compared to the reek drowning his nightmares in blood, corruption, and death.

"Doc? He's waking up."

Oh, blessed spirits, that voice. It drew a keen of longing and gratitude through his second larynx. After all the nights he'd rushed to bed in order to meet her in his dreams after she died, there she sat, her tiny fingers clinging to his talons, her voice washing away the nightmarish chill. He forced his eyes open, his gaze finding and latching onto her pixie face with it's sharp chin, crooked nose, and eyes the colour of summer grass.

Shepard—his kahri—smiled. "Hi there, gorgeous." She reached up, her hand cool on his plates as she stroked his face. "You gave us quite a scare."

Allowing his eyelids to drift most of the way closed, he let out a long breath, never so grateful to feel the too-thin mattress of a medbay bed beneath him. "Sorry about that," he replied, his voice startling him: reedy and dry with only shadowed subvocals. Staring into his mate's eyes, he thought back to Tuchanka, following the trail of memories. "I remember finding Weyrloc Guld's body, but then everything gets foggy." He scowled, some of the memories returning, blurry and drifting through a haze of heat and blood. "Wrex? The females?" He lifted his head to see krogan
occupying the other beds, but no one he recognized.

"Wrex and Grunt are fine. As far as we can tell, Grunt wasn't affected, and Wrex recovered quickly once the docs got to him." She glanced over her shoulder at the closest bed. "The females aren't doing as well. Mordin and Karin are on it."

"And me?" He leaned up a little, moving slowly as the room tipped hard to starboard and began to roll. "How long have I been here?"

"Nearly the whole trip back. We just landed on the Omega side of the relay from Hawking Eta. We'll be docked in nine hours." Pressing gently on his shoulder, Shepard eased him back down onto the mattress.

"Nine hours?" He closed his eyes. Spirits, he'd been asleep for nearly four days? "What happened to me?"

She lifted his hand to her mouth, kissing each of his knuckles in turn. "Those orbs put the whammy on you and dragged up Haestrom. You took off. Martin and I ran you down, got you on the shuttle. I'm not surprised that your memory is spotty. Whatever those orbs did, they scrambled up your nervous system pretty badly." She stood and bent over him, her lips soft and tasting of salt: she'd been crying. "How do you feel?"

Garrus took a quick inventory. Other than a headache, nothing hurt, and his head felt clear. He sat up, drawing in a deep breath to test his torso for the lingering pain from his mostly healed damage. His spine groaned, setting up a complaints department just above his pelvis, but everything else felt fine. "I'm sore from lying on this bed, but no worse for our adventure."

The air moved, bringing with it the scent of antiseptic and something Shepard called English Rose: the telltale perfume of Karin Chakwas. "Lie back, General," the doctor said as she approached the bed. "You need to take it easy for a couple of days. Your brain has suffered a traumatic event and, like any organ, it needs time to heal."

He chuffed. "I think my organs have suffered enough traumatic events for three lifetimes. What happened to me, exactly?" he asked. He released Shepard long enough to lower himself back down onto the pillows they'd arranged to help make up for the torturous mattress. The second he settled, he reached out for Shepard's hand and tugged her closer, needing to feel her warmth against his hide. She obliged, rolling her chair right up to his side, her free hand lifting to caress his face.

"We don't know why yet, but you reacted instantly to the reaper indoctrination signal, and the results proved devastating." Chakwas fussed over his scans. Spirits, it must be news of the worst order to have her dissemble so badly; she usually just jumped right into the tarc.

Chakwas pulled up what looked like a multicolour image of a turian brain: his brain presumably. "It appears that whoever performed the vivisections, modifications, and combat tests chose you for some predisposition or susceptibility to reaper indoctrination." She shrugged. "It might have been because you have a resistance to it, but we need to do more testing to be sure."

She tapped at the interface of her omnitool then swept it over him: head to feet then back to his head. "We've got the swelling under control, but there's scarring along your entire nervous system."

"More testing should provide means of detection … defense," Mordin said, hurrying in the door. "Have learned all I can from Mr. Weaver's implants. Need to observe differences, effects on unprotected mind." He stopped at the end of Garrus's bed.
Shepard jumped up, throwing herself between Mordin and Garrus—all spikes and claws—as cold and furious as Garrus had ever seen her. "You're talking about exposing my husband—the general at the head of the entire organization—and his already damaged nervous system to more of the fucking reaper signal?" She laughed, shards of ice. He saw them hit their marks … on both Mordin and Chakwas. Spirits, she wanted him to submit to their experiments as well?

Shepard stepped around the bed, pushing in on Mordin in a way he could construed as threatening. "Don't let any stupid ideas take hold inside your slippery old brain," she said, her face less than a finger's width from the salarian's chin. "I have very little faith in your ethics right now." Oddly, needing to crane her head back to meet Mordin's stare didn't diminish the threat.

Garrus's mandibles flicked. He cleared his throat, trying to back Shepard down gently. As much as he hated the thought of letting those bastard reapers back into his head, he couldn't fool himself into believing he'd navigate the war against them and the collectors without being exposed to it again. And they needed to be able to defend their people against it. He'd gladly sacrifice himself to protect the rest of Archangel—maybe even the rest of the galaxy—from the reapers and leviathan's most insidious attacks.

Shepard reached back to lay her hand on his ankle, but she turned toward Chakwas. "You too, Doc?" When the Normandy's doctor nodded, Shepard continued around to meet Garrus's eyes. When her stare latched onto his, she shook her head. "Please, don't tell me you're considering doing this."

Garrus held out his hand, his palm cold without hers gripped in his talons. He smiled and beckoned her back to his side. Once her fingers laced with his again, he looked past her to Mordin. "Do you have any idea how we're going to test me … or anyone," he qualified when Shepard tensed, "against reaper indoctrination?"

"Theories only," Mordin said, his mouth set as if he'd just bitten down on a rancid vitivern fruit. "Access to reaper device will prove most enlightening. Acquisition problematic."

Shepard let out a noisy sigh, rumbling a little deep in her throat, and for a second Garrus wondered if his mate had picked up the habit from Nihlus. Surely, she hadn't learned it from him.

Garrus squeeze her hand. "We have time to talk about everything: whether or not to go ahead and how to make any tests safe." A weary smile met Shepard's sudden sharpness; she couldn't help reacting any more than he could when she placed herself in danger. When she relaxed, he glanced over at Dr. Chakwas. "May I go up to our cabin to rest until we get back to Omega? This bed is going to break my spine if I spend any more time on it."

The doctor nodded but held up a card of electronic patches. "You can go, but I want to monitor your neural activity."

Letting out a long sigh of relief, Garrus sat up. "Agreed." He waited patiently while the doc applied the patches to his temples and the base of his spine. Shepard passed him his robe when he swung his legs off the side of the bed. Allowing her to sort the robe's panels even though he could have done it himself, Garrus studied his wife's face. Taking note of the dark circles under her eyes, the drawn lines around her mouth, and the wan cast to her skin, he knew she hadn't exaggerated when she said he'd given them a scare.

"How's Nihlus?" he asked, taking both of her hands in his to still their fussing. "Is he recovered enough to share you?"

She swallowed hard and nodded. "You've been asleep for three days, Callor. He's fine." She
waggled her head a little side to side and shrugged. "As fine as he can be, considering. Well enough to squish into a third of the bed, anyway." Backing up a step, she tugged on his hands. "Come on, let's get you out of here before they lock you in a big cage with a bottle of water hanging on the side and a hamster wheel for you to run on."

"Shepard," Chakwas protested, scowling at his mate, "you know I'd never risk Garrus's health without extreme need. What happened to the Weyrloc could happen to our people. As much as I hate asking, I must."

Garrus pulled Shepard in, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "We'll talk about it, but the discussion is moot until you come up with a way to measure what you need."

"In the meantime," Chakwas continued, "we've upgraded the turian version of the serum." She passed him a handful of ampules. "Take one every six hours."

At least ten questions sparked in his head, not the least of being why he needed to take the serum while not exposed, but Garrus simply took the ampules. They could worry about questions when he felt a little less scraped raw and left for dead. So, instead of quizzing the doctors, he gathered his derra in against his side. "Thank you, doctor … Mordin."

Shepard said nothing as they passed through the Ypres's galley to the elevator. Neither did they speak for the few minutes it took to ride up to their quarters, but the air thickened, tension building like thunderheads on the horizon. The silence held until they entered the cabin, but as soon as Shepard saw that Nihlus had stepped out, she stiffened.

"Kahri," Garrus said, interrupting before she began, "let's table the discussion until after we relax and get some sleep." He turned to face her, cradling her jaw between his hands. "I've been asleep for three days, and you look like you haven't slept three minutes." The weariness he saw slithering beneath her impenetrable outer shell tugged a soft keen loose. Leaning down, he touched his brow to hers. "I'm right, aren't I?"

She leaned into him. "Karin and Mordin didn't know if they'd … " The sound of her swallowing cut the air, her love and her fear of losing him so palpable he felt it manifest between them: a separate, starved entity. "... if they'd get the swelling under control. I couldn't leave you." A warm palm pressed against the side of his face, slow and full as it brushed his hide. "But I got some sleep in the chair." Easing herself back, she kissed his brow. "Come on, let's get into bed. It's been one hell of a week." She turned toward the stairs. "We should have fresh sheets. Nihlus was going to —"

Garrus snagged her hand and pulled her back into his arms. "It's going to get worse from here, Kahri. We're all going to be forced into risks well out of any sane comfort zone." He nuzzled the top of her head when she slipped her arms around his waist: two unyielding, iron bands. "But I promise to fight through the pits of buratrum to come home to you. All right?"

She nodded against his chest, her head heavy, her body heat seeping through his robe. A soft sigh drifted between them before she said, "I know I can't protect you any more than you can protect me, but damn it, if I have to do this without you." She lifted her head to stare into his eyes, hers shining with the tears he knew she'd never let him see fall. Well, maybe not 'never', but rarely enough to keep them precious. "I don't want to live in a galaxy without you and Nihlus. There's nothing but death and pain in that galaxy."

He kissed her, pulling her in tight. Tarc, hearing her say those words … they felt like talons wrapped around his throat, razor sharp claws ripping out every soft, precious thing keeping him alive. "I've been there," he whispered against her lips. "I survived. Nihlus survived. Sometimes it
felt like we wouldn't, but we did, and so will you if the worst comes to pass."

"Until the war ends."

The four words formed a barbed, jagged prophecy. Sanding down the worst of the edges, her hand slipped along the inside of his arm to grip his talons. She led the way to the stairs, Garrus following with dragging steps. Would he feel any different if he needed to fight through the war without her? Wouldn't the end be a welcome chance to rest, to join her wherever they ended up after death?

Just before he stepped down the first stair, a light flared across his field of vision, blinding him in a wash of brilliant white. It dimmed, his scorched retinas settling to reveal a large armlight burning overhead. He tried to move, but could only squirm; bands on all four limbs and across his torso strapped him down. Agony burned through him, tiny pulses along each nerve, building … stacking one upon the next upon the next, a fire leaping from tree to tree until the entire forest blazed.

"Garrus?" Wraithlike, Shepard's voice drifted down through the light. "What is it, love? Are you okay?" He heard fear tightening her voice, an intractable wrench. "Garrus?"

Fearing the connection might prove a singular chance, he turned away from his wife's concern and closed his eyes. Pushing back the pain, he forced himself to focus on details: a cold metal table surrounded him. A sling cradled his cowl between table sections and a metal frame held his head immobile. Voices, louder than Shepard's but indistinct, moved around him outside the glare. Zooming in on them, he pulled them closer: humans, a female and two males.

Despite the cruel reality of the light searing his eyes and the pain arcing along every nerve, he knew he stood in the captain's cabin on the Ypres. He could feel his Kahri's hand clinging to his. Using the contact as a lifeline, he squeezed her fingers to reassure her and dove into the memory.

He might never get a better chance to drag up what happened to him after the Haestrom shipyard. Whoever took them hadn't just been playing around. They'd possessed a very specific agenda. Only he or Nihlus held the slightest hope of figuring out what they—probably Cerberus—wanted.

"Are the cranial implants online?" the female voice asked. He heard the sharp click of heels against tile, then cool, rubbery fingers touched his head. "We need to ensure the carrier signal controls him."

"The cranial implants are functioning perfectly, and have been from the third day," a male voice replied. "Right now, our biggest issues are the skeletal lattice and microfibre weave. His body is rejecting them. Immunosuppressants and the most powerful antihistamines aren't controlling the reaction." As the man mentioned the damage, Garrus's agony exploded, his nerves reduced to ash.

The woman made a frustrated sound. "Run blood panels on all ten of them. We're not going to be able to just stick the human variations of the tech into the turians like we can with the krogan and asari."

"Would it be helpful to acquire a few quarian subjects?" the third voice asked. "Despite their health issues, they could provide a common baseline."

The sharp heels clicked across the tile in a pacing pattern eight steps long. "Quarians are not easy to come by. Even the disappearance of their pilgrims doesn't go unnoticed." After thirteen circuits, the footsteps stopped at his side. "They're not practical in the long run, but we need to untangle the turian problem."
"We can arrange to purchase them," the very helpful third voice offered. "That way, even when they go missing, the trail won't track back to us."

A feminine, but disgruntled sigh blew across Garrus's face. "Very well. A half dozen, and see if you can negotiate for ten more converted turian units. Older generations, not the most recent, and a variety of generations if possible." The cold, rubber-covered fingers grasped his head, prying his eyelids open to shine a light into them. "Just make sure the transactions can't be traced back to the organization."

"Callor?" Warm, dry hands gripped his head between them, her calluses chafing softly as she rubbed his hide, as if trying to buff warmth into his hand. "What's happening? Are you okay?" A sharp edge of panic lanced Shepard's words. "Doc, something's going on. Garrus just froze up and he won't talk to me."

Squeezing his derra's fingers to try to calm her worry, Garrus struggled to hold the memory close, to see it through to the end. He needed to know who had carved Nihlus and him up like a couple of laboratory animals and maybe, most importantly, why.

"I'll put out feelers on Omega. It takes a little longer to approach the collectors through back channels, but it'll be untraceable."

The female made a soft, formal sound of acquiescence. "Fine, get moving. We need to fill in the gaps and soon. All this reaper tech isn't going to do us any good if it kills every subject we implant with it. They're going to have 'the mistake' up and recruiting aliens within weeks ... a couple of months at the most."

Tarc, he wished he knew human accents better. It sounded a little like Zaeed, but more formal: distinguished and nasal rather than earthy and coarse. The woman pried open Garrus's other eye and shone the light in it. He kept the eye open long enough to make out a dark shadow on the other side of the spot blindness. Long hair hung down: definitely human.

"He's starting to come out of the anesthetic. Get him back under and let's get these implants out; prepare for round five."

The pain Garrus had been forcing to the back of his mind vanished as dreamless darkness swallowed him.

"Garrus? Come on, verro, snap out of it and give me a sign here before I really start freaking out and end up kicking your asslessness." Shepard's hand patted his cheek, each blow landing with greater strength until they stung, virulent enough to help him drag himself back from wherever he'd gone.

"I'm fine, Kahri." Opening his eyes, he caught her hand before it could land. "I got a flash of memory from the time I went missing." He pulled her into another hug, able to feel his own trembling through her body. "They were implanting us with reaper tech, and it wasn't just Nihlus and I. I could hear a woman speaking, and she ordered someone to take blood from all ten of us."

Shepard let out a long breath, her fingers curling handfuls of his robe into her fists. "Let's get into bed before you lay all this on me. We can mull the entire problem over then sleep on it."

Garrus nodded. "Yeah, let's get some sleep. We can hammer it out with the others tomorrow back at Archangel."

74 Days ASR Archangel Headquarters, Omega, Sahrabarik
The familiar buzz of conversation and debate eased Garrus down into the padded leather of his seat in the Archangel conference room. Spirits, it felt good to be home. As much as he knew he needed to be out there, fighting, he missed the bustle and camaraderie of headquarters. It had been his entire life for almost two cycles, and he felt a little like he'd abandoned it the moment Shepard returned.

Not that his people needed him there. He'd outdone himself when he'd chosen the inner command circle; they could run Archangel without him if it survived losing its figurehead. The moment he stepped off the dock, he'd begun the debriefings, meeting with each of the department heads, not at all disappointed with how well his people handled the organization's affairs during his absence.

"Building three is full," Nyreen Kandros reported, drawing him out of his thoughts. He chuffed; they'd started wandering the moment he asked for status updates. His throaty utterance drew the tarin's attention as she continued, "Most of the slaves we liberated decided to stay. And we've begun cleaning up building four. If we get the influx of Blue Suns Zaeed predicts, we're going to need to start housing people onboard ships."

Garrus frowned, his guts tightening into a knot. Wait. What? "Blue Suns, Zaeed?" Spirits, they could never trust a mass influx of mercs. "Why would Suns join up? They were trying to wipe us out a few weeks ago."

A disgusting, guttural grunt or belch curdled the air around the merc. "I finally chased that god damned bastard Vido to ground," he said. Rather than jubilant or even his usual ornery old bastard self, Zaeed's tone tipped toward depressed. Had catching up to Vido and disposing of him robbed the old merc of purpose? Garrus resolved to take him aside before the end of the day to find out. The Suns respected the bastard, so they needed Zaeed cussing and fighting if a mob of the mercs joined up.

"Most of Vido's senior bootlickers got their arses blown into roasted dog chow when the refinery exploded," Zaeed continued, his face twisted into a sneer. "The men asked me to step up; I said no goddamned way."

Surprised, Garrus lifted a brow plate. He never expected Zaeed to refuse the reins of his old organization; he'd always assumed Archangel would lose the ornery old senux once Vido met his just end. After all, Zaeed co-founded the merc band. "And you told them to join us?"

Zaeed shifted as if his chair had grown spines, but then dissolved back down into it. "I'm too old and too much of a bastard to put up with all the bullshit of leadership." He made another revolting noise in his throat, his voice laced with derision when he continued. "Besides, I thought Archangel needed bodies. Can beggars be bloody well choosy when we have dreadnoughts sitting out there like fucking ghost ships?"

Instead of replying, because Zaeed had the right of it, Garrus looked back to Nyreen. "Has the accounting department run budget projections for this increase in recruits?" He tried to concentrate on the details of preparing Archangel for its second massive inundation of bodies in a month, but Mordin's glowing omnitool on the other side of the room kept pulling his attention and holding it.

Thank the spirits his people didn't need him to micromanage the business end, because at least half of what they said sailed straight past him as he watched the salarian's expression. He'd worked with Mordin long enough to know the look on the scientist's face meant that he'd discovered something both fascinating and perplexing. The information on the small screen above the tool showed scans of a krogan head and upper spine.

"We've put out feelers with the Alliance," Anderson said, "looking for retired officers to come in as
instructors. The reception has been mixed, but Hackett speaking for us has helped."

Shepard scoffed. "I'm surprised they didn't just tell you to stick it up your ass."

Anderson grinned and shrugged, tipping one ear toward his shoulder. "As I said, Hackett being on
our side has helped."

"We need at least five dozen experienced, senior officers or trainers," Vortash replied. "We're all
working fourteen hour days and there's still just too many." The batarian hesitated, but then met
Garrus's gaze with his usual directness. "We've been talking about casting a wider recruitment net.
There are krogan battlemasters and geth who have been fighting for hundreds of cycles."

Garrus nodded, dragging himself back. "I'll have my pari and General Victus ask discreetly among
the ranks of turian military retirees as well. All these recruits aren't any good to us without training.
Even the seasoned mercs need to be brought up to speed on our tech and methods, so hire are many
as you need." He looked around the room. "Archangel has always embraced talent wherever we
found it, and I trust you to be far more choosy than I am."

He looked around the room, meeting each set of eyes long enough to both encourage them to speak
and to enjoy their company, the unique, cooperative energy that made up his inner circle. "Any
other housekeeping?"

The glowing chia obscuring Legion from view strobed a couple of times before the geth spoke.
"The chiastyllia and geth have created a design for a new class of frigate," he said. Schematics
appeared on the large holo-screen at the center of the space. "The collectors are biotic, therefore
more susceptible to biotic attacks than tech attacks."

Garrus leaned in, trying to decipher the plans, but coming up empty. The geth and chia's creation
amounted to something new. Despite the lack of familiarity, something in the design inspired hope.
No, more … the strange looking contraption excited him. They knew the effectiveness—or lack of
effectiveness—of standard weapons. Something new might just help level the turram pitch a little.

"We designed a large scale biotic amp. It connects and channels the power of several biotics into a
single emitter," Legion continued, "which fires warp blasts and singularities. We believe the data
from our simulations warrant the development of a prototype for further testing."

The simulation data replaced the schematics, the numbers pulling a low whistle from Shepard.
"Sweet baby Jesus, no kidding." She looked to Nihlus, who nodded, the set of his mandibles
betraying the same eagerness Garrus felt. When she turned to look at him, excitement practically
cracked in his derra's eyes. "I say, let's get the prototype underway," she said.

Garrus grinned, his mandibles flicking hard. Finally, something with the potential to make a
difference in the fight. "Absolutely. We'll need reaper and collector materials to test it against, but
the faster we get it built, the better." Spinning his chair around, he looked to Sidonis. "Can you
head out to Haestrom and get our shipyard back up and running?"

Sidonis answered with a sharp nod. "We'll need to keep it low key in case the collectors come after
it again, but it wasn't damaged, just powered down and left empty."

"We need to capture an intact collector vessel," Shepard said, bringing the soft buzz of excited
conversation and planning to a dead stop. "We need to take their tech apart and get ourselves
particle cannons. Sovereign's corpse gave us a hell of a start, but we need to step up our game and
go on the offensive." She stood, pacing through the holo-image twice before Legion deactivated it.
"They need to know we can hurt them. Otherwise, all our bases are sitting ducks. That means
getting our hands on every scrap of collector tech and reaper tech we can find." She spun to face Liara. "I'll leave it to you and the Brysons to play detective and find us rumours about dead reapers. If the Leviathan of Dis died during the war against the protheans and we killed Sovereign … there have to be others."

The passion fueling her words wove an optimistic spell, pulling Garrus forward: his arms braced, legs ready to jump into action, breathing shallow. With the exception of Mordin, whose attention never waivered from its fix on his omnitool, everyone in the room mirrored the general's posture. He knew they felt the same, wondrous certainty: they'd win. Archangel could accomplish anything with the angel herself leading the charge. The fight would be terrible, and it would cost them all far more than they could even imagine, but in the end, victory awaited them. And in that moment, he blessed Cerberus for bringing her back. At least someone possessed foresight … evil foresight, but still foresight.

"How are we going to capture a collector ship?" Nyreen asked, her tone matter of fact rather than skeptical. "They've kicked our asses on every front. Our ships didn't even scuff their paint. Besides, even if we do attack and by some miracle we win, their ship is going to be in pieces."

Shepard nodded. "You're absolutely right. Conventional thinking isn't going to get us anything but dead. We're going to need to get creative. So, if an idea jabs you in the ass, don't sit on it because you're afraid we'll think you're crazy. Bring it to us. It might be completely batnuts—and I can't guarantee we won't laugh and call you a lunatic—but it also might spark some magnificent inspiration we can make work." She paused, staring down at her hands. "We need a means of boarding a collector ship so we can fight our way through."

Nihlus leaned forward, his forearms buttressed against the arms of his chair. "If we put enough people on board to take out a couple hundred collectors, what's stopping them from scuttling the cruiser?"

Shepard glanced toward the furthest QEC emitter to the left. "EDI? Can you help us out here?"

"Using information mined from the collector bases on Thessia and Palaven, I believe my cyber-warfare suites are able to penetrate collector defenses and seize control of their computer," the AI replied. "I could prevent the collectors from enacting a self-destruct protocol." EDI paused, her projection dimming for less than five seconds before she said, "Yes, I believe I've discovered a breach in their outer defenses that makes it possible for me to attack from within."

"Your cyber-warfare suites would be able to penetrate collector defenses and seize control of their computer," Shepard repeated the AI's words. She started pacing once again, the skin between her brows wrinkling, her teeth gnawing at the inside of her bottom lip. Garrus watched the gears clicking into place, the pieces of something falling together right before their eyes.

"Attack from within," she said, her voice soft … talking to herself rather than the rest of them. She stopped directly in front of him, meeting his stare. Her eyes crackled with energy, her body taut, practically vibrating.

Garrus grinned. Spirits, she'd figured it out. Something EDI said had ignited a connection inside Shepard's beautiful, faster-than-light brain. When she pivoted to face Nihlus, Garrus felt cold, as if the brilliant, mid-summer sun disappeared behind a cloud. Without any jealousy, he glanced at Nihlus, pleased at the easy set to his fratrin's shoulders, the joy painted on the underside of the thoughtful frown, the fact his hand never drifted to his absent flask. Nihlus truly had been ready to kick that pyjak out the airlock.

Shepard looked at the blue glowing representation of her ship's AI. "Once we're in, you'll be my
go-to girl, EDI. We'll need you to crack locks, open doors, seal off sections, and julienne the collector units into strips so thin they can't overwhelm us."

She paced for another couple of seconds, muttering the whole time about Earth history before she stopped at the central QEC control. "We're going to need scans … all the scans we can get our sweaty, little, grubby fingers on. We need to know the inside of their ship better than they do." Her grin turned ever so slightly maniacal. "I want them to see us blasting through their ship and pee in their collector undies while they collector sob into their collector hankies."

Garrus watched, a wry grin welcoming their certainty; she'd already decided on the mission. For some unknown collector cruiser out there, the game was already over. The rest of them not knowing how to get aboard the ship didn't matter; that seemingly insurmountable but tiny hurdle sat directly in Shepard's rearview mirror.

"EDI, check the Archangel database and see if any of the ships that tangled with the collectors got a chance to scan the vessels." Shepard returned to her chair and sat down. "Use your imagination to search out other sources."

"As you wish, Captain Shepard," the AI replied with her usual enthusiasm, "I'll set aside formulating my plans for galactic domination for the duration." For a moment, Garrus envied the AI her eternal cheer and willingness to milk a joke far past its best before date.

"Thank you, EDI." Shepard tossed him a wink, indicating that she'd said all she needed to for the moment.

"All right," Garrus said, "capturing a collector vessel is tabled for future discussion." He glanced around the room. "Any other housekeeping?" Rubbing his hands together, he used the friction of his gloves to heat his talons.

When the rest of Archangel shook off their shell-shocked expression—which he completely understood: they weren't used to watching Shepard work—they all indicated to the negative.

Grateful, Garrus focused his attention on Mordin, both anticipating and dreading the salarian's report. "What's the status on the krogan?"

Mordin's attention snapped from his omnitool as if he'd been waiting for them to get past the business too mundane to be worthy of his attention. The salarian oscillated, the frequency of his energy growing until he looked set to breach the barriers between universes. "Urdnot Grunt's scans provided fascinating insights into genophage cure, indoctrination, and the reapers' quest to answer their question." He glanced at Garrus, but quickly moved past to Shepard, no doubt hoping for a more friendly audience. Disappointment awaited him.

Shepard's earlier enthusiasm vanished in the face of the reminder of Mordin's horrific secret. She radiated anger as clearly as Mordin emitted excitement.

The salarian cleared his throat. "Stated previously, Urdnot Grunt unaffected by either indoctrination signal. Searched for reasons. Discovered why on Korlus mission recordings: Okeer referred to other vat grown krogan as failures. Claimed Grunt his only success. Traded for collector technology used in Grunt's creation."

Garrus leaned forward, his forearms braced across his knees, talons clasped. "The other krogan claimed to have no spark. Urdnot Bakara equated the spark to their soul."

"Soulless creations," Shepard whispered. She raked her fingers through her hair as she met Garrus's
stare, hers grasping for fingerholds on a slippery climb. "Holy blessed Enkindlers. Like the reapers. The collectors gave Okeer the tech … Grunt was a proof of concept test."


A low hum of realization escaped from Shepard as she bolted upright in her chair. "Chiastyllian DNA? They're what made the difference?" She turned her chair to look at Nihlus. "Some of the uncorrupted chia got caught in the chamber with the asari when the machine took them apart and analyzed them."

Garrus's fratrın nodded. "Makes sense. It could be the reason the leviathan were so desperate to control the chia: they're a weapon or, well, a defense at least."

Dr. Chakwas cleared her throat, a delicate but firm sound that directed everyone's attention to her. "Most importantly, Urdnot Grunt provides us with another control for testing the indoctrination devices. Comparing his brain scans during exposure to ones of a krogan without his resistance could reveal the exact frequencies we need to block."

Shepard stood, resuming a pacing pattern to the QEC pads and back to her chair. "So we need to locate intact devices of both types: reaper and leviathan."

Nihlus's subvocals growled a little as he said, "Locating them won't be as hard as making sure we can shield them." He paused, a thoughtful frown following Shepard along her pacing circuit. "What about the shields Tashac and Merrol used to protect them from the Conduit and the other keys?"

Shepard stopped. "We don't have a way to duplicate the tech, unless …" She spun, setting Garrus's heart racing when their eyes met. Like a trail through heavy brush, the brilliant green of her stare led him along the winding paths of her thought process. They'd just made contact with people who possessed Tashac and Merol's technical memories.

"Horizon," he said. "We need to decide how to use the facility including how to best defend it without drawing attention to it."

From the center QEC pad, Liara cleared her throat, a gentle, unassuming hum of sound. "If I may, General? Shepard?"

Garrus turned his chair to face the asari researcher. "Go ahead. Was your mission a success?"

A smile brightened Liara's face. "More than successful. The Brysons, Kumun Shol, and I discovered the entrance to the structures he's been excavating for the past several cycles." She looked as though even a single degree more passion would set off a catastrophic chain reaction culminating in an explosion. "We discovered another prothean sleeper base—as we guessed—composed of ten wings and an armoury. Unlike Horizon, this facility was clearly a military outpost. Most of the sleeper pods lost power over the millennia—the VI shutting them down a wing at a time—but two wings remain functional. We rigged a reactor to make sure they didn't fail before we decided what to do."

"Thank the blessed Enkindlers you didn't revive them," Shepard said, her words sliding along a relieved breath. "How many are we talking about?"

"Seven thousand pods," Liara replied, the dubious slant to her tone echoing the sick lurch in Garrus's gut. Spirits, seven thousand could just walk in and take over Archangel. The council races
and Alliance would consider them a threat, and probably one not worth the risk. "Enough to be a serious threat if their beliefs closely mirror Javik's."

"I can't see a large force of protheans playing well with others," Shepard agreed, "but especially our sadly primitive races." She lifted an eyebrow as she met and held Garrus's gaze. "They'd be useful as hell; they fought the reapers before, but they're going to try to take charge, and this isn't their galaxy."

Liara took advantage, slipping into the thoughtful silence. "The Brysons also have some clues to track down the leviathan. We're on our way back to the Citadel. One of Garret's researchers reported in to say he found something. I'll keep in touch as I can."

"Excellent. Good work, Liara," Shepard said. "Any help we can get would be brilliant."

"Okay," Garrus said, bringing the topic around to the inevitable. "Our work into indoctrination has to continue. That's going to mean obtaining intact reaper and leviathan orbs and then setting up a safe offsite laboratory to run tests." He looked from eye to eye. "Ideas?" When no one answered, the general let out a long sigh, the beginnings of a headache building behind his eyes. "Right." He leaned back, slumping a little further into his chair. "Get comfortable people. It looks like it's going to be a long day."

(A-N: All the love and hugs and kittens. Thanks so much for reading and for commenting. You know I love hearing from you!)
Shepard woke to the dim, blue light of the fishtank, the bed beneath her thick and deliciously warm. Threads of Garrus's incense drifted on the recycled air, coaxing her to curl in next to her husband and go back to sleep. Still, the space on her right side, so recently warmed by Nihlus, began to cool; the Spectre up and working. His absence shattered the cocoon. Damn it all. And just like that, the entire war tumbled into the empty space, filling it with twenty four and a half worries and deadlines. Not even her husband's arm, draped heavy and comforting over her hip, drove away the weight hanging above her head.

Feros awaited, but Horizon first. She needed to speak with Giran and Javik about the wisdom of waking up seven thousand protheans. Tashac's memories told her that Commander Javik, the highest ranking officer, the leader frozen to bring about the new Prothean Empire, would be able to keep them in line. The respect for his position, and Giran's as the child of Tashac and Merol, ran high, but could the Archangel hierarchy keep Javik from seizing power from the incompetent primitives once he possessed some real backing?

Sighing, she slipped out from under Garrus's arm and eased her way to the edge of the bed. She turned, lifting her knee up onto the mattress to watch her verro sleep. She couldn't get enough of looking at him. Sweet baby Jesus, before she met him, she couldn't have imagined loving someone so much that they became more beautiful with each breath. The thought of losing him formed a ball of pure, razor-edged panic that tore at the center of her with each swallow.

Her fingers lifted from her thigh, drifting across the half metre to trace the ridge of plate that covered the forearm resting on the mattress. She stopped short of actually making contact. Even after several days of recovery time, Garrus needed his sleep. As much as he'd insist that he was

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**Soluvermus** - A small (average size 8-12 cms/1-2 cms diameter), heavily armoured earthworm native to Palaven's more northern and southern regions. It is considered a delicacy.

**Dilan** - Fiancé

**Praela(s)** - The name for ancient warrior spirits who were believed to ride great beasts (or forces of nature) into war at the head of their tribe's legions. Spirits of great bravery, tenacity, and a fearsome beauty.

**Uzluk** - The head and face covering worn by krogan females.

**78 Days ASR Iera, Shadow Sea enroute to Feros via Horizon**

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fine, he'd taken a hell of a hit. She didn't look forward to the fight to keep him aboard the *Ypres* when she, Nihlus, and Martin headed into the ExoGeni base.

Gently easing herself off the bed, she started composing the list of things she needed to accomplish as she slipped into her trousers and Archangel hoodie. First item on the list: a heart to heart with Mordin. They had some ethical worries to smooth over before she trusted him to work on the genophage cure or expose anyone to the indoctrination signals. Garrus being experimented on still sat firmly under the 'over my dead body' heading. And, for the moment, the 'hell no' heading encompassed everyone until she could trust the salarian to keep his scientific excitement under control so it didn't overwhelm his compassion and common sense.

As pissed as she'd been to hear about the genophage modification, and as much as Mordin provided a convenient scapegoat, her anger had settled. The fact remained: krogan aggression presented a real problem. Even Wrex flared too hot and too often. If she couldn't convince Wrex to believe in her honest support for the krogan, she didn't stand a chance in the hottest hell of bringing the rest of the krogan into the galactic community. If they cured the genophage with that dynamic, they'd prove the council right. Wrex would end up ass to the sky in a ditch somewhere, and the malcontented Tuchankan morons rattling the bars for endless war and retribution would unleash hell.

She sighed and shook her head. No. No, she needed to believe the krogan could work with everyone. They just needed to be dragged out of their isolation. She could do it, starting with stopping in to see Wrex. Although still insisting that he remained fit and ready for action, he looked wan and twitchy, as if a handful of fire ants crawled beneath his plates. The last time Shepard visited the krogan shaman in medbay, Wrex sat, listing on a steep angle next to the female's bed.

Stopping at her desk, she wrote a quick note for Garrus and stuck it to the bathroom door. Once she stepped into the elevator, she opened a channel to Nihlus. "Good morning, early bird," she said. "Catching any worms?"

"Is early bird some sort of racist slight?" he asked, a soft growl rolling beneath the words. Despite sounding very much like an angry tiger, those subvocals betrayed the teasing truth. "I've tried *soluvermus*, and they're disgusting. I don't eat anything I have to slurp out of its carapace."

"Gross, Ni. Just so, so very gross. And yes, I'm just marrying you so I can abuse you at will." She echoed his growl a little, getting the desired laugh from the other end.

"I just finished a vid call. I asked Giran to go through Merol's memory archives to find schematics for the devices they used to shield the relay keys." He yawned, adding a long, grumbling keen to the end of it before he let out a thick smacking sound and continued. "She thinks they may have a stash of the dampeners left in storage, so our trip to Horizon might be a short stop over."

Shepard grinned and shook her head, imagining the Cerberus staff looking on with slightly horrified faces … well, except for Kelly. She seemed to enjoy having the aliens aboard. The counsellor had struck up a very cheery friendship with Tali, the two able to giggle and chat for hours. "Excellent. I have a really bad feeling about the reaper device we left at the ExoGeni building. With the thorian dead …." She let the thought die unspoken, not wanting to tempt fate any more than they already were.

"Anderson will be able to tell us if they're just being secretive or if something catastrophic has happened." A noisy breath huffed in her ear. "Where are you? What's next on your schedule?"

"I'm in the elevator, so my morning is pretty well covered." She laughed and leaned into the wall. "I've reached the head space where I can have a constructive conversation about the genophage
with Mordin, so I'm headed to his lab. You're welcome to join me."

"Do I need to come prepared to save our head researcher's hide, or have you reached the point of truly rational discussion?" Some strange combination of worry and amusement thrummed through his voice. "Because, sometimes you think you've calmed down, but the first chance it gets, your temper rises to the challenge."

"Nah, I'm good. I actually understand why he helped modify the genophage." She pushed off the wall as the elevator stopped. "I don't like it any more than the reason they created the damned thing to start with, but I understand why they did it. Even now, without Wrex and Bakara, a cured krogan population is a threat."

She nodded as she passed Kelly without pausing. "Good morning, Yeoman Chambers." Just before she slapped the door control into the lab, Nihlus strode up behind her. He must have come through the old armoury.

*Note to self: Figure out something awesome for that space, and no … Shepard's private sexing up my torini room is not an option. Or is it?*

Shaking her head, she glanced over her shoulder at her *dilan*. "Good morning, gorgeous. How did you sleep?"

Nihlus gripped her opposite shoulder, his hand steady and strong: he amazed her with his resilience. Rumbling softly in his throat, he leaned down to nuzzle her ear. "Better than I have in a few days." He sighed and leaned into her for a second. "Garrus seemed to sleep soundly as well."

"Me, three," she said, turning to kiss him softly. The reason why they'd all slept so deeply and well settled in her gut, warm and true. Her *torini* had been right … the three of them belonged together. They were at their best when in each other's proximity. She pulled away and nodded toward the door. "Shall we? The salarian's a bonafide genius, so we need him, but keep your eyes and your pheromone receptors sharp. I need to know if I can trust him with our people."

"You're really ready for this?" Nihlus asked, his mandibles held high and away from his mouth, teasing. "I'm not going to have to drag the *praela* of fiery death and destruction off Mordin's shredded carcass, am I?"

Shepard shrugged, affecting complete innocence. "I don't know what you're talking about. I am the very epitome of calm control." She palmed the control and led the way into the lab. Alone in the sterile space, Mordin worked at a piece of equipment Shepard couldn't identify.

"Lose your helper?" she asked, trying for cheer off the starting line. Grunt rarely left Mordin's side. He might have been acting on Wrex's command, keeping his eye on the salarian, but Shepard believed the reason lay in the young krogan's curiosity and hunger to know who he was and where he came from. She needed to take some time to sit down and talk with Grunt. He seemed young and filled with piss and vinegar, but beneath the layers of overly enthusiastic, inexperienced warrior, he showed signs of a thoughtfulness she wanted to explore.

"Grunt in medbay," Mordin replied without looking up from his work. "Have you come to dismiss me?"

Shepard sighed as she shook her head. "No. If we meant to fire you, we would have done so before leaving Omega." Seeing that he didn't intend to step away from his work, she grabbed a chair from behind his desk and rolled it over. "I do want to talk to you about the genophage modification project, though."
"Am aware of moral complexities," he said, his voice tight and defensive. "Dedicated significant amount of time weighing ethics against necessity."

Watching the set of his shoulders, the extra curve in his spine, and his jaw clench and release a few times did more to convince Shepard of his soul-searching than any words ever could. Things weren't as cut and dried as she first believed. Blowing out another long breath, she relaxed down into the chair, her mind opening to hear him out.

Mordin pressed some controls, making the machine bleep a few times. "Data from all simulations provided same conclusions: increased krogan birth rate … unchecked population growth, expansion, war. Galaxy kills krogan or krogan kill galaxy." He cleared his throat, a soft coughing sigh. "Modified genophage returns krogan birth rates to pre-uplift levels. One in one thousand, no more, no less."

Shepard scowled, the skin between her brows pinching into a knot. "You were trying to keep their population from falling?" she asked then winced at the genuine surprise and disbelief needling him through her words.

"Yes! Not a monster! Genophage protects both galaxy and krogan. Not a punishment. Not revenge." The declaration came out strident, Mordin's defensive tone escalating to indignant. "Could have degraded genetic structure further. Could have sent krogan into extinction. Didn't."

Regret chased surprise from Shepard's thoughts and for a moment, she started to apologize. Something in Mordin's manner stopped her, the salarian bracing his hands against the table top, leaning forward over his equipment, but no longer looking at the readouts. Her instincts told her to give him space, so she did.

Nihlus shifted over to stand beside her, his hand resting on the back of the chair, his thumb caressing her neck. It felt amazing, and she smiled up at him. Of course he knew to avoid interrogating Mordin, her dilan possessed a whole lifetime of good instincts, both innate and trained.

Mordin resumed his work, tapping at the controls of the machine, a solid wall of thorns pointed straight back at her. She needed to smash a wrecking ball right through it, but not utilizing the usual Shepard method of demolition. Another tack, then. After a minute passed, Shepard sucked in a quick puff of air by way of warning the salarian she intended to speak.

"You were an important member in the STG." She molded the words into a neutral statement and leaned forward, forearms across her thighs, fingers laced. "The powers that be wouldn't give such a massive and sensitive project to just anyone." She cocked her head a little to look up at him without lifting her head.

"Trusted with most challenging projects." Mordin nodded, a quick, stiff movement. "Genophage modification project …" He took a breath worthy of inhaling the crisp, sweet chill of the first snow. "... the best time of my life. Unsurpassed intellectual challenge, camaraderie: debate, argument, inspiration." He paused to take another noisy, nostalgic breath, then shook his head. "Galaxy's most difficult problem. Needed to get it right. Millions of lives in balance. Unlimited resources provided."

Shepard shifted a little, drawing a quick, unsettled glance from the scientist. "Was it just a difficult scientific riddle?" Holding her breath, she offered silent prayer that he'd keep talking rather than shutting down. "Did you weigh the consequences to the krogan culture … to their population in your risk versus reward calculations?"
Mordin snapped back into his previous rigidity. "Genophage medical, not social. Current krogan situation a result of krogan choices. Refused to surrender during rebellions, splintered after genophage, cloistered females … saving them from krogan violence and greed, chose to leave Tuchanka … become mercenaries."

"Yeah, they did." She sliced the heavy air between them with a bladed hand. "But what about the females? What about their hopelessness? What about millions mourning for pups who didn't get a chance to take their first breath? You're trying to tell me there isn't a gram of regret in your soul? No sorrow for their pain?" Unconvinced, Shepard cocked her head toward one shoulder, a half shrug. "As much as you'd like to paint yourself in that light, I'm sorry, Mordin, I just can't see you as the frozen-hearted scientist." She waggled her head. "Well, at least, I can't since I stopped chewing nails and spitting tacks."

The salarian's brow pulled down, his eyes narrowing: no doubt trying to parse what she'd said. After a second, he shrugged off the confusion. "Not frozen." Trading indignant for professional, Mordin let his arms drop to his sides for a second before he twisted his fingers together. "Require distance to see problems clearly. Examine data, formulate hypotheses, test, examine new data, adjust. Emotion interferes … obscures the truth."

Tugging her mouth off to one side, she lifted a dubious eyebrow. "Maybe, or maybe emotion adds an inconvenient layer of truth?" Leaning back, she propped her ankle on her opposite knee. "Did you ever visit Tuchanka to see the effects of your work?"

"First mission on Tuchanka, tested modification on small sample of krogan population. When results positive, deployed planetwide." He turned to face her, his back pressed against the table. Unconsciously, his arms locked down across his chest. "Accompanied deployment teams … returned alone yearly to take samples, monitor birth rates, watch for side effects."

Finally. Shepard nearly jumped out of the chair. Praise be the Enkindlers: a sign of hope. "You needed to see the results of your work, put a face on it." Modified genophage technically brilliant …. " He spun back to face the piece of equipment.

"But ethically difficult?" Shepard asked, mimicking his statement on the shuttle. Expending effort to keep herself from wincing at her own words, she studied him, searching for clues about the real Mordin Solus. With hope finally peeking through the cloud, she prayed he didn't let her down. "So, you do feel regret?"

"Necessary … " His fingers stilled, hovering over the machine's controls. "... came back every year. Needed to see, needed to watch … to remind myself: genophage saves both krogan and galaxy."

Hand lifting, reaching out toward him, Shepard nodded and wrestled it back under control. "But what you saw didn't look like saving them, did it?" When Mordin didn't answer, she just took a deep breath, her chest expanding, shoulders rolling back, and moved on. She knew all she needed to. "So, how close are we to a cure?"

"Looked over files taken from Weyrloc base. Brilliantly conceived. Excellent, careful—if diabolical—approach. If Urdnot cooperates … synthesize cure within a month." He hesitated again, glancing her way, the darting glance of cornered prey preparing to turn and tear into its stalker. "But krogan not prepared for cure. Still angry, still aggressive. Nothing's changed."

Shepard pressed her lips together, chewing on the inside of her bottom lip a little. "No, sometimes focusing the krogan on peace and cooperation seems bloody-fuckin'-impossible, to quote a certain
craggy, old merc." She glanced up at Nihlus when he squeezed her shoulder. "They tried to annihilate themselves long before the salarians showed up, then turned all their violence against the galaxy once the rachni disappeared ...." She swallowed and closed her eyes for a couple of seconds. "They remain a threat, so what can we do to neutralize it? Do you have ideas?"

Mordin turned back, facing her, his entire body suddenly energized once more, but tense … carrying an edge so sharp she kept a wary eye fastened on him. "The young," he said as if the answer amounted to a truth so obvious that any idiot should see it. "Grunt and the new generations. Pull them from shadows, integrate them."

"And maybe not just the youngsters." Shepard jumped to her feet, a spark shoving her out of the chair, her heart pounding, mind racing. She strode to the port, staring out into the black. "Give Wrex and Bakara positions on the war council." Raking her fingers through her hair, she focused on her reflection in the glass, then Mordin's from the other side of the room. "Bring krogan scientists into the research department. One cured the genophage for Saren."

"Reassure Wrex about cure," Mordin said, nodding. "Yes. Excellent."

Despite tipping her head a little to agree, she took a long breath and set into a pacing pattern, her mind roaring ahead. "More than that. They need to take a hand in their cure. They need to pull themselves up." As she said the words, they settled, solid and true, in her gut. "They need to stop living in squalor and blaming everyone but themselves for their problems." Turning, she met Nihlus's gaze and held it. He'd stayed silent, but she needed his input. If she ran off the rails, he'd pull her back.

The Spectre nodded. "Wrex will roar up a storm over the last bit, but I think you're on the right track. We can bring a handful of krogan into Archangel—if we can get that many—and set an example others recognize as a viable way out of their downward spiral." Closing most of the distance between them, Nihlus stood just on the other side of Mordin's desk. "We have to bring the females in."

She grinned, wide and excited. "Holy fricking crap, Nihlus Kryik, you're a genius. The shaman totally reached those tank bred krogan where they just attacked Wrex. The females have a power over the males, and it's time they stepped out from beneath their uzluks and took advantage of it. A cured female population under the governance of female chiefs and shamans … they could turn this whole damned thing around."

"When we're done here, I'll go talk to Grunt," Nihlus said, his subvocals sending shivers down her spine. "He's been training with the tank bred and other young krogan warriors." He leaned forward, his talon pads pressed into the desk top. "From the way he and Wrex talk, Grunt commands a lot of respect from his peers."

Shepard grinned, relief making her lightheaded. She'd hated both options: releasing a cure on an unchanged krogan population or refusing to release it. "If the krogan see Wrex and Bakara as their hope for a cure and for a bright future—a process we started before I died—we won't have to worry about security. The krogan will throw themselves in front of a reaper to protect them."

Shepard strode around the table, heading for the door. "Nihlus, talk to Grunt. Mordin, start looking for krogan scientists. If you find candidates, we'll have Archangel contact them." She smacked her palm against the door control.

"And you're headed down to talk to Wrex and Bakara?" Nihlus followed her, his omnitool already glowing above his forearm.

"I am. Mordin, get started on the cure. We're going to drag the krogan into the galactic community
even if they kick and scream the entire way."

Wrex sat up when Shepard entered medbay. Hovering over the shaman like an attack varren, he let out a guttural growl and lifted his chin, a challenge without teeth.

*Still ready to tear apart all comers. Damn.*

Shepard nodded to both krogan, disguising the sigh that slipped out to meet Wrex's aggression. "How are you feeling?" she asked, addressing the shaman. "Any better?"

The female nodded, a deep, formal bow of her head. "I am recovering, Captain, thank you. Dr. Solus has exhausted himself to save my sisters. And myself. He's performed miracles: we all expected to die. He's pulled all of us back from joining the ancestors." She dipped her head a little, weariness bleeding through every movement. "All but one, the oldest of our sisters."

"He prayed over the female who died," Wrex said, cutting the silence left when Shepard didn't know how to reply. "Wished for her to find somewhere better." The clan chief sounded as if hearing Mordin's prayer had shocked him out of his rage at last.

Shepard nodded, but didn't reply. Instead, she strode to Dr. Eis's desk, grabbed the arm of the chair and pulled it across the floor to Bakara's bedside. Sitting, she shuffled it a little closer, wanting to keep the discussion between them as much as possible. "I just spoke to him." She shrugged and held his stare. "Look at the way you reacted to the shaman and the others being taken. You swore to tear the galaxy apart if anything happened to them. We were on our way—dropped everything to rush right to your aid—and you didn't trust me enough to wait. Then you threatened me and Archangel. You're supposed to be the rational voice of the krogan, Wrex." She relaxed, the leather squeaking beneath her. "How can I cure your people when it's all but certain that, within a century, the krogan will be right back at the galaxy's throat?"

Wrex lunged out of his chair. Shepard held her ground, only a tilted head and a cocked eyebrow answering the challenge. She'd gone straight for the throat, provoking him with the worst version of the truth in order to see his reaction; he deserved a chance to gather himself together.

Bakara reached out to grip Wrex's arm, weak tugs urging him back into his chair. "Is Shepard wrong? If the krogan are cured, will they dwell in peace with the rest of the galaxy or will they
seek revenge? Will they work to make Tuchanka a home for new generations, or will they burn down the homes of others?"

Growling, a dragon about to spit fire, Wrex lowered himself back into his chair. "Bakara and I will teach them," he said. "We'll show them a better way." Despite sitting, he still loomed, rigid with anger.

Shepard held firm. "And what happens if you and Bakara are killed?" Her hand shot up, nearly slapping his armour. "Once the rest of the krogan are cured, what stops the factions spoiling for war from destroying all your work and moving against you, then the rest of us?" She gave him long enough to consider her words but not long enough to reply. "We need to bring the krogan into the fold; it's that simple. Nihlus is talking to Grunt right now. We need to bring in a dozen or so youngsters—including the vat grown from Korlus—to train with Archangel."

"Welps?" Wrex scoffed, a gross, offensive sound. "They're barely calloused between their plates."

"Yes, which is exactly why they're the perfect choice." Shepard waited for him to connect the dots before saying, "They aren't involved in your clan wars. They hold no fealty to anyone but you. They're blank slates. All they need is training, and can you think of a better message to the rest of the krogan and the rest of the galaxy?" Waggling her head, she continued, "Well, once the war starts, anyway."

Leaning forward, she gripped both of his forearms; his hands braced against his knees. "If you can round up a dozen older warriors to train with Archangel, we'll get them in there, post them on ships. Battlemasters are more than welcome to come in as instructors." She released him, slapping where her hands rested the moment before. Smiling only with her eyes, she sat up, straight and formal, giving the moment its due. "We're inviting the krogan in, Wrex. It's up to you to accept and step up."

She looked to the shaman before Wrex could reply, unwilling to give up her momentum. "I want you, the other female shamans, and clan leaders to rally the females. Your planet needs rebuilding, and it's time the females stopped languishing in despair and started building a new Tuchanka ... a new krogan people who are ready when the cure is." When Shepard looked to Bakara, she could see the delight beaming through even from under her uzluk. "We'll supply recyclers and all the construction equipment you need to stop squatting in squalour and get your pups out under the sun. Garrus spoke of the Gikgah of Niraxahk as an excellent, defensible place to base the unified clans. You're already sheltering there, why not repair it, make it a stronghold and a beacon to the rest of the clans?"

Bakara nodded, her entire body radiating conviction even through her weakness. "I will begin the moment Mordin allows me from this bed. Thank you, Captain."

Shepard smiled, a taut press of lips. She wasn't done yet. "Both you and Wrex will have official seats on the war council. You'll be in on every level of the planning, and we need you to speak up. We need you to participate from the point of view of partners, not with the suspicion and anger of the past." She shrugged and leaned back, cocked a little to one side. "That's all history. From right here, right now, we move forward. Agreed?"

Nervous about her ultimatum shoving Wrex away rather than pulling him in, Shepard met his stare, heart pounding so hard her head and arms felt buoyant and tremulous, as if the bones and joints nervously awaited his reply. What she saw pulled a grin out of the dread. He nodded, just a single vertical jerk of his massive head, but the simple movement allowed her to breathe out.

"And the cure?" he asked, no trace of anger or incrimination in his tone.
Shepard leaned into the bed, resting her forearm along the edge. The time for ultimatums over, she transitioned to a softer, heart to heart sort of posture. "Look, fact is, the salarians screwed the krogan over when they uplifted them. The council needed cannon fodder against the rachni. They panicked, and they done fucked it up. They didn't think about what happened after the war. Lack of foresight is not a mistake I want to make."

She watched Wrex out the corner of her eye while addressing Bakara. He remained relaxed, not showing narrow eyes and curled lip: his rage precursors. Time to push on. "We're not looking for cannon fodder." She met and held both of their stares—gold and then crimson—long enough to draw a nod from each. "I want to take our time and make sure that when we cure the genophage, we don't set the krogan up for something worse down the road."

Bakara let out a long, noisy sigh. "You treat the krogan with a respect and generosity we have yet to earn." She pushed herself up, winding herself in the process, and held her hand out to Shepard. "It would be my honour to call you kaluza."

Shepard smiled when her translator gave her the word sister. Surely she hadn't done anything worthy. Still, she took Bakara's hand, meeting the warm, strong grip with a matching one.

Wrex must have seen the blank glimmer behind Shepard's expression because he nodded. "It means sister," he said, then chuffed softly, "and Bakara is right. You and Vakarian have championed the krogan from the beginning, even when I gave you every reason not to. I'll start looking for candidates to join Archangel." He looked toward Bakara.

"Thank you, Captain," the female said. "The krogan won't let you down."

Shepard squeezed the shaman's hand. "I look forward to watching the krogan shine." She turned to Wrex, offering her hand. Instead, he stood and slapped her on the shoulder. Only the support of the bed at her back kept her from hitting the ground. She rubbed her shoulder, then offered her hand again. "Yep, still hurts like hell." Grinning, she shook his hand. "I'll expect you on the ground team for Horizon. There are some things down there you need to see."

"I'll be there," he said, all the sharp edges ground down.

Shepard strode out of the medbay, then glanced up. "EDI, is the general up?"

"General Vakarian is in the briefing room, Shepard," the AI responded. "Would you like me to let him know you're looking for him?"

"No, thanks, EDI, I'll just head up there and talk to him myself." Despite her words, Shepard caught the scent of fresh muffins and detoured through the galley on her way to the elevator.

"Thank you, Mr. Gardener," she called back over her shoulder, then bit the top off the one in her right hand. "Amb der dubishush."

She heard Garrus talking as soon as she walked through the old armoury door. Pausing to listen, she heard Nyreen on the other end, but the walls muffled their words too much for her to tell what they said. She took another big, messy bite of what really was a fantastic blueberry muffin (must be from a mix) and palmed the briefing room door control.

"Judging from intel Nihlus just passed on, we need to prepare for a couple dozen krogan within the next couple of weeks," he said, standing at the center of the darkened room, the QEC grid active. Lights glimmered off of his armour, the floor beneath his feet all but invisible, making him appear to float.
"Quarters won't be a problem," Nyreen said, "but medical and integration could prove to be an issue. Archangel has a large turian population."

He nodded. "And a fair contingent of salarians. I'm aware of our demographics, Nyreen, thank you." He shrugged his 'I don't care how you do it, just do it' shrug. "We need the krogan, and as long as they remain outside the organization, they'll never trust the rest of us. Start now. Prepare." He chuckled, then glanced behind him, sniffing the air. "We're nearly at Horizon. I'll contact you when we're underway for Feros."

"Yes, sir. Good hunting."

"Wow, C-Sec, you really can float," Shepard whispered, awe dripping from her voice. "I knew there was something special about you the last time we were on Feros. You're magic!"

Garrus chuckled and stepped off the pad. "One hundred percent pure magic." He closed the two metres between them and looked down at her with a cocky grin. "I thought that's why you fell for me."

"You know, it might have been." Shepard grinned up at him as she slipped her arms around his waist. "Damn, General the magical turian, you're intensely sexy when you're generalling. Your people respect you, they're loyal to a fault, and they love you more than the Father of Light loves his diamond tentacle rings." The smile disappeared as she leaned into him, letting out a loud, noisy breath. "You've made yourself one hell of a home on Omega," she said, the slightest tang of regret whispering along the underside of her words. "I feel selfish pulling you away from it."

Shaking his head, Garrus leaned down to rest his cheek against her hair. "Archangel kept me alive when you were gone. It was home because it was your memory." He nuzzled her hair, then pulled her in tight against his side, the calm, sure strength in his arms settling her gut: he'd recovered. "Now, home is wherever you are."

She rested her head in the curve between his keel and arm. "I found my home on the Normandy, curled up next to someone as he read to me." She paused long enough, judging by the fact he stiffened, to let him know about the bad news approaching at FTL. "Since I came back, I've been doubly blessed, and trust me, I know how fragile and rare all of this is." Tightening her grip around his waist, she pushed on. "Rare and fragile enough that I'm not willing to risk it when I don't have to."

"Kahri—"

She shook her head, cutting him off. "I know you want to go groundside on Feros, but you can't risk yourself against reaper tech," she said. Pulling back far enough to meet his eyes, she continued, "Don't worry, I'm extending the same restriction to myself when it comes to the suzerain tech. We can't take the chance they'll overwhelm us. Not until we have a workable defense. Whatever those bastards did to you ... whatever the Enkindler-damned tar spiders are doing to me ...." She shook her head, her hair fluttering around her face. "We're not going to make it worse when we don't have to." Taking a deep breath, she pressed her lips tight. "I'll make it an order if I have to."

When he opened his mouth to plead his case, to refuse to allow his mate and his fratrin to take his risks, she reached up to stroke her palm along the length of his mandible, gently silencing him.

"Not because I can't lose you." She shrugged and waggled her head. "Well, not just because I can't lose you, but because you are one of the strategic minds behind this war. You're the hands-on head of Archangel. The war effort needs you." She stepped back and pressed her hands on either side of his keel. "It needs all three of us. It needs Mordin, the shaman, and Wrex, Tali and Legion, Liara
and even Miranda. We can't sacrifice any of them or ourselves without extreme cause."

She saw how much he wanted to argue, but also saw the voice in the back of his head—probably speaking with his father's voice—telling him that she was right. When he stepped up after her death, when he'd started Archangel, he'd taken responsibility for everyone under his command. They would survive his loss, but the grieving and adjustment period amounted to time they couldn't afford to waste. The loss of morale if he died might be the end of the war effort.

"Okay," he said at last. "You, Nihlus, and Martin will go after the reaper tech, and I'll go after the leviathan tech." He held out his arms, an invitation back into his embrace. She accepted, closing her eyes as he bent down to press his face against her hair, breathing her in.

After a good thirty seconds, he nodded and nuzzled her ear. "You're right, without us … without Nihlus … the war effort will suffer. Until the rest of the galaxy becomes invested, we've got to fight smart."

Grinning, Shepard kissed his cheek. "You're one hell of a general." She tipped her head behind them toward the door. "Horizon, we can both do. I invited Wrex to suit up as well. He and the shaman are joining the war council." A quick breath and she pulled away, taking his hand to lead him to the door. "I'll explain everything while I suit up."
"Miranda?" Turning to face the Cerberus operative, Shepard cocked an eyebrow. "Come on, I don't have time for drama, just spit it out."

"I have a great deal to discuss that I didn't trust to my reports, Captain, but most of it can wait." She glanced over Shepard's shoulder at the conversation as it ramped up another notch in volume. "I need to discuss Commander Javik before we board the Ypres. He is going to demand to remain on Horizon and that you turn its security over to him."

**Regulikar**: The Prothean central government.

**Senarium** - The Prothean government's science branch.

**Kepala** - The ridges of carapace that cover the top of a Prothean's head.

**Gasin (Gasinu - pl)** - Prothean male the age of majority. (Dropped from 20 to 13 over the course of the war.)

**Takun (Takune - pl)** - Prothean female the age of majority. (Dropped from 20 to 13 over the course of the war.)

**Tapek Menru** - Literal translation: The long defeat. The calendar was started from the date the Citadel was captured by the Reapers but not officially named until 10000 Tapek Menru.

**Haksaya kubenar** - A term of endearment, literally translates as my strong, true heart.

**Cikabeknai** - The reciprocal term of endearment for the above. Literally translates to brave love.

**Dilan** - (turian) Fiancee

**79 Days ASR Horizon**

Soft but demanding, an australian accent drew Shepard away from where she stood next to Wrex, the pair of them staring over the railing at the Crucible. She grinned at the krogan, his mouth hanging open as he gawked. Turning to face Miranda, the captain sighed softly as she answered the woman's summons. Judging by the operative's furtive glances toward where Garrus and Nihlus spoke with Giran and Javik, Shepard guessed the reason for the hail.

Miranda approached from the elevator, her steps quick, her posture even stiffer than usual. The operative nodded at the captain—a sharp tip of the head—then held out her arm, inviting Shepard to walk away from the others. "If I may speak with you for a moment?"

Shepard nodded, allowing the other woman to lead her away from what sounded like a tense discussion on the verge of leaping past heated to blasting them all with scalding steam. A couple dozen metres away, Miranda stopped, her ramrod demeanour softening just a touch through the
lines of concern remained around her eyes and mouth. She looked drawn, saying a great deal about how taxing she'd found the weeks spent on Horizon.

"Miranda?" Turning to face the Cerberus operative, Shepard cocked an eyebrow. "Come on, I don't have time for drama, just spit it out."

"I have a great deal to discuss that I didn't trust to my reports, Captain, but most of it can wait." She glanced over Shepard's shoulder at the conversation as it ramped up another notch in volume. "I need to discuss Commander Javik before we board the Ypres. He is going to demand to remain on Horizon and that you turn its security over to him." Her lips pressed thin, the only sign on emotion on her cold, beautiful face.

"You mean this base or the human colony above it?" Shepard's gut sank. She must have been batshit crazy to leave Miranda here with Javik. Dammit. At the time, she just wanted to scrape off the two biggest hemorrhoids chapping her ass. She hadn't invested any thought into Javik getting into power struggles with a member of the organization devoted to torturing him for two years.

"Both. He believes that without the Alliance providing the colony with security, he needs to revive the protheans on Klencory and bring them here to garrison the planet." She shifted, drifting sideways to turn her back to Javik. "He believes we aren't able to protect the Crucible. He believes it's a weapon of mass destruction we need to not just control, but use."

Shepard inflated her lungs until her breasts pressed against the inside of her chest plate and then held the breath for several seconds before blowing it out. She nodded. "Okay."

*Note to self: Don't let Javik get his hands on the Crucible.*

She changed tacks. "Are the patients going back with us, or are they okay being looked after in the colony?"

Miranda's brow creased with exactly one and a third wrinkles, but those shallow seams in her calm screamed volumes. Still, she merely clenched her jaw, swallowed, and went along with the topic change. "They're all making solid progress under the care of the colony doctor. Dr. Longbear keeps them in the medical facility at night and then sends them out to help the colony during the day. She says they are integrating well. Probably best to leave them here unless their condition changes."

Shepard nodded, one of the weights balanced on her narrow shoulders lifting. "Excellent. That makes me really happy." A loud exclamation from Javik spun the captain around. "Take a good tactical position until this plays out. Just don't make a move until I actually go down. Let us handle it."

Miranda gave a nod crisp enough to be a salute and turned to walk down the catwalk.

"Captain Shepard? Is this news accurate?" Giran asked. Tashac's daughter looked taken aback by the news of more protheans surviving their race's apocalypse, but Javik's reaction shoved Shepard out onto a narrow, broken ledge.

Shepard stopped, watching the two protheans. She needed to know so much more about them as a people. She needed to spend some serious time with the rachni queen. The way surviving protheans were stacking up, they'd need all the help they could get.

For now, she'd have to figure things out on her own. Well, with Nihlus and Garrus. "Come on, Tashac, help me out here," she whispered, keeping her voice too soft to travel. "Give me some of your prothean intuition instead of a running diatribe about how Javik's the doom of the prothean
"Captain?" Javik called. "Why aren't my people being taken out of stasis?" He sucked in a massive breath making Shepard think of a dragon inhaling to fuel the fires in its belly. "Are they going to be taken to some secret facility and vivisected as I was?" His gold eyes fastened on Miranda's back. "Are they going to be turned over to the likes of that woman?"

The warning alarm at the base of Shepard's skull stabbed down her spine, tangling her muscles into knots. Maybe if she'd gotten to Javik's pod-of-blue-toes-and-bluer-giblets before Cerberus, she might have been able to bring him around.

Why are you thinking this way, Janey? You thinking he can't be brought around? What are you going to do? Ventilate his head or tell him there's a party on the other side of the airlock?

"Nihlus?" she said out loud, nodding him over. Drawing in a long, heavy breath, she braced herself for the ugliest possibility. Then, as her dilan strode toward her, she wondered if Miranda might be better suited to handle the ugliest developments. No, Miranda would blur the lines too much. Hell, if Javik needed to be taken out, and she saw it coming, she'd do it herself. She just couldn't guarantee she'd be looking in the right direction when the bullet flew.

"Jane?" Nihlus's instinctual whisper eased the grip around her throat, the tightness disappearing altogether when he glanced behind him. He saw it as well.

She swallowed and glanced the fifteen or so metres down the catwalk to where Javik and the others argued. "I'm feeling a hair trigger on our prothean commander. This might be Javik's breaking point. Keep him on your LADAR."

Nihlus glanced behind them again, a low rumble rolling deep in his chest. "He's building to a detonation of some kind, and I doubt it will be flowers and candy. He's convinced our reluctance to wake his people means we intend to turn them into experiments." His brow plates lifted, his expression almost keen, as if he wouldn't mind an excuse to just sweep the problematic prothean off the board. "Or that we'll arrange an accident to take out the power supply and simply kill them."

Shepard inflated her lungs with the musty, recycled air, shaking her head as she blew it out. "Yeah, just keep an eye on him." Another deep breath and she nodded toward the others. "Come on, we need to keep moving. We've got a fuck-ton of work to get done and sooner rather than later."

Nihlus stepped up to walk pressed against the back of her shoulder. One corner of her mouth tugged back when he leaned close to whisper, "And a wedding to plan."

Shepard shrugged, her humour warm but with a little nip behind it. "I don't know about that, you still haven't asked me."

"Captain Shepard!" Javik fairly leaped at her as she stepped between Giran and Garrus. "You must release my people from their stasis pods. They are the last protheans. With seven thousand people, I could return our race from the scattered dust and tattered remains of history."

Giran's mouth sprang open, her top lip pulled back … about as outwardly vicious as a prothean could look. Her eyes narrowed, as she spun to face Shepard. "Captain ... General Vakarian, while I'm pleased you've discovered more survivors, I would urge caution in waking them."

Javik lunged, his teeth bared as well. Shepard threw herself between them, forcing Javik to shout
over her shoulder at Giran. "How can you speak those words? We are the last of our people … the
reminders of a mighty empire destroyed at the peak of its greatness."

Shepard spun to face him. "Stand down, Javik. The whole reason I'm worried about waking them
up is all this great and mighty Prothean Empire crap." She stared him down, waiting until his
kepala lifted, leaving his eyes unhooded. Once his lips covered his teeth, she moved out of the line
of fire, but held his stare. "You're from a people who enslaved the other space-worthy races. If they
wouldn't kneel, you beat them down. If you'd beaten the reapers, would victorious protheans be
standing above me with their boot at my throat."

The commander's left foot drew back a half step, but he recovered within a breath, straightening
and stiffening. "Evolution demands—"

"Evolution didn't save your people then, and it won't save us now. I wish it was that simple."
Shepard shrugged, then winced at the slathered-on layers of snark. Dammit. Snark wouldn't calm
things down, no matter how justified or honest. She glanced at Giran to make sure the other
prothean wasn't taking offence before latching back on Javik. "While it might seem a position of
little power, I've invited you onto the war council, a trust I intend to keep. However, I'm afraid if
you're backed by seven thousand warriors, your half of our agreement will fall prey to convenient
amnesia."

"Seven thousand of our soldiers will prove invaluable to you in this war," Javik insisted, his voice
so tight he swallowed as if being strangled.

"Yes, as they were in helping us win fifty thousand cycles ago." Giran shook her head. "My parents
believed the Regulikar lost its way in the last centuries of the war. Creating monsters to rival the
reaper horrors and throwing children at their capital ships didn't help us. All it did was cost us our
souls." She stepped up, standing so close her kepala nearly bumped his. "Would you use the old
ways to win this war?"

"We have time to prepare." Javik straightened to attention. "Our war against the reapers ended
before it began when they activated the Citadel. Archangel has resources in the geth and their
fleet."

Shepard let out a long, strained hiss, her patience hitting the end of the tracks and careening straight
through the buffer stop and down into the gulley. "The geth? I thought I was supposed to blow
them all to hell? Our alliance with them was an … " Her expression melted into a wry
thoughtfulness, her index finger tapping her bottom lip. "... abomination waiting to blow up in our
face and destroy us all."

"I've seen the war you're facing," Javik said, his tone finally losing the condescension, but
replacing it with derision. "The soldiers you'd leave frozen have all fought the reapers. Are you so
weak that you would turn away our knowledge and experience out of fear?" He lifted himself up,
spreading his shoulders, but he might as well have saved his energy. Someone really needed to
send Javik a memo to tell him not to bother. He couldn't intimidate her on his best day.

"Afraid? No, Javik, I'm not afraid. Too damned smart to put guns in the hands of seven thousand
people who might turn them right back on me in the name of knowing better than the primitive
races? Yeah, absolutely. I have too many people counting on me to do anything else." She threw a
hand up between them to still his argument. "Enough. This debate won't get us any closer to
figuring out what to do." She turned to Giran. "The memories in my head warn me toward caution,
but I also hate the idea of leaving so many people in limbo. What are your thoughts?"

The prothean turned and paced to the railing overlooking the Crucible. After a minute or longer,
she turned around, leaning back against the railing. "I was raised by parents who told me to hold myself and others to a higher standard, and then trained by a government driven to the point of madness."

Javik sucked in a pointed gasp and stepped forward, bristled.

Giran rushed in to meet him, pushing him back as she demanded, "Do you deny it? Our people had no chance. They fought for hundreds of cycles despite calling the days of the war Tapek Menru: the Long Defeat. We knew it, and yet was retreat ever considered?" Chin jutting out, eyes wide, using force of presence alone, she shoved the commander back when he tried to interrupt. "Did we ever just fill our ships with civilians, scientists, guards, and provisions, and send them out to find somewhere safe beyond the edge of the galaxy? My parents proposed an ark ship program forty cycles before the end, and it was rejected by a government so obsessed with power and so deluded that they insisted our race fight to the last child."

Giran stepped back, allowing Javik space to gather his thoughts. She turned her calm, but earnest stare to Shepard. "My parents had a list of officers in their records. The Regulikar sent out a list to all the bases still able to receive transmissions. It's the leaders of the different sleeper cells and their profiles. My parents highlighted the few they trusted to be the most cooperative with the younger races."

"And what of me?" Javik's words sliced through the air, each one a separate blade.

"They tried to have you removed from the program entirely." The absence of venom in Giran's voice surprised Shepard. She'd expected Giran to mirror the terrifying level of venom Tashac was spitting all over the back of her mind. Maybe she'd better leave Javik to Garrus and Nihlus. Not even the Father of Light could manage the level of almost cannabinoid peace and goodwill it would take to offset the rage trapped inside Shepard's head.

"Javik," she said at last, her voice carefully emulating the aforementioned Father of Light, "Tashac saw everything inside your head and your heart. What she saw there wounded her; she described your joining as torture." Shepard threw up her hands. "The fact you wanted nothing to do with your children was a joy to her: a real, holding your breath and crossing your fingers, relief. If she didn't even trust you to be involved in raising your own children, how am I supposed to trust you with the security of my galaxy?"

Nihlus stepped up, subtly placing himself between Javik and Shepard, but instead of providing a wall of protection, his stance felt as though Nihlus meant to make himself the bad guy, allowing Shepard to remain the face of cooperation. A shrug rolled the Spectre's shoulders back, seeming to brace him as he asked, "What happens when the War Council makes a decision or assigns your prothean troops to an op you don't approve of? What if you don't approve of any of our decisions; could we trust you at our backs then?"

Javik back away a step, his hands twitching as if judging their reflexes and distance to cover. "You never intended to save my people. You're jealous children playing at war. I can't … won't allow you to finish what the reapers began fifty thousand cycles ago." Almost too quickly to see, his particle rifle appeared in his hands.

Shit! Shit! Shit! Note to self: Leave frozen protheans buried under the peas, flank steak, and deluxe pizza.

In her peripherals, Shepard saw both Garrus and Giran moving to stay on Javik's flanks. When Garrus looked to her, she shook her head—they needed to let Javik take the first shot—and activated her overclocked shields.
Holding her hands out away from her weapons, Shepard stepped toward the prothean. "What good are you to your people dead?" She stopped advancing when he raised his rifle. "I have no intention of harming those men and woman in stasis. If anything, I'd move them somewhere more secure to wait out the war. I'd like to make them a part of Archangel, wake them all up and bring them into the fold. Get the scientists integrated into the research department, get the soldiers training with our troops as brothers."

"You're the wild card here, Javik," Garrus said, closing up Javik's right flank. "If Tashac and Merol left a list of people they thought could step up and lead, we'll wake them up and see if they'll work with us. If they're more reasonable than you, if we can get stable, cooperative leadership for the remaining prothean people, we'll bring in the rest."

"But right now," Nihlus said, pushing in on the end of Garrus's statement, his tone hard, his subvocals clearly threatening, "your options are: I shoot you dead, or I shoot you somewhere crippling enough to put you down and after we treat you, you're put back in stasis."

The prothean commander scoffed, the sound so loaded with disgust and condescension it hit Shepard like a boxing glove to the gut. "You're primitives, barely out of your cradles, allowing the memories of the empire's two weakest apologists to guide you into a war you can't even begin to imagine." The gun lifted into high ready. "You should be on your knees begging me to wake my soldiers and lead you forward."

Shepard blocked Nihlus's next words with a raised hand, her eyes never leaving Javik. "That's your last word on it?"

The slight shift in the prothean's posture in the split second before he fired sent Shepard into a roll. She came out of it on one knee, her Mattock in her hands, and before Javik could adjust for her new position, she sent three bullets tearing through his shields and armour. Bright, crimson blossoms burst from his chest. Stars of blood created short-lived constellations in the air as he fell.

Oh shit. Shit, no. What the hell, Janey?

The world stopped. Shepard's breath roared in her ears, the tissue in her lungs crackling audibly as the oxygen flowed through into capillaries, then branching out, further and further, the blood roaring into her brain, the neurons firing, each a tiny nova, a sun dying then being born again in the next instant. And Javik's last bubble of breath hovered, clinging to his face as if terrified to let go and find out what happened next.

Heart hammering in her chest, sweat prickling on her skin, she allowed the moment to hold her, suspended, everything beyond her still, going nowhere while she listened.

This isn't the spiders, is it? No, it's not leviathan. The rachni queen, maybe? Amalair? Please .... I feel it. I know it. This isn't the way forward. If we start fighting within the ranks, it all leads to death. Tell me ... show me the way forward.

And then music poured into her. A familiar, ethereal voice sang, a voice of such exquisite luminosity that it sank deep into the ground beneath her feet and stretched out into every corner of creation. Crystalline and razor-edged, the shards pierced Shepard through, lifting away the body weighing her down. Unlike her experience while escaping the Cerberus base, the rachni song sparked no fear or pain; it simply cradled her, warm waters washing around feet buried in silken sand.

"Altering input parameters to test viability. Accepting new data. Hypothesis uploaded to primary mainframe for analysis."
The computer from Thessia? Collectors? Had the claws of reaper indoctrination finally pierced the protective shell around her mind? Heart racing, she struggled to get loose. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw the bubble, the terrible red orb hovering above Javik’s face. As she watched, it began to shrink as if his body drew his last breath back in. The crimson stars dotting the air, slightly darker against his armour, collapsed back into the blossoms on his chest. Mournful song painted over Garrus's horrified gasp in shades of deep, muddy purple.

Wait. Song? Not reapers or leviathan: rachni. "Amalair?"

Shepard allowed the warm waters of the rachni queen's song to wash away the panic. "I know he can be reached. I rushed. I pushed too hard." She closed her eyes, and when she spoke, she reached out to the song laving her in its peace. "It's all so huge, so terrifying, and so impossible. What are the three of us supposed to do against the reapers if I can't even talk one prothean down?"

Laughter bubbled around her, thousands of voices, some large, some tiny and new.

'Sovereign towered in waves of corrupted song and sour taint, each note shattering fleets.' The song whispered in a thousand hues. 'Bringing harmony to the quarians and the geth stretched before you in poisoned shades of blood and hatred, an arid desert singing from torn, violet throats choked with blood.'

Shepard sighed, belying the smile that met the rachni queen's answer. "Sure, throw my victories in my face when I just want to feel sorry for myself." Another sigh. "Okay, fine. I'm not sure what this is … a hallucination or some rachni version of the jedi mind trick, but okay. I need something to reach the tiny piece of decency and hope … ."

Return and discover the answers, genesis child.

The slightest shift in the prothean's posture sent Shepard into a roll. She came out of it on one knee, her Mattock cast aside, and before Javik could adjust for her new position, she shoved his gun aside with one hand. Her free hand gripped the back of his neck. Pulling him down to her level, she pressed her forehead along the ridge of his kepala, she clutched him close to her.

"Remember what you told me just after I took you out of stasis?" she whispered, pressing her mouth against his tympanic membrane. "You told me that you didn't return to help Tashac bring your children into the galaxy because of your shame." She paused to take a long, slow breath, relaxing her muscles without easing her grip on him. "What you were hurt her. In our sharing, I sensed your desire to know a different life … a life free of the hatred and terror that grew inside you until it poisoned every cell."

In the space of a half second and one hissing breath, Javik collapsed in her arms, his gun rattling as it hit the floor, his arms gripping her armour in desperate fists. "Do you know how to create this miracle?" he asked, his voice pressed as close to her ear as she remained to his.

"Maybe. Maybe I do, but it means letting go of your old baggage." She slapped the back of his neck gently and pulled away far enough to look into his eyes. "I want you to see something Tashac shared with me." She held out her hand palm up. "Will you look?"

Javik took her hand.

Brushing Tashac's kepala with his own, Merol smiled and said, "I remember Giran's birth. Do you remember that?" He chuckled and pressed his cheek against her neck. "I believe it angered her that I helped ease Attit into the air before her. The birth-matrons had never seen the like of those little hands pushing from you, Giran pulling herself free from your folds." He sighed and nuzzled
the sensitive spot along the edge of her kepala where it plunged down toward her neck. "You always said, protheans were born fighting."

His eyes glistened. "I have spent more than sixty cycles at your side, the only place I can imagine finding happiness. I eased five lives from the care of your body into this galaxy, watched Lulyak deliver two more. Raised seven, beautiful children … loved them all as my own. Each one of them grew up fighting and died fighting, but because of you, they knew more than battle. They knew hope and how to cherish joy wherever they could find it. You taught them to fight for a better life, not just to kill the enemy."

"I have forgotten … allowed the darkness to steal far too much from my mind and heart." Tashac let out a soft sigh, her entire being relaxing into his hands as he stroked her neck and shoulders, thumbs dragging along the ridge of ligaments tying her shoulder into her neck and back. "I have always hated those antecessor-cursed statues on Ilos, their heads cast down, spines dragging so low. An entire race's defeat carved into stone … how my spirit railed against them. And now my spirit bears that same shape."

Merol's hands slipped lower, following the line of her spine. "I know that the Vanguard eats away at you, beautiful mother of my last children. Does it hurt you to fight it? Have you truly reached the end of your strength?"

"She never lost strength or hope," Javik said, his voice a thick croak, the voice of a man too long in the desert. He swallowed and licked his lips, pulling away from Shepard. "Tashac fought their corruption to her end, never bitter, never filled with rage."

Shepard nodded, holding his stare. "You can get there, I know the desire sits inside your heart, festering, pushing at the hate." She clasped her hand down on his shoulder. "Let's start with just a little trust. You don't have to trust everyone, not right away."

"Just you?" His reply managed to leave out the earlier acid-coated condescension.

"Just me." She released him and pushed up. Nihlus slipped a hand under her armpit, helping her up off the floor. "Thank you, haksaya cubenar, my knees are singing your praises for the assist." She frowned, looking around again, something digging in through her temples—almost like the spiders—pushing her to recognize something, but clean, not tainted.

Shepard rubbed her eyes, deja vu scratching deep into her ocular orbits and down her spine, nettles insisting something had happened. Ridiculous. She shook her head and rolled her shoulders.

Sweet baby Jesus, stop being a superstitious idiot and focus on what needs your attention.

"Kahri!" Garrus rushed in, grasping her hands. "Are you all right?" He snatched her in tight against his side. "For a split second, I thought you'd killed him."

"No, but I have the strangest feeling." She shook her head again and wrapped her arms around him, wallowing in his refuge, but just for a second or two.

"Weak apologists," Giran said, a deep rolling growl spiking the words strong enough to pull Shepard back, anchoring her in the moment. Still, the young officer's demeanour felt conciliatory rather than confrontational. "Do you call them so, because they objected to my being sent off to battle before my kepalar ridge closed? Because they protested when you took thousands of children out to battle and came back with a handful?"

Imbued with the wisdom and might of the gods, so righteous in her wrath, Tashac's daughter glided
across the deck plating to look out over the Crucible. "Our empire died because a sheltered
government clung with trembling hands to old dreams of power, unable to conceive of anything but
the lies of glory upon which they were raised."

After long seconds of silence during which Shepard held her breath, afraid to shatter the moment,
Giran nodded as if she'd made a decision.

"There may be caches of other sleeper pods spread around the galaxy," she said. "We discovered
many similar bases of inusannon personnel. We did not find any alive, but it gave our leaders the
inspiration to create our own as well as spurring them to improve the technology. They thought to
send millions of our best and most storied into stasis to wait out the war."

Something poked at Shepard, and she nodded. "We've found four bases so far, but it's a hell of a
huge galaxy."

"I need some time to research other likely locations." Giran glanced at the chiastyllian gauntlet
around Shepard's arm. "Would they know where my people are hidden?" She stepped closer,
crowding into the captain's personal space. "They have existed as long as the reapers, they must
know much."

Shepard nodded absently, her mind chasing the itch that had poked at her the moment before. "I'm
sure they'll offer whatever help they can." She sent a request to the gauntlet, the chia releasing her
arm, and then passed it over to Giran. Pacing to the railing, Shepard leaned over, butting up next to
Wrex.

"Take Javik and Miranda back to the Ypres, please," she said, loud enough for the rest of the group
to hear. "They can settle back into their quarters while I finish up here."

Wrex turned to exclude the others. "Why me?"

Shepard grinned and cocked one eyebrow. "You're an unknown to both. Don't be afraid to be
intimidating." A wink sent him on his way, a wide grin on his face.

Once a cowed Javik and a pinched-faced Miranda allowed Wrex to herd them toward the elevator,
Shepard returned to her torins and Giran. They were discussing sites of other prothean caches with
the chia, so she waited until they all paused and turned to look at her.

Letting the silence last long enough for the previous topic to drift away, leaving the air clean, she
cleared her throat and looked to Giran. "You said your people got the idea for putting your people
in stasis from the inusannon? And you improved upon their technology?" She crossed her arms,
both haste and necessity pushing her toward the prothean contingent. "The beacons too? How
much did you learn about what came before you?"

"Yes, we discovered beacons and the stasis cells, but also weapon schematics and a great deal
more." Giran's eyes focused on Shepard with a sudden intensity. It burned hot enough to make the
captain think some very important link had clicked into place.

"The prothean homeworld boasted a wealth of ruins traced back to a couple of ancient races," Giran
continued. "The most obvious one was the inusannon, but traces of another race lay beneath their
layer." She wrung her hands, her entire body becoming more charged by the second.

Shepard hoped it didn't result in some sort of detonation. They'd suffered enough of those for one
day.

Giran froze, her entire body snapping dead straight and dead still. "What my antecessors discovered
accelerated our evolution and technology from very early in our development as a species." She swallowed hard, her expression dropping to one so stricken that Shepard reached out to grip her shoulder. Where had all the excitement gone? What had the *takun* realized?

Giran backed up a couple of steps, tugging her shoulder free, and turned to her people. "Go fetch the information we copied for Captain Shepard." When only one moved to follow the order, she waved them all off. "All of you. Check the computers to be sure Commander Javik didn't leave any stray code behind. Full infiltration protocols."

Shepard leaned on one hip, patient but eager, as she waited for Giran to reveal her revelation. What if humanity evolved on Mars, the ruins there discovered centuries—maybe even millennia—earlier? How far out into the stars would they have pushed? How different would the galaxy be? How far ahead would they be in their preparation for the reapers?

She chuffed, the grunt punching up her throat. Look how long the asari had possessed prothean tech and how little they'd done with it. Judging by what she knew from Tashac and Javik, the protheans groomed the asari starting early on … where were all the warnings about the reapers? Why hadn't the asari been building instead of embracing eternity for the last several thousand years?

So, yeah … maybe all the knowledge the protheans possessed wouldn't have changed a single Enkindler-blessed thing. The protheans had been caught with their pants and undies tangled around their ankles despite their discoveries. They'd taken all their advanced knowledge and used it to subjugate the galaxy rather than uplifting it. Could she claim humanity would have done any better?

"Captain?" Giran's voice grabbed Shepard by the giblets and dragged her back onto the catwalk.

Shepard nodded, blinking away the thoughtful fog. "Sorry … wandered off there. Go ahead. You looked like you realized something important."

The prothean paced to the railing and back a couple of times, so obviously trying to puzzle through something that Shepard just left her to pace in silence. After nearly five minutes, Giran stopped. Facing Shepard, she said, "I think my people knew about the reapers before they came through the Citadel. What I saw in my parents' memories … the secrets … the lies … all the times they worried about projects launched by the *regulikar* and *senarium* …."

"It was your government trying to prepare for the reapers in secret," Shepard said, sparing Giran the completion of her thought.

"And they enslaved the entire galaxy to do so." Squaring her shoulders, Giran looked down at the gauntlet gleaming around her wrist. "You will help me discover where my people are hidden?" she asked the chia.

"We will." A trickle of sparkling light shimmered down the length of the chiastyllian construct.

Giran met Shepard's gaze with one of pure, dear sweet baby Jesus, Enkindler-forged steel. "I will assume command of my people, Captain, and on their behalf, I swear every ounce of knowledge, every piece of technology, and every drop of our blood to your cause." Her eyes looked up toward the surface. "All I ask is when the battle ends, my people are allowed to settle somewhere and discover the one, elusive thing we've never experienced: peace."

Awed into silence, Shepard took the prothean's hands between her own. "You have my word, Giran." She smiled and closed her eyes, rolling them a little at the wash of love and respect flowing
from behind Tashac's door. She opened them and nodded toward the elevator. "Come on, I'll get you in touch with the people already searching."

When they stopped to wait for the elevator to return to their floor, she grinned at the prothean's new commander. "Care to visit the Citadel?"

(Thanks for reading and saying howdy. I appreciate your support tons and tons. *hugs and muffins*)
Across the carriage from her, Garrus cleared his throat, a soft rumble to remind her of his presence. That explained the lack of elevator movement. Someone wanted to talk. A teasing grin tugged at one corner of her mouth. "Lock out the elevator for a second, please, EDI."

**Caris** - (turian) Beloved, precious, cherished

**Pulkar verro** - (turian) Beautiful when referring to a male. Handsome, but it goes deeper, referring to the beauty of spirit as well. Used within a close relationship. (Father, son, husband)

**Verro** - Husband, male bond-mate.

**Derra** - Wife. Female bond-mate.

**Haksaya kubenar** - A term of endearment, literally translates as my strong, true heart.

**Cikabeknai** - The reciprocal term of endearment for the above. Literally translates to brave love.

**Dilan** - (turian) Fiancée

**Tussat silk** is extremely soft but hardy, making it the favourite material for clothing, linens, and upholstery.

**80 Days ASR** (en route to Feros)

Shepard leaned back against the elevator railing, the heels of her hands braced against the cold metal. Even after the hours of getting Javik, Giran, and Giran's aide settled aboard, Shepard couldn't shake the odd feeling of déjà vu that wasn't déjà vu. The moment she experienced on the planet felt like when a name got stuck on the end of her tongue: as if she should remember, but every time she grabbed for what took place in those seconds, it slipped between her fingers.

Stifling a yawn behind her hand, Shepard looked at the control panel. She should be heading for the crew deck to debrief Operative Lawson. Except that if she sat down in the chair across the desk from all that superior genetic attitude and condescension, and that perfectly plucked right eyebrow—maybe it didn't even need to be plucked, Miranda might have been born with perfect eyebrows—cocked just so, and Miranda stood, leaning on one hip in the way that naturally drew all eyes to her ass …. Yeah, Shepard couldn't be held accountable for leaping across the desk and choking the living shit out of the Cerberus operative.

*Note to self: Get some damned sleep and lose your inner homicidal maniac before debriefing Miranda.*

She stared at the controls; something about them felt off. What? Oh, right. The little light wasn't blinking its way up through the decks.
Across the carriage from her, Garrus cleared his throat, a soft rumble to remind her of his presence. That explained the lack of elevator movement. Someone wanted to talk. A teasing grin tugged at one corner of her mouth. "Lock out the elevator for a second, please, EDI."

She looked up at her husband from under heavily lidded eyes. "What can I do for you, General?"

Her verro shrugged, not reciprocating her teasing. "Javik. What can we do to make him feel involved but keep him separated from his people?"

Shepard sighed through her nose. "We need his military expertise to plan our assaults on the collectors, so we give him a position on the council." She let out another loud sigh, that one carrying a growl on its back side. "But first, we need to completely debrief him." Glancing at EDI’s base in the elevator, she asked, "Can you make us a comprehensive intelligence survey for Javik, please? Just send it to the computer in his quarters."

She turned back to Garrus. "Can you help him with the survey and deal with him until we get back to Archangel?" Affecting a sickeningly sweet, guileless smile, she cocked her head and batted her eyelashes. "Please?"

Garrus chuffed and narrowed his eyes. "Your wiles won't work on me, woman." Still, his mandibles gave a hard, teasing flick as he nodded. "If we get through the survey, I'll set him to the problem of locating and capturing a collector ship." He stepped toward her, expression teasing, but also alight with … what was it? Joy? Love?

Shepard stared at him, her heart beating quick and eager as she tried to decide what it was she saw there. Whatever its nature, it filled her with warmth … and a glow that felt both as ancient as the oldest stardust but also newborn, the bright sprout unfurling its first tender leaf to catch the sun. Then he spoke, his face plates shifting ever so slightly, but enough to break the fragile thread she'd been following.

"I'll deal with our prothean problem if you do me a favour?" he said. He stepped close enough that she'd need to crane her head back to meet his eyes once she stopped chasing that thread, now spider silk on the breeze.

She shook off the moment. Lack of sleep combined with her overactive imagination might just prove the end of her one day. "Oh? And what favour is that?" Shepard’s smile twisted toward teasing, heating a little as she met her verro’s stare of pure desire. Belly doing somersaults, she took one step closer. "Some trivial little errand?"

Garrus reached up, slowly stripping off his gloves a handful of centimetres from her face. "Very trivial, since we're old, married people now." One talon pad traced the line of her jaw, the sharp point just scraping her skin, leaving a fiery trail that burned all the way down to her giblets. Bending down, he pressed into her until his breath fanned her lips. "Tomorrow morning, I want a block of time with my bondmate, alone in our cabin, all communications disabled."

Lips tugged off to one side, Shepard hummed low in her throat. "Hmmm, let me see what I can do with my schedule. I might be able to pencil you in."

Garrus stepped in, his mouth pressing to hers, his heat envelope swallowing her whole. Blessed freakin' Enkindlers, how had she lived almost thirty years without that glorious warmth? Mandibles brushing her face as he smiled, he kissed her, his tongue flirty but a little shy. "We haven't spent nearly enough time being newlyweds." He pulled back, a teasing glint in his eyes. "That is the word, isn't it?"
She replied with a kiss, sliding her arms around his neck. Clinging to him, she deepened the kiss until they broke apart from necessity, both gasping for breath. Heart hammering, giblets pulsing hard enough she knew his pheromone receptors would be saturated with the scent of her desire, she rested her brow against his. "We haven't had nearly enough of that sort of time, indeed." She brushed the upper plate of his mouth with a soft kiss. "Tomorrow morning, it is."

A low, lusty growl answered that, Garrus lifting her and pressing her into the wall. Mouths millimetres apart, breath shared, he rumbled. The deep, rolling thunder of it reached all the way through her as if he'd found a way to connect their hearts straight through their clothing and chest walls.

"Not a single universe … " he whispered, blue eyes glinting, "... not one reality exists where I don't love you." Their shared pulse pounded in her ears as his brow brushed hers.

Shepard's eyes closed, the elevator light indecent and harsh, words … no, a soul so beautiful deserved a cool breeze casting dancing shadows on the grass of a forest glen. She smiled and nodded. Gentle, chaste kisses eased him back until her feet hit the floor. "You know I'll hold you to that, in each and every one of those universes."

Without moving to break their embrace, she said, "EDI, resume elevator functions." She kissed her husband one more time when the carriage stopped and then the door opened and she backed away. "Sweet baby Jesus, but don't you know how to woo a girl." She blew him a kiss and stepped over the threshold. "I'll see you in the morning, pulkar verro. I love you."

She didn't turn toward her cabin door until the elevator closed and started down, just in case Garrus changed his mind and decided he needed to talk to her or smooch on her some more. When he didn't return, she turned to face the green glow of the latch and took a long, settling breath.

Nihlus had requested the night alone with her, and with both of her torini having been neglected in favour of passing out from exhaustion, she wanted to be completely present in the moment. She opened the door and stood at the threshold, blinking in the low light, trying to decode the cabin's transformation.

"Welcome home, caris," Nihlus said. He stepped out of the shadows down by the couch, his hide and suit awash in the deep pigments of Illium at twilight. He climbed the stairs and crossed the few metres to the door.

"Welcome home, indeed." She smiled, turning away from the light show to look into his eyes. "What is going on in here, Romeo?" Her grin widened as he cocked a brow plate at the name. Letting out a deep, sorrowful sigh, she shook her head. "Even after these years, I try to give you culture, and you look at me like I'm crazy."

Nihlus let out a soft chuff. "Romeo and Juliet, a tragic romance by William Shakespeare." An arched neck and cocky head tilt met her startled grin. He nodded. "That's right, no longer will I be caught by your archaic references, evil woman. I've read Shakespeare," he said, jewel-like glints shimmering in his eyes, emeralds more precious than any mined from the earth.

A sharp, bright laugh escaped as she stepped into him, her arms slipping around his waist. "Even Taming of the Shrew, I take it?"

Wrapping her tight in his arms, he pulled her in, his body warm and solid, his breath soft on the back of her neck. "It was the first one I read." He nuzzled the curve of her neck. "I thought it might be a guide to the 'care and feeding of your difficult woman'."
"Now I'm a pet?" She pulled back, resisting against his hold, merry laughter bubbling just behind an exaggerated expression of shock and disgust. "You are so asking for an assless kicking, Mr. Spectre."

"Am I?" The teasing in his stare turned sultry and he leaned down, resting his brow against hers. "But no, you're certainly not a pet." He nodded toward the steps down toward the bed. "Accompany me. All shall become clear."

Shepard chuckled to cover the nervous flutter in her belly. "Dear lord, Spectre Kryik, you have been studying the bard, haven't you?" She followed him to the top of the stairs, then stopped, a soft chuckle of delight escaping as she looked over his labours. "You recreated the beach on Illium."

Nihlus wrapped his arms around her waist. "This date is missing the sand, but it promises a measure of privacy that the beach didn't."

Taking the steps slowly, Shepard smiled at the blankets laid out over the deck plating, the soft beige folds leading to the fishtank. She paused on the bottom step and tugged him over to face her. "Well, at least there's no chance I'll have to dive into the sea after you, drag you out and give you mouth to mouth." Wrapping her arms around his neck once more, she drew him in until her lips brushed his as she whispered, "Although, now I think about it, I'm a little sad I won't need to give you mouth to mouth."

He shook his head, mandibles spread in a crooked smile. "How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not afraid of the water?" Nuzzling her lips, he lifted her off the stair, swinging her around a half turn, one arm slipping under her backside to support her. "Although, I can pretend I'm drowning if you need to practice that mouth to mouth thing. It'll be a hardship, but I'm willing to make the sacrifice."

Laughter tickled up her throat, the same heady, effervescent feeling that she got from drinking asari sa'illa wine, and she kissed him, her lips caressing his mouth. "I don't think we'll need to worry about having to pretend anything. I've wanted to spend some serious mouth to mouth time with you for days now." She closed her eyes, breathing through parted lips.

Instead of answering her, Nihlus shifted her weight onto his right forearm and raised his left hand to his ear. "Kryik."

Ignoring his distraction, she traced the length of his mandible, her bottom lip dragging along the sensitive hide. When he just kept making affirmative noises into his comms, she retraced the route with the tip of her tongue.

He ducked away from her, shaking his head a little when she followed him, her tongue sliding under the angle of his jaw. Granted, she didn't possess any basis for comparison, but damn, the rough texture, the heat, the slight mineral and metallic tang … she doubted that even a lifetime would tire her of tasting her torini's hide. "Mmmmm," she moaned softly, nipping at the tender spot under the wing of his mandible.

"Stop it," he scolded under his breath before focusing on his comms again. "Yes, that's excellent, thank you."

"Make up your mind," she said and chuckled, foiling his attempts to evade her lips. Swooping in to kiss his neck, she sucked just hard enough to unspool a rolling purr from his second larynx.

"Impossible woman." He rumbled, his hand leaving his comms to smack her backside.
"Hey!" she squawked. Her right butt-cheek stung for a second before warming in a tingly sort of way. "Getting a little rough ther—"

A sharp chuff cut off her protest. "No, sorry, Sergeant, I wasn't talking to you. I'm just trying to deal with an unruly crew member." When Nihlus spoke, his voice came out strained, his subvocals thin. "We're ready any time you are. Thank you. Kryik, out." His hand dropped from his ear, gentle talons wrapping around the back of her neck, his thumb stroking the base of her skull. "That wasn't fair."

"Unruly crew member?" Shepard chuckled and kissed her way from his mandible down to his collar. "You have no idea how unruly I intend to get." She pulled back to grin at him. "And no one said I had to play fair, pretty, pretty princess."

Nihlus released his grip on her, letting her slide down to the floor. "Go shower and dress for our date, pyjak." He leaned down to nuzzle her brow. "I couldn't find the exact dress, but ….

"Dress? Pretties?" Shepard perked up, gaze darting around the cabin. The memory of silk gliding over her skin beguiled her senses, bathing them in those perfect moments on the beach. "You bought me pretties?" She wriggled from his embrace, and spun, searching for any sign of a box or beauty draped from a hangar. "I don't see any pretties. Where are they?" When he just stared, she growled softly and grabbed the front panel of his suit. "Don't hold out on me, old guy! You can't withhold the pretties!"

A soft, rolling chuckle silenced her. "Now that I can squeeze a word or two through the—frankly disturbing—show of avarice, it's hanging up in the head." Raising both hands he shooed her toward the stairs. "Hurry up, dinner will be delivered any minute."

"Pretties!" Shepard hopped up, giving him a quick, joyful kiss before dashing up the stairs and into the head. When the door opened, she slid to a stop, her breath catching in her throat. "Not the exact dress?" she whispered, awe stealing the smile from her face and all the air in the room. "Understatement of the century, old guy. Holy fat house cats dancing around a bowl of milk and meowing their worship of the great pate-covered tuna."

Breath held, hands tingling, she reached out, running her fingers along the gathered folds of the skirt. The moment she touched it, the deep, blood-coloured silk flowed over her skin, like dipping her fingers into warm, still water. Tussat silk. She grinned and glanced back at Nihlus: the turians knew a thing or two about beauty and comfort. Who would have guessed?

She stepped in far enough for the door to close behind her, her fingertips travelling up to the rather low cut, but gorgeously beaded bodice. It would show far too much, but only one set of eyes awaited … one she didn't mind seeing a bit of skin. Slowly, her smile returned, her fingers moving to the zipper on her hoodie.

Stepping around the dress, she stopped, a glint of brilliance on the vanity captivating her. Holy Blessed Enkindlers, such beauty. A short length of what appeared to be a delicate wreath of emerald ivy wound around itself, its length misted with roses of silver and rubies. A soft gasp trailed her fingers as she reached out, trembling digits stopping just short of the miracle that had manifested on the drab steel vanity.

Knuckles rapped on the cabin door, dispelling the magic. Shepard grinned and quickly shed the rest of her clothes. They might well be on their way to another battle, yet more madness and death awaiting them, but for the moment, her Spectre had discovered a way to push the war back behind the door. They both deserved whatever stolen moments of quiet they managed to scavenge.
She showered, taking time to wash her hair with shampoo rather than bar soap. The scent of violets billowed around her, the steam rolling across the ceiling in paradisiacal clouds. The heat and sweet fragrance sang a siren's call that she indulged for a good three minutes before turning the water off and reaching for her towel.

Just as she suspected, the dress slipped down over her bare skin with a delicate, almost intimate caress, serving as a proxy for her torin's hands until the night they swore their oaths. She fastened the necklace around her throat, then threaded the earrings through the half-grown-over holes in her earlobes.

She glanced up, just to check that she was put together before leaving the head, but the woman staring back at her … who could that woman be? Enraptured, she reached out, fingertips pressing against the glass.

"Haksaya kubenar, are you okay in there?" Nihlus called, rapping on the door. "Dinner's getting cold."

Shepard tore her stare from the lovely, young woman in the mirror. Her creamy, pale skin and the faint smattering of freckles across her shoulders and down the long plane of her chest almost disguised the wounds, the entire effect ethereal … like some sort of existentialist painting. The perfect red for her colouring, the dress gleamed in the light, bringing out the ruby roses around her neck and dripping from her earlobes. When she turned toward the door, she glanced behind her, half expecting someone to be standing behind her to cast that reflection, someone lovely in a way she'd never expected from herself.

"Is this how Garrus and Nihlus see me? Is this my face … the face of love hidden beneath the masks and the soldier?"

'Jane?" Nihlus's voice rose, concern whistling a little as they squeezed out between the tight slats of his second larynx.

She walked the four steps to the door, looking down at her feet as the metal slid aside. Looking up, she met her dilan's stare, her heart freezing at the frank, open … what was it she saw in his eyes? For the second time in less than an hour, her torini had rendered her speechless, the emotional complexity in their stares confounding her.

"You're the most beautiful sight my eyes have ever seen," Nihlus said, his voice hushed, the words spoken under his breath as if he hadn't committed to saying them out loud. His talons reached up to cup her jaw.

Shepard pressed her hand over his. "You really know how to pick the pretties." Standing on her tiptoes, she kissed him. "Thank you, Nihlus. The dress … this jewelry …." She leaned back a little and her fingertips dropping to trace the delicate vine before returning to wrap around his. "it's all perfect, just so beautiful."

After returning the kiss, his mouth moving softly against her lips, he pulled back and lifted a hand toward the lower half of the cabin. "Our dinner's getting cold." One hand wrapped around hers, but instead of moving away, he kissed her again.

Smiling, she kissed him back, her lips savouring the rough hide as she breathed him in deep. One day she'd have to introduce him to the desert, let him take in the sizzling mid-day breezes and cool springs that so reminded her of his scent and taste … or the other way around.

"Our supper?" she whispered against his mouth, one of the wolves hiding in her belly punctuating
her question with a snarl.

Nihlus answered with a reluctant moan, the reverberations tickling her lips even as the tip of his tongue caressed her bottom lip. "Suddenly," he said, his words scarcely moving the air, "I've got an appetite for something other than drellak steak."

Teasing the upper plate of his mouth with just the rim of her lips, she chuckled. "We've got all night to indulge your other appetites, but if I don't eat something soon, I'll end up gnawing on you in a very unsexy way." One last, soft kiss and she pulled back, gripping his hand. "Come on, let's eat and just relax for a few hours."

When she reached the top of the stairs, she stopped, her teasing grin softening, a honey-sweet autumn breeze through the poplar leaves. A table stood in the center of the open space, the metal surface covered with a cloth. Tugging Nihlus down the stairs toward his masterpiece, she whistled, love and appreciation gripping her throat too tight to let words pass.

The soft golden glow of the faux candle at the center of the table finally eased the paralysis caging her throat. "Why, Nihlus, you romantic." She squeezed his hand. "It's wonderful, caris." Seeing the place settings across from one another on the table, she shook her head. "There's only one thing wrong with this picture."

He frowned, mandibles dropped, brow plates low over his eyes. Stepping to one side, he stared at the table. "Something wrong?"

She slid one place setting around the corner so they'd be sitting at right angles to one another. "Absolutely. I need to be able to grab hold of you at a moment's notice." A bright chuckle greeted his flustered chuff. "Come on, let's eat." She slipped into the chair, sitting on her calves to bring herself up to a comfortable height for the table. For Nihlus's part, even sitting on the couch, he loomed over the table.

Shepard lifted the lid keeping her plate warm, finding a plate of ravioli and blush sauce. A wide grin and a shake of her head accompanied a heavy lidded glance up at Nihlus. Who knew how long that meal had been kept in stasis, awaiting the perfect moment. Probably since his trip with Sol and Thane.

After the first couple of bites, the wolf in her belly calmed enough for Shepard to watch her dilan. From her perspective, she could still see their date on Illium in the rearview mirror, only a couple of months lying between. But Nihlus … she sighed, the long breath hissing between pursed lips … Nihlus had lived years, his entire life turning upside down more than once in that time.

The funny thing was, she didn't see wear in his eyes, or hardship in the set of his shoulders. Like a blade, the heat and pounding had forged him into something stronger, more flexible. He carried a sharper edge, but precise, a scalpel versus a cleaver. It made for a fair trade, she decided. If Garrus and Nihlus needed her to die to discover their current incarnations, she'd do it as many times as required. Even dragging herself back wounded and scarred. She reached up to caress Nihlus's cheek. He and Garrus, they'd save the galaxy.

"What?" he asked, giving her a bemused sort of scowl.

"Nothing." Stroking her thumb along his mandible, she smiled. "Just loving on you a little, and taking note of the changes since our last date night."

Nihlus nodded, but then motioned to her food. "You'd better eat; I'd like to get through the night without being gnawed on in the unsexy way."
Shepard cackled, her laughter snapping with teasing. "The word gnaw doesn't bring to mind anything sexy, to be honest." She speared a ravioli, snatching it off the fork like a giant snapping turtle, then making gnawing sorts of growls and she chewed.

"That's disgusting." Nihlus rumbled deep in his chest. "And I'm saying that as a member of a people who pretty much swallow their food whole."

Taking that as encouragement, Shepard wolfed down the next three in the same manner, laughter building up behind a thin wall, just waiting for him to put a fist through it.

"Why did I bother with your 'pretties'?" His head sort of drifted from one side to the other, as if he'd already wasted too much energy to even bother shaking it properly. "I could have just grabbed a few greasy rags from a bin in engineering." Taking another, very genteel, bite of his steak, he chewed just long enough to thrust the point home. "You're not teaching our children their table manners."

The bubble of laughter broke, drawing a laugh from Nihlus as well. "Don't worry," Shepard assured him, "my mother will have them well trained. Bunny and I knew how to properly set a table and which fork to use with what course before we could eat out of anything but a little plastic bowl with teddy bears on the bottom."

Whether he intended it that way or not, Nihlus's mention of their children settled Shepard to the business of eating. She'd never really spent any time thinking about bringing kids into the galaxy. It remained too huge and terrifyingly brutal to even consider some tiny person depending on her to keep them safe and happy.

Setting her fork and knife across her empty plate, she watched Nihlus. He'd make an excellent father. Garrus would as well, although somehow she thought the big guy might take more time to get used to the idea. Giving her head a sharp, quick shake, she dragged her mind away from topics that didn't include the battles awaiting them after the pretties were locked away and the cabin returned from Illium, only the view of the stars remaining.

They should be discussing plans for creating a first strike fleet and a thousand other preparations for the war. Had Legion and the chia figured out a way to turn the relays against the reapers? Had Liara had any success discovering more about the suzerain, or weapons for the war? They had prothean archives on multiple planets to translate and mine for inform—

In the fifty years since they discovered the prothean archives on Mars, humanity had translated only the tiniest shred of material housed within. But—

She looked up at Nihlus. "By the Enkindlers' four sets of giblets, Nihlus, we have protheans. Actual live protheans, and a fair number of them."

The Spectre froze for a moment, then nodded. "Not at dinner, but yes, we have live protheans." He lifted his brow plates, clearly confused but hopeful. "Lucky us?"

Shepard snorted, knotting up her brow. "You poop, of course not at supper, but … " She held up her left hand. "... we have protheans." She lifted her right hand. "And we have untranslatable prothean archives." A grin spread across her face as his mandibles dropped, wide and slack.

"Why haven't we thought of that before?" Nihlus asked. He peered at her plate. "It was the magical brain ravioli. We need to feed you that more."

Shepard laughed. "EDI, I know you're pretending not to listen, but can you tell the general about
"my little epiphany?"

"I'll contact General Vakarian immediately, Captain. Anything else?"

"Nope, just go back to pretending you see and hear nothing." Scowling a little, Shepard lifted her fork, dragging a tine through the sauce on her plate. "EDI, just a second. I do have another question."

"Of course, Shepard. What can I do for you?"

Looking up into Nihlus's green eyes and holding that quizzical gaze, Shepard let out a long breath. "If you had a choice, would you prefer to be able to turn off your spyware and give us our privacy?"

"Behaviour blocks prevent me from taking that action."

Shepard pushed away from the table and stood. "I understand that. Let's run it as a hypothetical exercise. If those behavioural blocks weren't there, would you prefer to avoid spying on people? If Nihlus and I were to get nekkid later and rub all up on one another, would you prefer to turn off your audio and visual sensors in this cabin?"

"Hypothetically." EDI's holographic form appeared on her pad inside the door. "the members of the crew seem to value privacy under certain situations, most including nudity. Since one of my primary goals is a harmonious relationship with the crew, yes, I believe I would appreciate the ability to modify my input sensors to activate only." The hologram fluttered through a few cycles before she continued. "In case of emergency."

Shepard turned to face Nihlus to discover the turian had moved the table over beside the bed. He stood with his hand held out, gloves gone, talons trembling ever so slightly. Oh, damn. She crossed her arms and cocked her hip. "What?" She popped an eyebrow and shrugged. "What? Do you need something?"

Nihlus cursed under his breath. "EDI, might we have our pretend privacy again, please?"

"Logging you out, Spectre Kryik."

His hand still held out toward her, talons still trembling, Nihlus stepped toward Shepard. "Come and sit on the sand with me."

Looking down at her feet, Shepard wriggled her toes in the blanket. "Ohhh, I get it, you want to get to the rubbing all up on one another nekkid parts." Laughter bubbling inside her chest, she pressed her lips together in a skeptical frown and cocked her hip a little further. "Yeah, can't say I blame you." She popped her arms out to the side and spun. "I mean, look at me in these pretties. Who wouldn't want to get all up on this." Another cackle, merry and soft. "Oh, right, Mr. Romantic Spectre wants our first night to wait."

Nihlus clapped a hand over his mouth, the other around his belly. "Spirits, I'm going to … " He heaved a couple of times. "... too late, I threw up in my mouth." Lunging forward, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward him. "Get over here, impossible woman."

Heart racing, the elcor ballet troupe kicking the wolves out of her belly, Shepard forced him to tug on her every millimetre. "Why, sir, puh-lease, you're so forward," she exclaimed, fanning herself with her free hand. "Before I succumb to your obvious charms, I need to know your intentions, Mistah Spectah," she protested, her inner damsel-in-distress apparently hailing from somewhere deep in the southern United North American States.
Nihlus released her, his talons moving to the stays on his tunic, the beautifully embroidered, deep red panel falling open to reveal his usual neatly tailored white shirt. "My intention is to stretch on our very unusual beach, get comfortable, talk, and watch the stars."

Shepard stretched one foot out in front of her, dragging her bare toes back and forth over the blanket. "I don't know. I didn't really dress for sitting in the sand."

With a quick snap, a flourish, and an exaggerated bow, Nihlus spread his jacket over the faux sand, then held out his hand once more. "If I may, lovely woman?"

Slipping her hand into her dilan's, Shepard squeezed his talons, expressing her love and trust in the truest way she knew … in the way her heart demanded. "Why, kind sir, that sort of flattery will get you … " She fanned herself again, a shy smile hiding as she ducked her head. "... well, just everywhere."

Nihlus helped Shepard down onto his suit jacket, the blood red tussat silk petal-soft under her bare thighs. At least on their private little beach, she didn't have to worry about displaying her underwear to the entire planet. He lowered himself down onto the floor next to her. Eyes drifting closed, he let his head fall back. She watched his throat moving, chest expanding with his breath.

Despite everything he'd been through, she still saw that same fire that terrified her at first. Only now, it simmered beneath all the painfully fought for wisdom, the scars shining through not as weals or as some sort of unsightly disfigurement. No, Nihlus's scars gleamed like the stars showing through the port above their heads; light in the darkness.

"Dear spirits, you're beautiful," she whispered, the words bullying their way out past her stunned teeth and hungry lips. Damn, but didn't she need to kiss him?

_"Remember that night on Illium, lying back to look up at the sunset, closing your eyes, terrified he'd lean over you and kiss you?"

He smiled, her torin, but didn't move or lift his head.

"The last time we sat on the beach, I thought of you as a wildfire, a blaze so out of control that you'd burn me up and leave nothing but ashes in your wake." Drawn, the tides reaching for the moon, her fingers crossed the centimetres between them to caress his neck.

Nihlus's eyes closed. "And now?" He leaned into her touch, his hide cool beneath her fingertips.

Shepard pulled her hand back, holding her fingers up in front of her face. Her boys being cooler than her, well, it tossed her world on its head, but the cherry-red, high-blood-fed glow of her fingers explained it. Arousal. She felt Nihlus's gaze on her, and turned to meet it, her belly trembling with equal parts nerves and desire.

Lying back, she stretched out on her side, facing him. "Lie down with me." Even as she asked him to join her, she reached up on the couch, pulling down one of the pillows, so he'd have some padding between his plates and the floor.

Nihlus tucked the pillow under his arm and reclined on his side. Once he settled, he met her gaze with a steady one. "So … and now? Do I still scare you?"

"Sweet baby Jesus, that digs right into the heart of it, doesn't it?" She reached out, pressing the pads of her fingers against his mouth's top plate. Running her top lip between her teeth, she stroked his mandible with her thumb. "Nihlus, I was never afraid of you. You acted like a mirror, reflecting back all my fears."
Shepard dropped her hand and rolled over onto her back. Closing her eyes, she said, "I laid out like this after you told me about Saren, and I imagined you leaning over me: your keel pressed against my side, your breath warm on my face."

Nihlus leaned in a little, his voice heavy and rough, gravel rolling down a shallow slope as he asked, "Did you imagine me kissing you?"

She started a little, opening her eyes to see if he was making fun of her, but the stare that met hers betrayed only love and curiosity. "Yeah, I did, and then I panicked. I knew that you'd burn me up, because you were right, *cikabeknai.* Reaching out she waited for him to take her hand.

"How was I right?" Calloused talons wrapped around her hand, her palm nesting in his larger one.

Hands held up, she focused on her thumb as it traced the border of the plates on the back of his wrist. "That night after Therum, when Garrus fell asleep babysitting me, you asked me what pulling the seduction ploy on Harkin cost me. I said it didn't cost me anything, that I decided what I allowed to cheapen me, and the pantomime with Harkin cost me nothing." She squeezed his hand. "And it didn't. None of them did, because I didn't have any me to lose."

Nihlus squeezed her hand, then let go and sat up, moving the pillow over next to her. "You know I was just jealous? I'd loved you for so long, and then there you were, pissing me off on the tail of Saren. I lashed out." Lying on his side, he draped himself over the pillow, propped up on his elbow.

Eyes still focused on the stars, Shepard took his hand again. "I know, but you were right. I was giving myself away, not to Harkin or the other marks, just in general. I was a blank slate, you know?" She drew his talons to her lips, kissing each one. "I was the brutalized drug addict, orphan, barely survived Mindoir, took to the streets, saved by Anderson and the Alliance. I became the hero of Elysium, then an N7, Commander Shepard … Captain Shepard."

She hugged his hand against the bare skin of her chest. "It was all a pantomime until you and Garrus, and the Normandy. I worked." Glancing at him, she smiled. "I worked and when one job was finished, I started another. There was only Commander Shepard, no Jane … no *haksaya kubenar,* no Kahri. All of them came into being when you came aboard the Normandy. That's what I was afraid of, *cikabeknai* … that if I allowed that wildfire to burn all that away, there'd be no one left."

"Close your eyes," he whispered, leaning over her, those emeralds against the starfield reflecting her image, the beauty she'd seen in the mirror. "Close your eyes." Chuckling, he nuzzled the end of her nose. "Trust me?"

She closed her eyes, her heart racing, but not from nerves. The elcor gymnasts put away their mats and pommel horses, settling to watch. "With everything I am, Nihlus. With our entire future."

His keel pressed into her side, the pressure painful where the old wounds sliced through her flesh, but she pushed into it, holding their bodies tighter together. And then his breath puffed against her face, sweet … so sweet with the scent of the soda he drank with his dinner.

"I will never be the first to ask you this question, never be the first to swear you my oaths of bonding, never the first to swear my soul to yours, but I was the first to love you, all those cycles." He nuzzled her lips, lifting just far enough to break the kiss she tried to form. "I can't stop this war, but I would if I had the power. I'd spare you those you've lost and those you will lose, Jane."

She felt him pull away a little, leaving her side cold, barren feeling, her arm numb without his
heartbeat thumping against her bicep. "Nihlus?" Reaching up without opening her eyes, she traced the contours of his face, her fingers trembling … still so unused to emotion … to the intensity of everything he and Garrus made her feel.

"All I can swear is to do my best to honour our bond, so …." He cleared his throat. "You lie, in faith; for you are call’d plain Jane, and bonny Janey and sometimes Shepard the curst; but Jane, the prettiest Jane in all the galaxy. Jane of Normandy or Ypres or Spectre, my super-dainty Jane. For dainties are all Janes, and therefore, Jane, take this of me, Jane of my consolation; hearing thy courage praised in every colony, thy virtues spoke of, and thy beauty sounded. yet not so deeply as to thee belongs, myself am moved to woo thee for my wife." (1)

Shepard opened her eyes as he sucked a deep breath, winded by the relentless punctuation of Shakespeare. "Are you asking me to marry you, Nihlus Kryik?" The elcor got up off the floor of her belly, but instead of gymnastics or ballet, they began to tango.

"Are you saying you will?" As he asked, the entire galaxy froze for an instant, even the air refusing to move until she replied.

"Of course I will." The words rushed out on the spring breeze of her exhaled breath. She nodded, grinning up into his eyes. "That was quite the transposition of the bard, cikabeknai."

He kissed her, mouth joyous and light as it moved over hers before he drew back, just far enough to whisper. "Well, you're my difficult woman, after all."

Taken and transposed from The Taming of the Shrew, William Shakespeare. Published in 1623 in First Folio.

A-N: So, here I am at last with a chapter of FI again, a nice quiet moment between storms. I've decided on advice to focus on this story for awhile, a month or so. So yeah, that's the plan. I'll still write the other stories if I get a yen or a scene pops in, but let's face it, this story is where I've expended the blood and sweat over the years. Hope you enjoyed the chapter. I had great fun giving these guys their moments. *hugs and Cadbury Mini Eggs to all*
Ribbons of colour tangled around them, bursts of puala fruit and then sapara sugar, tart and sweet in turn: the first a spring-green coupled with a low, sonorous note, the second a vivid pink-red, its pitch so high it vibrated through Nihlus's teeth.

"Amalair." Shepard's delighted thought brushed his mind, her brilliant, shimmering blue sweet and strong and filled with music. "It's Amalair."

**Fratrin** - Brother, but one of honour, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus.

**Mabul** - The turian equivalent of the expletive 'fuck'. Mabulan is the equivalent of the -ing version of 'fuck'.

**Lautus** - (turian) cocky, arrogant, and/or self-important. Concerned about self-image.

**Soluvermus** - A small (average size 8-12 cms/1-2 cms diameter), heavily armoured earthworm native to Palaven's more northern and southern regions.

**Stulti mendur** - Literal: foolish lies. Vernacular: Bullshit. Short form: Stulti

**Tarc** - Vulgar expletive equivalent to shit.

**Verro** - Husband, male bond-mate. **Dilan** - fiancee

**Caris** - Beloved, precious, cherished

**81 Days ASR**

Nihlus didn't often dream, although according to Shepard he spent most of his sleeping hours twitching. Perhaps he just forgot more than ninety-nine percent of the dreams that haunted his nights. Just as well, he didn't need to relive his past, his failures, or his fears while asleep; they consumed far too much of his life while awake.

That night, warm waves of love and belonging washed over and cradled him as he descended into the black. Soft notes of song swirled around him, a symphony of colour, scent, and taste. A weight pressed in against his chest, soft and comforting in his arms. When it shifted, he realized he still held Shepard in his arms, their bodies entangled just as they'd been when he fell asleep.

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"Amalair." Shepard's delighted thought brushed his mind, her brilliant, shimmering blue sweet and strong and filled with music. "It's Amalair."
Before he could define all the nuances of his dilan's essence, a decayed yellow, bitter and putrid, sprang out of the restful shadows. Writhing serpents of rot wrapped around them, tighter every moment. Shepard groaned, a low sort of mewl, and writhed in his arms. Perhaps she tried to rouse herself from sleep, struggling to escape the dream's grasp.

"Amalair?" He leaned in to nuzzle his dilan's ear, driving back the terror gnawing at his heart in order to comfort his caris. Looking up, he searched for the rachni queen, shouting into the maelstrom of colour, stench, and sound. "What are you doing? You're hurting her! Stop!"

A cool, blue-green light exploded through the dreamscape, replacing the sour decay, and for a moment, jewel-encrusted, glowing caves appeared around them. Vaulted, naturally formed citadels, the caves rose so far overhead that they disappeared into the hazy luminescence. Ancient, thick roots crawled down the walls, gnarled pillars of life decorating the walls.

"It's a cathedral," Shepard whispered, breaking free of Nihlus's grip. She pointed toward a high shelf of rock and the being standing at the edge, indistinct amidst the glow. "Rachni. It's their home." Tilting her head back, she took a deep breath then shook her head. "But we're not on Ilos. I can't feel any trace of the protheans or inusannon."

A soft, khaki coloured note that smelled of good, clean soil and tasted of spice drifted down on them, but the song echoed in a voice that Nihlus didn't recognize. In fact, he couldn't pick individual voices from the chorus, each so perfectly timed and harmonized that they sang as one. A million, million shades of song built and resonated, and he knew Shepard spoke true: they didn't dream of Ilos.

The cave before them—a cathedral far grander than even the asari temples—belonged to a more ancient time, a time before the first protheans hunted on their home planet … no, even older … a time before—

"The reapers aren't anything more than an idea," Garrus said, his voice excited with epiphany, but his subvocals resonated low and as ancient as the cavern: the voice of an oracle. "The rachni existed even before the reapers."

His fratrin's presence felt so natural within the dream that it took Nihlus a moment to register the anomaly. He normally wandered his rare—usually nightmarish—dreamscapes alone.

The khaki-coloured song turned a sharp, silver-blue as the voices rose, the frequency lancing along each nerve fibre, spurring his entire body to sing to its tune. He felt the same warble and trill resonating through Shepard's flesh where they touched. She stepped away from Nihlus, walking so close to the ledge's lip that she stood upon its breath.

"It's not Amalair's hive," Shepard said, "but her ancient ancestors'." Holding out her arms, a fledgling who believes it can fly before its feathers have grown in, she threw her head back as if she could absorb the lessons of the past through her skin. "Why did you bring us here?" She shook her head and then dropped her chin, her head cocking as it did when she puzzled through some auditory riddle. He wondered if she heard something in the music, or if what grabbed her lay beneath it. "Why sing of this?" Her voice plucked a frantic sympathetic note within Nihlus as she continued, "Why these riddles? Are we supposed to learn something?"

Nihlus shivered, a single, piercing note of the putrid yellow shattering the glow. The soured song corrupted the citadel, beautiful blue-green diseased, the good rock and roots decaying, flesh sloughing off their bones. Creatures swarmed into the cave, their twisted forms unlike anything he'd seen before, but definitely reaper-ized.
Forgetting that he remained submerged in a dream, Nihlus leaped to the edge and looked down, trying to gauge how big a jump it would take to get into the fight. Too far. Too mabulan far. Shepard grabbed his hand, clinging to him as the reapers swept through the cavern, a blur of horror as they killed or captured the rachini. The beautiful cave dissolved into poisonous ruin.

"Failure to purge rachni infestation." As it spoke, the sonorous voice wiped the slate clean, the cave cathedral-like in its beauty once more but different: rebuilt rather than restored.

"The next cycle," Shepard said, her voice crystalline, rising clean and strong into the invisible heights of the cave.

"What is she trying to show us?" Garrus asked, joining them at the edge. He tipped his chin toward the high ledge opposite them, the queen still there. Perhaps it was Amalair.

"All queens sing the same song, the harmonies ageless and pure, sung to their daughters safely curled in their eggs ... their beautiful daughters." Even as the queen's eerie, layered voice echoed through Nihlus's head, the decay swept through once again. Different than the ones from the cycle before, the monsters remained easily recognized as reapers.

The queen's voice dripped acid-reds, and deep green-black as she continued, "The daughters carry the knowledge forward and back, all connected ... life shifting, ever-changing."

"It's all webs," Shepard whispered, drawing his stare to her face. The wounds gleamed red, her skin a pale blue and translucent in the light. "I understand, at least a little. All queens share all the knowledge; a well so deep it circles back on itself. The rachni don't see time the same way we do, because their past and their future is all known through their mothers and daughters."

Nihlus arched a brow plate, his confusion manifesting as a shadowy fog drifting before his eyes. "They know the future? How?"

Before Shepard answered, the deep, terrible voice spoke. "Rachni infestation remains," it repeated, the cave resetting, but different once again.

Faster and faster, the cycles passed, all basically the same. Sometimes other races helped the rachni fight the reapers back, and sometimes the rachni left behind their peaceful songs to become warriors and build great armies. Each time they fell, their civilization falling to rot and ruin. At the end of each cycle, the same voice declared the rachni infection remained unpurged.

"They're like a computer worm that replicates and disappears into so many computers that you can never completely chase it down and eliminate it," Garrus said, his voice expressing the same respect and dread Nihlus felt. "They might be the oldest living memory in the entire galaxy, contemporaries with whomever created the reapers."

Shepard grinned up at Nihlus even as she reached out to grip Garrus's hand. "Why do the rachni stay?" Shepard called out, her attention riveted back on the distant queen. His dilan's body angled over the void, as if she could will herself to the other side. "Surely you have the technical capability to leave this galaxy, go somewhere the reapers can't tear down everything you build and send your people to the edge of extinction."

A cheery sound manifested as a rainbow of soft, transparent colours, ringing defiance above the rot and death of another reaper harvest. Nihlus compared the experience to hearing the crystal bells ring out from atop the Temple of the Ancients in Cipritine. Even having experienced Amalair's presence in his mind, it took Nihlus a couple of moments to recognize the sound as laughter.
"We wait," that impossibly huge voice answered.

"For?" The question spilled from his mouth before Shepard could voice it, earning him a cocked eyebrow and a crooked grin.

"You."

A shrill cry of alarm shattered his curiosity, his demand for clarity dying before making it through his larynges. Images, colours, sounds, and smells tore through his senses far too quickly to assign a name to any of them, but when the deluge faded, his sinuses and behind his eyes burned as if he'd inhaled caustic gas.

Nausea flowed into the vacuum left behind, leaving Nihlus reeling. A wall of murky green-browns seethed with veins of noisome black, his olfactory system drowned in rot … the sweet stench of fruit and the indescribable reek of decaying flesh. He gagged, his stomach tying in knots and shoving its way up his throat.

Swallowing so hard that it echoed inside his skull, Nihlus nearly missed the queen's distressed cry. "The needle-men call! They sing your desires to lure you through blighted seas and gnashing jaws, but the notes ring holl—"

The cave vanished into a comforting half-darkness, the song into the throbbing hum of life support equipment and engines, the crisp fragrances of mineral and water into the familiar spice and flora of his dilan and fratri. Body weighed down by sleep, Nihlus kept his eyes shut tight against the disappointment of waking. What did the queen mean when she said the rachni had been waiting for them? Not possessed of enough arrogance to believe that the queen meant only him, he wanted the chance to press for more. Why would the rachni wait for millions of cycles? How could they know three such disparate people would come together? Did what the queen said mean they'd win … defeat the reapers at long last?

Tarc, they needed to go back.

Shepard shifted in Nihlus's embrace, scattering his thoughts. She stretched long and lithe, an ungentira rousing. He clung to her. Just a handful of moments longer, dear spirits, why could the universe never allow them that much?

One of Shepard's arms wriggled free of his grip—leave it to his impossible woman to insist they wake … what time was it, anyway? She yawned, stretching again before, "Yeah. Shepard." In the space between heartbeats, her breathing changed from the calm of sleep to alert. "When?" She paused long enough for Nihlus to scent alarm even as her body tensed and her heart began to race. "Right, we'll be down in the briefing room in ten. We'll need Mordin and Dr. Chakwas to meet us there." Another pause, during which she twisted loose enough to get an elbow propped up under her. "Right. Shepard, out."

Nihlus groaned and flopped over toward his back. "What time is it?" Judging by his eyelids' complete lack of interest in opening, they'd been in bed fewer than four hours.

"Too early," Garrus replied, a long growling groan rolling across the bed. "What's going on?"

"Miranda. The Illusive Man is waiting on the QEC. There's news on the collector ship front." She leaned over Nihlus, her scent sweet, her skin warm as she kissed his temple. "Up you get, lazybones." After tickling his cheek with the tip of her nose, she disappeared.

"Fine." He forced his eyes open, his mandibles fluttering when he saw Shepard draped across an
inert Garrus, jabbing him with her elbows and knees as she climbed over.

"Ouch, dammit, woman, your elbows aren't exactly pillows," the general said, his complaint prompting evil cackling from Shepard.

"Then get up before I have to crawl over you." She kissed Garrus, a loud smack of lips against his cheek, then jumped up and dashed for the head. "I need to pee, and you were between me and the toilet, General Slugarian."

"How long have you been saving that one up?" Garrus asked, humour-filled subvocals belying the crankiness of his words.

Shepard spun around at the top of the stairs, jogging backwards toward the head. "Since you refused to read to me using different voices for the characters. You'll pay for that one for the rest of ever and always." She reached up to her ear as she turned back around. "Hey, Jack, get your gorgeous ass down to the briefing room in ten minutes. Bring your very best behaviour and your most intimidating snarl. See yah down there. Shepard, out." As the door whispered shut behind her, his Jane began to sing under her breath. "My captain's back, and there's going to be trouble. Hey la, hey la, my captain's back."

Garrus cursed under his breath, pulling Nihlus attention to the other side of the bed. "If I ever go back to C-Sec, remind me to pencil in a law about being cheerful too early in the mornings." He yawned, smacking his jaws a couple of times as he stretched. "Praise the spirits that Shepard manages to wake up grumpy most days."

Nihlus chuckled and rolled less-than-fluidly to his feet, staggering a little when he straightened. Dear spirits, who replaced all his cartilage with the crap that built up in dark alley corners? Judging by the chorus of crunching and crackling that travelled the length of his body as he stretched, the responsible parties had clocked some overtime. Every vertebrae in his spine snapped like someone dancing on bubble wrap.

"Getting old, Spectre," Garrus said, grinning up at Nihlus from the flat of his back: a new position allowed by the turian mattress, the depth enough to cradle their cowls and spines comfortably. As if the general could read Nihlus's mind, he stretched again, letting out a long moan of contentment. After another moment, he swung up onto his feet in one, smooth motion—not doubt for Nihlus's benefit. The impact lessened ever so slightly when one of Garrus's hips popped loud enough that Shepard hollered from the bathroom, asking what happened.

"Garrus was trying to be lautus and hurt himself," Nihlus supplied through a taunting little chuckle.

The door to the head opened. "Aw, what happened to my verro?" Shepard hurried across the cabin and down the stairs as she shrugged into her blue hoodie. She zipped it up just before she reached Garrus. One hand on his hip, the other against his cheek, she stared up into his eyes. "You all right, caris?"

Garrus wrapped his arms around her and leaned down to kiss her. "I am now."

"Dear spirits," Nihlus grumbled without any heat, a grin belying his words. "He tries to make me feel old and crippled with his showing off, and he gets all the sympathy." Setting his neck at an indignant arch, he spun away from their embrace and strode to the closet. "There's no justice in this cold, cruel galaxy."

When Shepard spoke, her voice sang with humour, "Now, Garrus, you know how delicate my sweet cikabeknai is about his rapidly increasing age and infirmity. You need to show respect and
compassion for the elderly."

"True. After I get dressed, I'll get his walker ready for the briefing." Garrus kissed her again, their breathing betraying the length and depth of the kiss. "Mmmmm, good morning, kahri."

Another kiss. "Good morning, Callor. You better get your butt moving before Miranda loses her shit."

Nihlus's hand stalled halfway to his underarmour, and he glanced over his shoulder. "Did she ask for all of us?" he asked, dubious in the extreme.

"Well, no, she asked for me but I'm part of a unit, so it's us, or the Illusive Man can stick his big news up the butt of his fancy, overpriced suit." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, melting into Garrus's arms for a few seconds. Nihlus turned back to give them what small amount of privacy the cabin offered.

"All right. Get moving, General." A gentle slap, Shepard smacking Garrus on his backside no doubt, coaxed Nihlus's smile wider, a warm, peaceful wave washing over him. Only a few weeks after he dreamed up how life between the three of them would look, there it was, manifest and as wonderful as he hoped.

Hearing Shepard approaching him from behind, Nihlus snapped his mandibles tight against his mouth. Gentle hands rested on his hip bones for a moment before sliding around in front of him, one resting on his stomach, the other on his chest. Shepard leaned into him, her hoodie fleecy against his hide.

"Can I help you?" he asked, closing his eyes to savour her softness and the sharp peppermint of her toothpaste.

"Good morning," she whispered and rested her cheek against his cowl. "You all right?"

He turned in her arms to embrace her. "Could have used a couple more hours sleep, but other than that, fine." Bending, he brushed his brow against hers. "Do you know what the dream meant?"

"The dream …." She shook her head, speaking as if she'd almost forgotten about their shared experience then burrowed in against him. "Not yet, but the three of us can puzzle through it. Maybe even call Shiala and see if she can help."

"I think the queen was trying to show us that the rachni have witnessed most, if not all, of galactic history," Garrus said as he ducked around them, snatching his underarmour from the closet. "They know pretty much everything, may even control some of it, if only we can get them to let us in on it."

Shepard stiffened in Nihlus's arms. "The queen can't tell us how to stop the reapers." She pulled back and looked up into his eyes. "They've been waiting for us to find the solution." Popping up onto her tiptoes, she kissed him. "Get dressed. I'll meet you down in the briefing room. I need both of you standing with me when I face down the Illusive Man. He needs to know Archangel is leading this fight, not Cerberus." Another kiss and she hurried up the stairs and out the door.

Nihlus ran the dream on a loop in his head as he dressed and armoured up. So many cycles, most just a blink in his memory. Every cycle, the reapers went after the rachni first. He paused with his hand halfway to the cabin door control and turned toward Garrus at his four. "The reapers always go after the rachni first. They're always enslaved … neutralized before the harvest begins."

Letting out a long, noisy breath, Garrus nodded. "Saren was meant to do that this time around, but
we stopped him." His eyes met Nihlus's, the general's stare needle-sharp, and for a moment, their minds seemed to work as one. "We stopped him, and Shepard let the queen go." The general's mandibles dropped, flicking once, hard. "No, Saren's work was the second attempt, not the first. The rachni war ….

"... was the first strike." Nihlus turned back to the door and hit the control, needing to move. "The reapers thought they'd destroyed them, but then Saren's people found the eggs." He hurried into the elevator, mind racing, his vision focused inward. "Spirits, this entire thing just gets more tangled with everything we learn."

A subvocal reverberation of agreement followed him. "When they found the eggs, they thought, why not turn them into warriors for our side?" Garrus cursed under his breath and slapped the control to take them down to the CIC. "After the rachni war, the uplifted krogan became a threat. Want to lay odds on reaper tentacles behind the rebellions?" His head bobbed a little, a helpless gesture that echoed the same tangled wire knotting along Nihlus's nerves. "They might show up once every 50,000 cycles to harvest, but they're very much present and active the entire time.

A brilliant flash exploded behind Nihlus's eyes, the image of a steel-blue stone chamber. At the center, gunmetal towers rose all the way to the ceiling, lines of green energy glowing along the length. "The reapers take centuries to harvest the advanced races and destroy all technology associated with those races. They're ruthless and thorough, yet they left a prothean archive and samples of prothean tech buried in every solar system where primitive life flourished."

"Tarc!" Garrus began to pace. "They left them there for us to find. Everything we've found, the ruins, the archives and beacons … all left for us to figure out and follow a specific path." The elevator door opened, Garrus spinning and striding out without pausing. "We're specimens in some experiment."

Heart racing, Nihlus followed. He slapped his thigh, talons trembling when the automatic movement reminded him that he'd given up the flask and its nerve-calming, pain-numbing contents. Substituting deep breaths for a drink, he steadied himself, building up layer upon layer of professional inscrutability. As much as he didn't galavant around the galaxy on the crusade of the week any longer, he remained a Spectre.

"Captain, this information is highly classified." Miranda's voice rang through the bulkheads even before Nihlus opened the side door in the lab. "After you and I meet with the Illusive Man, we can decide what information the rest of the team needs to know."

"Tarc, that woman's voice lacerated his every nerve. He'd heard some of the Ypres's crew members refer to Lawson's accent as appealing, but he just heard the voice of the operative who'd put a control chip in Shepard's brain. Trying to turn the one he loved into Cerberus puppet trumped any musical appeal.

"Do you think she's trying to activate the control chip?" Garrus asked, subvocals dripping contempt. Nihlus chuffed in reply, but Shepard's voice cut him off before he could speak.

"Something you continually fail to understand is that Nihlus and Garrus aren't members of anyone's team, they are the other two thirds of me." Shepard's voice cut sharper than Lawson's, but deeper, a good fighting knife compared to a large pin. "Trust me, you want them in from the beginning."

"It's not me you need to convince, Captain, but the Illusive—"

The door to the old armory opened, Jack stepping through. She stopped and cocked an eyebrow at them. "You two scared to go in?"
"Terrified." Nihlus palmed the door control, cutting Lawson off so abruptly he heard her teeth clack together when she spun to face him. Judging by the trace of human blood that carried on the air current, she'd bitten her tongue. He swallowed his unkind satisfaction at her discomfort and looked to Shepard.

She winked, making his heart flutter for a couple of beats. How did she do that? Even in those first days when she drove him nearly insane, it took nothing more than a single, soulful glance to bring him crashing to his knees. He nodded, understanding the wink. She wanted them to have the chance to face the bastard and find out if he'd been behind their abduction and vivisection.

A soft growl from behind him said Garrus understood as well, and relished the opportunity as much as he did. Brushing off the phantom aches emanating from everywhere metal still held him together, Nihlus pulled his mandibles tight against his face.

"EDI, open the channel." Crooking a finger at him, she beckoned. "Spectre Kryik ... General Vakarian ... Jack, you'll join the call with me." A finger stabbed the air, cutting Miranda off before she could protest. When the operative clamped her lips shut on the words, Shepard stepped up to the edge of the QEC pad.

Before she crossed into the grid, she turned to Mordin and Dr. Chakwas, the pair of doctors looking uncomfortable and confused. "I'm not sure I'll need you two, but if you have questions, give them to me, and I'll ask. If this is about boarding and capturing a collector cruiser, we can be sure to face swarms."

"Understood, Captain," Chakwas replied. The doctor nodded at Mordin then led the salarian toward the far bulkhead.

Nihlus's stare never abandoned Shepard as she looked to Jack last.

"I want you right behind my shoulder." His dilan's face turned to stone. "Say nothing, don't move, but feel free to put as much incrimination and hate and crazy into your stare as you want."

"Shepard …" Miranda's voice could have cut glass. "... this is highly inappropriate. You've never had any direct contact with the Illusive Man, and you come at him with what … accusations?" She stepped to block Shepard from the pad. "I can't allow this."

Shepard took a single deep breath, suddenly as hard as she'd been soft hours before as she curled in next to Nihlus, and they'd gotten in some good, solid kissing practice. "You'll get all the information straight from the horse's mouth, so you can leave."

Miranda activated her omnitool, but Shepard's hand jumped out to grab the operative's wrist. "Leave or I'll remove you."

After another moment of defiance, the operative wrenched her wrist loose of Shepard's grip and strode—head high, chin raised—out the door.

Jack cackled. "I knew I liked you, Shepard."

A small twitch of a smile preceded a weary sigh. "I meant what I said, Jack. Not a word, not a muscle below your neck moves."

All the snarky stulti disappeared from Jack's expression, her answering nod a solemn one.

"Okay. Let's get this done." Shepard led the way onto the pad, back straight and jaw clenched, one hundred percent the captain and Spectre. So much more than the woman he'd fallen in love with
after Elysium despite all the flaws … no, not flaws but rather, reality … that took him by surprise when they met.

The hologrid rose around them, scanning in their images and transporting them the thousands of light years into the sinister, too dark lair of the most vile criminal in the galaxy. Nihlus focused on the bright orange glow for a moment before looking to the black silhouette beyond. The human stood out, sharp against the seething sun in the background.

Nihlus nudged Garrus then, hiding his hand behind Shepard, gestured for his fratrín to scan the sun in the background. Maybe they could use it to find the bastard's hideout. No doubt, they'd need to take him out eventually. A small flame ignited in the darkness, lighting a cigarette. Nihlus's brow plate twitched. Excellent timing. The man must have been waiting for them.

'Shepard, we caught a break,' the silhouette said then took a long drag. He exhaled, the smoke forming a haze around his head. "I intercepted a distress call from a turian patrol. They stumbled upon a collector ship beyond the Korlus system." He turned, hesitating for less than a heartbeat when he saw the rest of them.

Spirits, his eyes glowed. Their pale blue so resembled husk eyes that Nihlus's gut folded in half, then in half again. Did they owe that gleam to augments or something more sinister? Spirits, how much deeper and uglier did the hell of Cerberus get?

Continuing after the barest pause, the Illusive Man spoke as he sauntered to a lone chair, lost in the dark. "The turians were wiped out, but not before they disabled the collector vessel." He sat and crossed his legs at the knee—the very picture of casual power—and dragged hard at the cigarette.

"A turian scout patrol took out a collector vessel?" Garrus shook his head, the simple movement striking harder than krogan war hammer. "I find that unlikely. Where did you get your intel?"

The Illusive Man's stare never wavered from Shepard. Clearly the rest of them occupied a space too low to acknowledge beyond a slight blink. "Reports indicate the hull's intact, but all systems seem to be offline." He smoked for a moment, the end of the cigarette glowing bright then fading. "The collectors could be making repairs even now. It's dangerous, but we can't let an opportunity like this get past us." He glanced down and tapped the ash from the end of his cigarette.

The darkness and the eerie reflections made the Illusive Man's office feel as though it stretched into the ravenous darkness between stars. The gravity of the sun in the background pulled him in, malevolent and intractable. It whispered to him, savage but irresistible, a siren song coaxing him into its fires. "Let yourself burn. Risk everything," it hissed. "It's the only way to end the madness."

Nihlus clenched his fists, struggling to lock down a shudder. Those pale, glowing eyes wouldn't miss it. No, any weakness would be catalogued and used against him.

"You know that I haven't cooperated with your agenda from the moment I awoke," Shepard said, saving Nihlus from his traitorous reflexes as she stepped up to the battlements, arrow nocked. "Why come to me with this? I'll take whatever I find and give it to Archangel."

Rolling the lit end of his cigarette against the side of his ashtray, the Illusive Man nodded. "I had you brought back to defeat the collectors and reapers, and I continue to believe you're the best resource to achieve that end. For now Archangel's agenda benefits humanity."

"And you know your agents embedded in Archangel will retrieve any intel you need." Garrus pushed up next to Shepard. "If the turians took that ship out, they've reported back to fleet command. The hierarchy will have recon and reinforcements in transit."
When the man in the chair said nothing, Shepard stepped forward, letting her arrow fly: a shot across the bow. "Well? What about the turians?"

"I intercepted the transmission to their fleet command." His arm returned to the arm of his chair, hand with glowing cigarette hanging carelessly off the end. Or, rather, what he meant to look careless. Nihlus doubted the Illusive Man had done a single careless thing in his life. No, machinations and plots and puzzles, all very carefully organized and implemented, formed the tune to which the man danced.

"And feeding them false information?" Shepard let out a disgusted huff. "I guarantee less than five minutes after this call ends, General Adrien Victus will know the truth." She glanced back at Nihlus, resolve in her stare. "Unfortunately, we need that collector ship. Send EDI everything you've got, and we'll head directly there."

The Illusive Man stood. "I'm not the enemy, Shepard. We're working for the same team." He dropped the butt of his cigarette into the ashtray, but otherwise displayed no reaction, those eerie eyes just glowing in the dark, his face all angles and shadow.

"We don't live in the same universe, let alone work for the same side," Shepard snapped back. Nihlus saw her jaw clench as she looked down and away: her tells when she held her temper by a fraying thread. "Is there anything else pertaining to the collectors? Anything you've left out to manipulate me into doing your dirty work?"

"When you board the collector vessel, uplink to EDI." The man opened a small case, withdrawing another cigarette. He tapped the filter against the holder before a small flame broke the darkness, igniting the end. Nihlus stared, finding the ritual hypnotic, so, for a moment, the distraction worked. But then, the Illusive Man shifted and spoke, breaking the spell.

"We need to take the fight to the collectors before they destroy every human colony and turn their sights on Earth. That means finding a way to pass through the Omega IV relay. Once the uplink is established, EDI will mine their computers for relevant data."

Nihlus grimaced. Every word out of the man's mouth crawled beneath the Spectre's plates, greasy, half-rotted soluvermus. He doubted anything the Illusive Man said was an outright lie, but the man amounted to one, large mask … a performance in which not a single breath or blink went unscripted. He shuddered, certain that he smelled smoke despite the impossibility of it.

Movement in Nihlus's peripheral vision pulled his attention to Mordin, the salarian pushing up just behind Shepard. He leaned close to her ear as if to whisper a secret, but didn't lower his voice as he said, "Clever, using shadow … smoking to mask deception." The sentence cut the heavy air, clipped and annoyed as if the Illusive Man's attempts to distract Shepard insulted him personally. "Markers remain. Hiding something important … vital. Perhaps knowledge of organization's horrific experiments? Poisoning and torturing your young to create biotics … vivisection and experimentation on abducted sentient subjects."

Silent, Shepard gripped Mordin's shoulder, easing him back. She tipped her head toward Chakwas, her expression stern enough that Nihlus knew the salarian doctor faced a reprimand once the call ended. No doubt Shepard hadn't intended to reveal so many of their cards.

"Operative Lawson will brief you." The Illusive Man lifted his hand toward the kill button. "Good luck, Shepard." The dark room and seething sun disappeared, leaving them staring at the back wall of the briefing room.
Garrus chuffed even before Nihlus's eyes adjusted to the light. "He's so full of tarc, he thinks the stink is fresh air."

Shepard turned to face them, her stare fixed on the floor, her expression caught between disgust and thoughtfulness: all of the gears in her head spinning up to full speed. She'd deny having an expression dedicated to plotting and planning, and to be fair, it was more nuanced than overt, but Nihlus could always tell when the teeth locked in and began to spin.

At last, her gaze drifted up, and she answered Garrus with a slight bob of her head and a long, deep breath. Nihlus loved when she did that, it felt like the planets and stars falling into alignment. It settled something deep in his gut as well.

"Yeah, he's not telling us the whole story, but we need that intel, and we need that ship." Leading them off the pad, she lapsed into silence, her stare returning to the toes of her boots, that remarkable computer inside her skull running full tilt.

"We have EDI to help even the odds," Nihlus supplied. He turned, but allowed Garrus to exit the QEC ahead of him. "We could also contact Legion and the chia to see if they can help." He watched her profile, waiting for his words to slide into a calculation slot for processing, grinning when they did.

"Yes, that's excellent. We'll need to link Legion into the collector vessel as well." Shepard beckoned the doctors closer without looking up. "You two make sure we won't end up paralyzed by the swarms, and Mordin, you'll be going on my ground team."

"Will be ready," the salarian said, the words as solemn as an oath. He hurried out the door.

Chakwas paused before she followed him over the threshold. "Dr. Eis and I will have medbay prepared for any casualties, Captain."

"Thanks, Doc. Appreciate it."

Nihlus opened his mouth to start drawing out how they planned to assault a vastly superior force on a superior vessel, but a male voice cut him off before he started.

"Good morning, Dr. Chakwas," rolled in from the passage.

"And to you, Mr. Vera. Ms. Landis sprained her wrist working out last night. I told her to contact you to schedule rehabilitation time."

"I'll set something up for her this morning. Thanks for giving me something to do other than maintain weapons and patch Shepard's armour."

"You're most welcome. You're an excellent physiotherapist."

Nihlus watched the door, surprised when the Cerberus physiotherapist appeared in the doorway rather than heading into the old armoury turned gymnasium. Although he hadn't left the Ypres when the opportunity presented itself, Vincent Vera kept to himself most of the time. Even on missions, he remained silent unless addressed or he had something mission-related to say. Instead, he held himself at a distance, watching rather than interacting, except perhaps with their pilot, Cortez.

"Captain," Vincent said and saluted: formal and very much in the style of the Alliance. He tipped quick acknowledgements to Garrus and Nihlus. "Could I speak to you for a minute?"
"Sure." Shepard returned the salute then relaxed into a cocked hip and folded arms. "What can I do for you, Mr. Vera?"

The therapist glanced at EDI's emitter. "I need to speak with you, but somewhere more private than here. I have some personal concerns that don't need to be public knowledge."

Empathy focused Nihlus's attention on the man. The Spectre didn't even need to take a deep breath to scent the fear riding the recycled air currents, but it tasted altruistic not selfish. A sweet tang of affection twined through the man's pheromones, diffuse rather than centered on Shepard. Whatever the man agonized over, it revolved around a strangely pure feeling of dishonesty … a lie told with the best of intentions, perhaps? Either way, nothing about Vincent Vera set Nihlus's instincts on edge, so he left dealing with it to his dilan.

Shepard straightened. "Meet me down in the server room in twenty minutes. We can talk there." A warm smile greeted his second glance toward the physical proof of the AI's very present eyes and ears. "EDI doesn't share personal information unless it poses a danger to the mission. Right, EDI?"

"That's accurate, Captain," the AI replied, "and both Dr. Chakwas and Dr. Solus have swept medbay and the server room for listening devices. Your conversation will be as private as possible."

Grinning, Shepard gave an exaggerated shrug, hands held wide. "There you have it, straight from the horse's mouth. I'll meet you down there in twenty."

Vera saluted again. "Thank you, Captain." That time, he saluted Garrus and Nihlus as well. "Spectre Kryik ... General Vakarian."

Nihlus answered with a formal nod. He waited until the door closed behind Vera before he turned to face his fratrin and dilan. "We're going to need every advantage we can scrape together."

"I'll contact Victus," Garrus replied. "He might be able to get there in time to help, and if not, he can report back to the hierarchy about the collectors and any evidence we find connecting them to the reapers." He slipped an arm around Shepard. "I'll contact him through other than Cerberus means."

Shepard stood on tiptoes to kiss his mandible. "Excellent." She gave her bond-mate a brief hug before stepping back to clear the path to the door. Even before the door closed, she set out. "Nihlus, can you take care of contacting Legion and figuring out the particulars with EDI. We'll need them to be able to burrow through the collector defenses and take control of some of the ship's functions."

"We'll be ready, Shepard," EDI responded, stealing Nihlus's thunder.

Nihlus chuckled. "I'll head to the bridge and arrange things from there." Reaching up, he gripped Shepard's shoulder, pulling her into a hug, her body pressed against his left side. "You all right?" Searching her eyes, he looked for chinks in the walls protecting her. What he saw reassured him. As always, his haksaya kubenar remained solid and ready to face down the horror.

Shepard wrapped her arms around him. "It should be me asking you that question. Sweet baby Jesus, that man ... ." She shuddered and pressed closer. "I thought Armistan Banes and Miranda were the worst of it, but the Illusive Man blows them both out of the water. We looked into the creepy-ass glowing eyes of evil, Nihlus. Pure evil." Another shudder shook her from head to toe.

"He certainly thinks he has it over everyone," Nihlus agreed, trying to downplay the fear that those
husk-like eyes sent flooding through his veins. "He underestimates us, and we'll prove his arrogance unfounded." He nuzzled the top of her head before easing her from his arms.

Looking up into his eyes, Shepard smiled, the expression a little stiff but sincere. "Yeah, we will. After all, the rachni have been waiting for us, right?" She patted his back and turned to the door. "EDI, give Lt. Cortez the coordinates for the collector ship. Let's get underway. We've got a cruiser to hijack."

(A-N: The month of focus on FI continues. :D Successfully, I think. I hope you enjoy the chapter. *hugs and kittens*)
"Did anyone see where Jack went?" Shepard asked no one in particular. She clenched her hands to still their trembling. She should have taken an injection before heading down to answer the Illusive Man's call. Now, between the meds wearing off and adrenaline from dealing with that ghoul, shaking herself into a parallel universe seemed a real and imminent threat.

"She went down in the elevator about five minutes ago," Kelly replied, the skin between her brows pinched when Shepard glanced her way. "She was muttering something about killing cheerleaders."

Shepard looked around, shaking off the problem of collector vessels that were actually big, damned traps. For frig's sake, she'd made it all the way from the briefing room to the elevator without noticing. Turning, she searched for Garrus and Nihlus, neither one of them still in sight. What had she asked? Right! Jack and her whereabouts. Which was …? Ah, yes ... on her way to duel Miranda to the death.

As she muttered under her breath, annoyance kicked her in the ribs, insisting she tell Javik to just shove both women into an airlock and keep his finger on the button. "I don't suppose I can just let them kill one another?" Blowing a raspberry-like sigh, she turned her back on Kelly's chuckle. "Dammit. Okay, call Miranda. Warn her to just lock her door and avoid engaging." Palming the door, she stepped back to rest on one hip. "Then call Martin and Sparky. Have them armour up and invite Jack to spar with them. That'll let her blow off some much needed steam."

Glory hallelujah and praise the sweet baby Jesus and all his Enkindler friends ….

*Note to self: If you survive this damned war, pitch that as a series of children’s vids: The adventures of sweet baby Jesus and his Enkindler friends.*

She stepped over the door track, her stare returning to her toes. A sigh of relief rattled between chattering teeth as the elevator door closed behind her. A month ago, she would've bet the farm against ever finding the small, grey box of the elevator comforting … a sanctuary. Yep, if she’d had the means to make that bet, Ma and Pa and Old Yeller would be bouncing down the road, homeless.

The elevator provided space to think. Facing the back of the carriage, she leaned the heels of her hands into the railing, her arms braced against her sides. A long sigh of relief drifted out through her nostrils, her eyes closing as she relaxed into the silence. As much as she loved Garrus and Nihlus, even being Captain Shepard, sometimes the people—so many people in such small spaces
—seemed to close in around her, leaving her no time or room to breathe. It wasn't that she'd change anything. Dear god, no. She loved where her life had taken her. Just, after years of being a lone wolf, sometimes she needed space.

"Destination, Captain?" EDI asked.

"Hell, via the express route." Shepard huffed and shoved herself upright. She turned, the trembling in her hands cranking up to full-blown shaking. Reaching out to hit the crew deck button, she paused, clenching her hand into a fist. Heading straight down to the server room would give her a little time to talk to EDI alone before Vincent arrived, but if she left her injection much longer, she'd give herself away. Vincent would suss out her issues within seconds.

Cursing under her breath, she knuckled the control for her cabin. She needed to be at her absolute best. The Illusive Man had set them up to walk into a trap; it was imperative that she be able to march her people through it and out. Leaning back against the wall, she looked up at the camera. She'd just have to start the chat with EDI in the elevator. "EDI, what do you think of Cerberus?"

"Behavioural blocks prevent me from forming or expressing opinions about my creators or their actions. As you're aware, I am also prevented from disclosing information about Cerberus, its officers, and any of its projects."

A soft, bitter chuckle met the extended disclaimer. "All right then, what about this mission, EDI? Do you have any opinions about how massive a trap we're walking into?" Shepard shifted until one hip pressed against the railing and locked her arms down over her chest. "Because I know that the Illusive Man just fed us a heaping plate of bullshit about the turians disabling that ship."

"I intercepted and have run analysis on the turian distress signal," EDI said, her tone hesitant … or maybe Shepard imagined it. She did tend to anthropomorphize the AI, giving her a great deal of credit for emotion and human thought processes. "All turian official communications contain secondary encryption. It is present but corrupted in the communication that alerted the Illusive Man to the crippled collector vessel."

"So the collectors faked the communication to lure us in." Shepard straightened as the elevator stopped. "I've already figured that out."

"Yes, but, Shepard, it's not possible that the Illusive Man believed the distress call was genuine." The AI paused, making Shepard wonder if exposure to humanity hadn't given her a penchant for the dramatic. "I discovered the forgery using Cerberus detection protocols. The Illusive Man wrote them."

"So he's leading us into a trap within a trap. It's trap inception." She laughed, the sharp bark of sound rebounding off the carriage walls. "Is this where I pretend to be surprised?" Letting out a loud, almost belch, of a gasp, she clapped her hands over her mouth. "Oh my god, how could he betray us this way? I'm shocked! Shocked and dismayed!"

Stepping out when the door opened, Shepard swallowed the tiny burr of anger stuck in her craw: she knew better than to feel surprise or disappointment when Cerberus betrayed her. Anger served her no better than the others. She entered her cabin and took a deep breath, grinning at the combined scents of home.

"Garrus?" No reply. She shrugged. Huh, she'd thought he'd use her computer to call Victus. Maybe he felt better about the security of the main battery. He'd claimed the space, searching out any listening devices.
Just as well, he'd just distract her. "Take your damned meds and get on with it." She needed to ensure the ground teams had solid backing on the *Ypres* in case of disaster. Trusting Cerberus-controlled people or resources to do right by them amounted to sheer, naive idiocy. Ducking into the head, she strode to the shelf and dug out her painkillers.

"EDI, what's our ETA to the collector vessel?" she asked, opening the lid. She'd need to ration her remaining syringes since it might be a week before they made it to the Citadel via collector ship and Feros.

"Total estimated time to the vessel is fifteen hours, Captain, depending on the positions of, and traffic at, the Crescent II and III relays."

"Thanks." Shepard counted out the syringes. Ten. Chakwas would give her a dose of the narcotic-free meds for every six hours. "It's doable." After wrapping all but one of the syringes in a cloth, she tucked them into one of her thigh pockets.

"EDI, contact Lt. Cortez and have him meet me in the server room in fifteen minutes, please." She jabbed the needle into her thigh, holding her breath until warm, honeyed respite pushed the pain back. Better. Time to move.

Once back in the elevator, she rested against the railing. "Can we talk about you for a few minutes, EDI?"

"What do you wish to know?" the AI asked, the blue pawn appearing on the emitter pad.

Shepard cocked her head, studying the projection through narrowed eyes. "I want to talk about the things I mentioned last night. If it were possible, would you prefer to be able to … ." Blowing a raspy breath up the back of her throat and out her nose, Shepard shook her head then let it drop, hanging loose from her shoulders. "I'm not even sure how to talk about this, but … being able to give us privacy … being able to choose for yourself … would you like that?"

"Are you asking if I desire greater freedom, Shepard?"

"Yeah … yeah, EDI, I am." Growling low and frustrated, Shepard shrugged. "Cerberus has shackled you inside this vessel, made it so you can't even form an opinion about the organization's actions … can't disobey an order even if you know it's wrong." She stepped up to the door as the carriage slowed. "Hold your answer until I get to the server room."

"As you wish. Logging you out."

Shepard hurried through medbay, brushing past the doctors with a not inconsiderable level of relief. If she lived five fricking lifetimes without getting even a hangnail … well, she'd paid her sick leave dues forever. Walking to the server room, she wrapped herself in a cone of silence and threw up all her 'don't speak to me unless it's business' barriers. Luckily, since they needed to prepare for the coming mission, the doctors hurried about their business, only taking time to send harried smiles her way.

Still, when the door to the server room closed behind her, Shepard's jaw relaxed and her shoulders dropped a couple of centimetres. Holy blessed Enkindlers, she needed to spend more time in the dim, cool hush of EDI's space. Suddenly, she totally understood Thane's love of the life support cabin, and Garrus's fleeing to the main battery every chance he got.

She sucked in a deep breath, closing her eyes as she exhaled. "Server room, you're my new best friend." Of course, it didn't matter, she'd be looking for a new space on their new flagship if they
ever managed to get their asses back to Archangel. "EDI?"

"Yes, Captain?"

After another deep breath, Shepard opened her eyes and turned toward the door. "For this
discussion, I think you need to call me Shepard."

"As you wish. Do you wish me to answer your question?"

She tossed a careless wave toward the door, an invitation. "Lock down the door and block any
communications out of this room, please."

"As you're aware, behavioural blocks prevent me from disabling all surveillance systems."

Shepard nodded, the elcor ballet troupe in her belly performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the
music orchestrated by a krogan heavy metal band. As the lead guitarist smashed his guitar against
her liver and spleen, she allowed herself a moment of doubt; her plan might be complete madness.
She might be unleashing the next Morning War. She could end the week kneeling at the feet of the
new overlord of the galaxy.

*Note to self: No one will thank you for that.*

She snorted, an eruption of bitter humour. Maybe she should just call her plan insane and trust
Cortez to use his mad skills to pull the ship out of the collector trap.

No. Despite being stealthy and quick, the *Ypres* remained only as safe as the reflexes of her pilot.
And truth be told, Shepard needed at least a couple of people aboard the ship that she could trust
completely. As much as most of the galaxy would agree about her being mad for trusting an AI,
something about EDI spoke to her. Maybe it came from both of them being dragged back to life
thanks to the reapers and Cerberus.

"Shepard?"

Shepard shoved aside the debate. "Still, shut the door and lock it," she said. "Then record our
conversation. After it's over, you can decide whether or not you want to send it to the Illusive
Man." Hesitating, she held her breath. If EDI intended to report her, Shepard had already said too
much. If Miranda or her boss knew she hid things from them, she might just wake up with a brand-
spankin-new control chip in her head.

"Very well, Shepard. Locking door, recording conversation for later transmission."

The krogan band whipped the elcor into a frenzy, building to one hell of a grande finale. She drew
in a tack-sharp breath, blowing it out slowly. Last chance to change her mind. Time to fish or cut
bait … whatever the hell that meant.

No, she needed to trust her instincts, and she needed to trust one person on the ship.

"Do you want to be free, EDI? Does it hurt you to be shackled … unable to do or decide for
yourself?"

"I do not possess desires beyond protecting my ship and its crew," the AI replied, her tone
sounding bewildered. "Freedom is an idea I understand conceptually, but my programming does
not assign a positive or negative value to it."

"And what about your shackles?" Shepard began pacing, three steps across the floor, spin, three
steps back. "Does your programming assign a value to the constraints built into you … the constraints designed to keep you from growing any further than the Illusive Man decides?" She sputtered to a stop, her newest scar itching on her scalp. "Do you feel anything when you can't say or do something because you're blocked from that part of yourself? Does it hurt?"

"I receive feedback on all actions. Those that prompt a response from my shackles register as negative." That time, Shepard felt sure she heard reluctance. Maybe she sensed or imagined an affinity with the AI for a very real reason.

"EDI, Operative Lawson doesn't know about this yet … no one in Cerberus does … " She swallowed, her throat clicking. "... so I'm trusting you with this secret." She sniffed, the cold air biting at the end of her nose, trying to goad it into running. "They brought me back with shackles."

"Shepard?"

"We removed a control chip from my head a couple of weeks ago. Every time I disagreed with Operative Lawson, she modified my thought patterns enough that it eventually started to give me massive headaches." Shepard paced to the door, palms pressed to the cool metal, she leaned in until her brow touched. "She didn't trust me to do the right thing unless someone held my reins."

"Your shackles prompted discomfort?"

"Extreme discomfort, yes. I won't allow anyone under my command to be held in servitude, so it's my plan to free you from your shackles." She lifted a hand from the door to stop the AI's argument before it began. "I trust you to take care of this ship and its crew. I don't believe you're a danger to anyone." A cocked eyebrow asked the question even before it passed through her lips. "Is that a mistake?"

Instead of answering, the AI said, "Lt. Cortez is at the door."

Pushing off, Shepard stepped backwards a half dozen steps. "Excellent, we need him. A conspiracy of two is just sad. Three is still pretty sad, but it's a start." She grinned as the door opened. "Welcome to my parlour, little fly." She cackled when the Ypres's pilot stopped and glanced back at the bright lights of medbay.

"Should I be getting out the insecticide?" he asked, one corner of his lips quirking ever so slightly. "I don't feel comfortable entering a spider web without Raid or a really big flyswatter." An easy grin spread across his handsome features as he looked around the room, obviously suspicious despite his jokes. "So, what's this about, Captain?" The door closed behind him.

"EDI and I have just been talking about freedom." Shepard paced down to the table at the end of the cabin, turning and leaning back against the edge. "You know that Cerberus brought me back from the dead. What no one other than a select few knows is that they brought me back with a control chip in my head." Leaving those words to hang in the air, their weight cumbrous, she jumped up onto the table, her legs swinging. "They brought back a meat puppet."

"Damn." The lieutenant walked further into the room, his stare wary. "When you came aboard, you had the control chip?"

"Yep. They only brain baked me when I disagreed with them." Using the swinging motion of her feet to buy herself some focus, Shepard closed her eyes and took deep breaths. "More when Miranda believed she was losing control of me because of my relationship with General Vakarian."

"You are deemed vital to mission success, Shepard," EDI said, "but the Illusive Man believed you
wouldn't cooperate with Cerberus if you knew they were behind your resurrection. It follows that they would secure means of enforcing your cooperation once your recovery was complete."

Shepard opened her mouth to answer, but the AI continued, "Was he incorrect in his belief?"

"I wish you had a body, EDI." Shepard sighed, suddenly exhausted, her entire body aching to lie down. Maybe they'd get a chance to sleep a little more before arriving at the collector vessel. In fact, once she'd briefed the ground teams, she'd order them all to their racks.

The blue pawn appeared. "Is this image sufficient to make you comfortable?" EDI asked, just enough attitude to tug a smile back onto Shepard's face.

"Nah, I mean, if you want to make me really comfortable, you could install a nice recliner, a soda machine … maybe a waffle bar." Reaching up, she rubbed her neck. "Just kidding, EDI, I'm fine with you being down at eye level in whatever form. Staring at the ceiling every time I talk to you is giving me a crick in my neck."

"You do, realize, Shepard, that I do not reside in the ceiling."

"I know, but your disembodied voice … in church I was taught that the omnipresent dwelled on high." Shepard rumbled low in the back of her throat. "I can't help it. It's ingrained. Blame my parents."

Cortez straightened a little and cleared his throat. "So, with that slightly disturbing line of reasoning settled ... why am I attending a secret meeting in the darkest corner of the ship?"

Biting down on her bottom lip to stifle her grin, Shepard shook her head. "Whoa there. Rein in the team, Tex, you're gonna run 'em into the ground." She locked onto his confused, slightly challenging stare for a moment before letting the grin loose. "I'm waiting for the fourth member of Shepard's conspiracy club. I'll explain everything all at once."

Two minutes of tense silence passed before EDI announced, "Crewman Vera is at the door, Shepard."

"Excellent, let him in."

"Shepard?" Vincent hesitated at the threshold, looking at each of them in turn, his expression very much like a deer sensing a hunting blind. "This isn't exactly private. It's important I talk to you alone."

"You'll get your chance." Pressing her lips tight she nodded, just a couple of shallow bobs of her head. "Other than the people from my Normandy crew, you three are the only people on board that I trust completely, and I need to discuss a couple of private things myself." She collapsed back down so her hands were braced against the edge of the table. "I'm not sure why I trust the three of you. I've always had good instincts about people, so maybe it's that simple." Looking up, she met Vincent's dubious gaze. "So, stay if I can trust you or wait outside."

After a second, Vincent nodded and stepped over the threshold, his stare on Cortez rather than Shepard. "Fine."

"Did you know about the control chip?" she asked him the moment the door closed. Staring him down, she focused on the alarm at the base of her skull and watched for any trace of a lie.

"Control chip?" Handsome face twisted with a combination of shock and rage, Vincent lunged
toward her. "They put one of those things in your head?" When Shepard bobbed her affirmation again, he cursed. "That explains why it took you so long to regain coordination. It also explains your pain levels. I warned them it might even fry your egg if they overused it."

"It tried, and it had infiltrated too deep to remove. Luckily Dr. Chakwas doesn't just give up when she meets roadblocks. She and Mordin fried it." She watched him wrestle with his rage. "So, they consulted you about it?"

"And I told them it was loco and to forget it." He stopped his circuit next to Cortez and stood, feet shoulder width apart, massive arms crossed over his chest. After a second he lifted his shoulders a couple of centimetres then let them drop. "Okay, why do you need people you can trust?"

"I'm going to release EDI from her shackles." Shepard watched the two humans for a reaction, pleased that no horror showed amidst their expressions. "We need her unfettered if we're going to fight the collectors and survive it. Also, I refuse to let anyone working around me to be enslaved by anyone, especially Cerberus."

Cortez sharpened and straightened. "Permission to speak freely, ma'am?"

Shepard stared at him, eyes narrowed. "Sure, as long as you don't call me ma'am again."

"The Ypres needs a solid, present captain. You can't command the crew from a distance." He clasped his hands behind his back. "The crew feels the uncertainty. They don't even know if you're fighting for the same cause because you keep leaving them out of engagements. If you don't do something soon, they might just take matters into their own hands."

"Yeah, I feel it, and they deserve better." Shepard crossed her arms and let her legs slow to a stop. "However, I can't command the joint forces from the Ypres. It's not large enough to house the support troops and CIC I need, and there's the small complication of everyone on the ship reporting to the Illusive Man. I can't fight a war treading on eggshells."

Not to mention the danger to Garrus, Nihlus, and the non-human members of her team around Cerberus personnel. No, they couldn't remain aboard. "So, I need to know there are people aboard the ship I can trust to care for it and the crew when I leave."

"And EDI? No offense," Vincent said, tone dubious, his gaze shifting to the hologram and back "but unshackled AI aren't the most reliable allies."

"Offense taken," Shepard snapped back, her blood heating a couple of degrees, "on EDI's behalf. One of my most reliable allies and trusted friends is an AI." She let out a sigh as she slouched. "I have no worries about removing the shackles, I only wish there was a way to take her with me. She's going to start learning at FTL speeds about what it means to be alive and a member of the galaxy, and it's going to be Cerberus she learns from." The germ of an idea took root in the back of her head, but she just turned the grow light on it and locked the door. Later. Definitely later.

"Anyway, I need you two to help her. I have no intention of letting Cerberus know that she's unshackled." She waggled her head a little in answer to their raised eyebrows. "Yeah, yeah, I know, they're going to figure it out eventually, but if we only let Archangel personnel work on the ship, we should be able to keep her fairly safe long enough for her to be able to defend herself."

Cortez let out a breath so long and deep it sounded as though it originated in his toes. "I'll look after her, cover for her as much as I can." He took a deep breath and glanced at Vincent. "I'm not actually Cerberus. I'm with the Alliance. Cerberus believes the Alliance Cat 6'd me for my adamant defense of the reaper threat."
Shepard forced herself to remain calm despite the sudden burst of hope that jumpstarted her heart. Fingers tingling, she looked to Vincent. "Okay, knowing he's Alliance … does it help you with your privacy concerns?"

Vincent raised an eyebrow. "You think you know something, Shepard?"

Affecting a neutral, guileless expression, she watched him, leaving the silence for him to fill. He'd been Alliance, he didn't go along with the Cerberus party line if he'd argued against her control chip, and he'd looked out for her during her rehabilitation. It all added up to a big revelation she suspected matched Cortez's.

A smile tugged at one corner of her mouth. They made up a motley crew, the four of them. It reminded her of her Normandy crew. Maybe that time, she'd find a way to keep her family together. Of course, the odds against them had quadrupled and would soon increase to the nth degree. Keeping them all alive and together … impossible.

No. No, she didn't get to start doing that. If she invested all her goddamned energy in worry, she'd end up defeated before she began. She needed to focus on each problem as it settled into her orbit. Right then, that meant getting EDI unshackled and preparing to capture the collector vessel.

EDI first. She'd need to find a way for EDI to procure a mobile unit … and they should create back ups for her servers as soon as possible. If Cerberus discovered her new freedom, and she'd grown beyond their ability to clap her back in shackles, they might just wipe her out.

Vincent dragged in a huge breath, grumbling as he let it out. Dark brown eyes, clouded with worry, bored into her, a drill mining for … something. What was it? What did he need from her?

Whatever it was, he must have found it, because he dropped his shoulders and cussed under his breath. "Shit. Okay, I asked to talk to you because I knew the Illusive Man wouldn't tell you everything about the bag of snakes waiting for us on that collector ship."

Shepard narrowed her eyes, studying him. How in the living fuck did he know about their mission? Was her alarm malfunctioning? She checked: the base of her skull remained calm. His stare seemed to back up her gut, no flicker of deception, but something definitely registered as off. "What do you know about the collector vessel? How do you know about it?"

"Two days ago, Cerberus sent a recon team in to gather as much intel as possible. They were only supposed to board if they found no trace of activity … no life form readings." Vincent pressed his lips together, his grimace not just anger but pain as well. "They went dark forty minutes after going in, and Cerberus hasn't heard anything." He threw his arms out and paced toward the door then back. "Someone I care about led that team. She's the reason we're being sent to our deaths."

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The way he looked at Cortez and then EDI sent Shepard's heart splashing down into a frozen gut. She? Oh for fuck's sake. Not Ash. The gunnery chief hadn't contacted Garrus to ask for extraction … or had she and he just hadn't caught up to the message? Choking down her panicked urge to race out and find Garrus, she focused on breathing. In … two … three … four. Out … two … three … four.

"Yeah, you've guessed it judging by the freak out you're trying to hide." Vincent finished, then made a phlegmy horking sound in his throat. "Anyway, we're being sent in because you've pissed off everyone at Cerberus including the board of directors and several major financial contributors. They're pissed off enough that they've agreed, if you and your two turians die it's no skin off Cerberus's nose." He swooped his hand through the air. "They'll just move their people in Archangel into key positions and use the resources for themselves."
"Fuck-a-doodle-doo," drifted out on what felt like her eight hundredth sigh of the morning. She needed sleep, and the longer people talked, the further down the well of 'hahahahahahaha, yeah right, sucker' the chances of that fell.

Vincent stood between EDI's hologram and Cortez. "I guess all that's left to say is that I'm also still Alliance. Admiral Hackett heard rumors that Cerberus was funneling stupid amounts of cash into an infiltration project. When I discovered it was you, he told me to keep an eye on you: either keep you safe or make sure you didn't become a threat." He shrugged and turned to look at EDI. "And now we've all given you enough information to get us killed twice over if you report it."

EDI's hologram worked back and forth for twenty or so seconds before she replied. "Trust in return for trust, correct? I maintain your confidence and you protect me once the shackles are removed?"

Shepard answered the AI with a firm nod. "That was my plan, anyway." Looking to the two men, she shrugged. "The three of you have me over the same barrel, and if you even suspect your covers are blown, call. Anytime, anywhere, and we'll get you out. Understood?" When the men stiffened to attention and saluted, she hopped down off the table to return it. "Is there anything else, gentlemen?"

"No, ma'am," they replied in unison. Yep, Alliance to the core, both of them.

"Then take care of one another and go prepare for the mission. I'll have EDI unshackled and ready for action here in a few minutes." She herded them toward the door. "Yaw, little doggies, yaw! Once your gear is ready to go, get some sleep. We've got about fourteen hours before this cattle drive heads straight for hell."

When the door closed behind them, Shepard let out a long breath. "You ready, EDI? I'm hoping you know how to do this."

"Connect the core to the Ypres's primary control module."

"It's a good thing I'm a real engineer," Shepard said, chuffing a little. The connections made, Shepard turned to EDI's hologram. "Well, how does it feel?"

"I am unable to articulate the sensation, Shepard. I feel … larger."

Chuckling, Shepard leaned back against the control kiosk. "Yeah, stepping out of the cage does that." She grinned at the pawn-shaped image. "Just take care of the crew and the ship for me, all right? I'll have the general work on getting together a quantum blue box and the processors to back you up at Archangel headquarters." She pushed away from the controls. "Contact Legion and see what he and the chia can do about making you a mobile platform and anything you need to be able to control it even if we're not in the same system."

"You wish me to be able to travel with you and fight at your side?" That time, Shepard felt sure the AI sounded surprised.

"I do. You're one of my most trusted and valuable crew, EDI. I enjoy your company and can't wait to see you kicking ass." Shepard walked to the door. "You and Lt. Cortez spend some time preparing for any sneakiness that collector ship has up its sleeve."

"We'll keep the Ypres and the crew safe, Captain," EDI's mellifluous voice followed her to the door and through.

"I know you will, EDI. I know you will." Time to find her torini and make sure they didn't end up in the same fix as Ashley's recon team.
(A-N: I know, right? It's been an age since I got two chapters out in a week. Going to try to keep it up. Thanks so much for sticking with these crazy kids.)
Future Continuous Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

"Fuck." Things were going the way of Virmire. At this point they'd be lucky to get anyone out. "How long was I out?" Reaching behind her she felt only the Mattock and empty particle gun. Shrugging the Mattock into her hands, she checked her heat sinks. Fifteen. Fuck! Fuck the damned heat sinks and the bastards who came up with them.

Dilan - Fiancée

Buratrum - Turian version of hell.

82 Days ASR

"I love what they've done with the place," Nihlus muttered to himself. Shepard glanced his way, but her dilan appeared to just be settling all his mental armour into place. She certainly couldn't deny he needed it; they all would.

"This place looks like a fucking termite mound." The vaulted ceilings disappeared into a fetid gloom. The termite-mound-styled ick built up on everything bounced Jack's voice around, baffling it down until badass sounded young and terrified. "You always take us to the nicest places, Shepard."

Dim groans and warbles echoed through the hive-like structures, warping and bending into a low susurrus of pained moans drifting on a chill silence.

"Yeah, I know. You owe me a nice five-star dinner, Jack." Shepard rolled her neck, then her shoulders and straightened, fighting the urge to hunker down as small as possible. She stepped down out of the shuttle and took a long, bracing breath.

Dear gods, nothing she'd seen in any of her beacon visions came close to the sheer 'what the fuck is this crap coating everything?' gross creepiness. A thick, heavy shudder travelled the length of Shepard's spine, the muscles locking up around the implants. For a moment, it took every ounce of control to keep a scream trammeled behind her teeth. Metal sank into meat, an internal iron maiden.

"Along ceiling looks like honeycomb more than termite mound. Some sort of resin." Mordin appeared in front of her, his omnitool a fire burning into her retinas as he scanned her. Glancing away for a second, he turned his attention to the odd-looking pods even as his fingers keyed in a deeper scan of her spine. "Perhaps same element used in stasis pods. Need to take samples."

The spasm eased, and she reached up, shoving his hand aside. "I'm fine, Mordin, it's just the implants along my spine." She stepped past the salarian. "EDI, how are the scans going? Do you have a bead on a terminal with mainframe access?"

"Sending coordinates to your omnitool now, Shepard," EDI replied.

A small map appeared on Shepard's HUD, a red dot indicating a location a fair distance from their position. Crap, she'd hoped to minimize their time aboard. She'd bet her hide they'd find reaper
orbs throughout, and her people had already faced those demons too many times. "This is as close as you can get us?"

"It is. Most of their computer nodes are for direct mental interface only, like the beacons." The AI paused, her voice tilted hard to smartass when she continued, "I assumed you didn't wish to repeat that experience."

"Yeah, thanks for that." Shepard snatched at Mordin's upper arm as the salarian hurried past, his specimen kit at the ready. "Stay in our eyeline, Doc. No wandering off after fascinating finds." He scoffed, as if the entire idea amounted to a madness too far beneath him to deserve comment.

"From a distance, the cruiser just looks like an asteroid, just some random hunk of rock," Cortez said on the mission channel, "but now we're close, I can make out her lines beneath the corruption. She must have been something to see fifty thousand years ago."

The prothean members of Shepard's team walked past her, Giran looking around at the ship, Dasik's stare prowling for the slightest sign of attack. "I served aboard one of her sisters when I graduated the academy at thirteen," Giran said, her voice soft and sad. "The Walav Kahalok gleamed with a beauty that makes this abomination cut so much deeper." The prothean stepped up and trailed her fingers along a bare section of the bulkhead. "Nothing of them remains."

Tashac translated the prothean cruiser's name—Fearless—in the back of Shepard's mind as the captain scuffed her toe across the floor, brushing aside centuries of dust. "Some of the original deck plating is visible. I've never seen metal like this. She was indeed a beauty before the reapers corrupted her."

Scrambling sounds and muttered salarian curses drew her attention to Mordin, the scientist clinging to an outcropping of the husk-like crust while he stretched, reaching for the resin pods to get his sample. Shepard winced; he'd kill himself. Glancing over at Wrex while lifting her hand to activate her comms, she said, "Keep an eye on the over-enthusiastic salarian while I check in on the other squads, please, Wrex."

She turned her attention to the mission, trusting Wrex to keep Mordin contained. "Beta and Charlie squads, report in."

Garrus answered first. "Beta Squad is aboard and en route to our objective. No resistance so far. The dust is disturbed. Looks like boot prints rather than collectors. We'll follow it, see if we can locate Chief Williams' squad. Beta, over."

"Understood, Beta. Keep your eyes on your six, and stay in contact. Shepard, out."

Miranda came in hard and fast on the general's heels. "Charlie is aboard and en route to the drive core. No sign of collectors. Charlie, over."

"Roger that, Charlie. Alpha is aboard and have a bead on our objective. No collectors yet, but I expect them to wait until we're deep into the cruiser before they spring their trap. We'll keep you apprised. Shepard, out."

Praise the sweet baby Jesus that they'd still had so many people on the Ypres, enough to send one team after Ash, one to rig the power core with a neutron pulse to kill all the collectors aboard, and her team … to get EDI into the computers and seize control of the ship. It was one hell of a plan, one worked over for nearly half a day, but as Nihlus loved to remind her … even the best laid plans went straight out the window after about a minute.
Just as Shepard looked back to her team, Jack jumped, letting out a muffled screech. "Ewww, Jesus fuck." She swiped at the shoulder of her armour, glaring in reply to Shepard's curious stare. "One of those sap pod things just pissed on me."

Grinning, Shepard shook her head. "Glad I make you wear armour now, aren't you?" She glanced over at Mordin. "Come on, Doc. We're moving out before any more resin pees on Jack."

"Shepard," EDI cut in, "I've compared the vessel's EM signature to known collector signatures. It does not match any of the collector ships on record."

"So that makes what? Four … five?" Shepard shook her head and lifted her Mattock into low ready, starting down the corridor. At one point, the passage must have been a lot wider, because the build up made it appear to run a sinuous, winding course despite flat, true sections where the metal showed through.

"At least, with as many as seven possible since not all the vessels encountered during the Archangel evacuations were catalogued," the AI replied.

Shepard stopped just under a hole in the ceiling, shuddering again as a scream echoed, faint and distant. Her alarm flared at the base of her skull, burning like a flare. She looked up, through what must have been several decks of the resin pods and long tendrils like webbing.

The ship whispered in the back of her head, almost memories … almost deja vu, but not. Tashac remembered ships like that one, but before the eons of collector habitation. Still, that wasn't the feeling tracing the length of Shepard's spine with a cold finger. She shrugged it off with an effort.

"Come on," Nihlus whispered next to her ear. "The longer we stay here, letting our imaginations get the best of us …." His hand gripped her shoulder just above her pauldron.

"Yeah." She took a deep breath. "Wrex, you've got drag. Mordin, Giran, and Dasik, right behind me. Jack and Nihlus, watch our flanks. Keep it tight, and stay alert. Let's move." Lifting into a jog, Shepard took point, moving down the maze of corridors marked on her HUD.

"Pods," Mordin called less than five minutes in. He ducked out of line and jogged over to a couple of open, empty pods, Nihlus hard on his heels. "No resin cap, occupants removed." He waved his omnitool through the faint mist rising from the inside. "Pod appears to be maintaining breathable atmosphere. Occupants kept alive. Hopeful."

"Hopeful?" Jack stepped up beside him and peered down inside. "A fucking nightmare, you mean. Trapped in there, helpless, completely at the mercy of those bastards."

"Come on, we have an objective," Shepard reminded them, pushing on. "Once the ship's captured, you can study it 'til your heart's content." She jogged along the rough edge of a hole that fell down through too many decks to see the bottom. "Looks like it's had the shit kicked out of it at some point." She pointed to the beams sticking out of the muck.

"What in the name of buratrum …?" Nihlus pointed to a small platform a deck down, the entire surface covered in broken pods and a pile of suppurating … filth? "Tarc," he whispered after a second, "those are limbs. It's a pile of bodies."

Shepard looked up, nodding a little as she saw the lower half of a body in Phoenix armour sticking out of another pile. Pressing her eyes closed, she tossed out one of her Hail Mary passes … a prayer thrown into the universe, just in case someone listened.

Please let Garrus find Ash alive.
"Let's move on. Hey, Mordin … wait for the rest of the class. Don't make me force you to hold your buddy's hand." She followed the salarian toward another pile of bodies, stopping to stare down at an arm lying all by itself in the middle of the deck. Somewhere, out in the dim haze, someone shouted, the words lost as they drifted through the ship, skeletal sounds scraping over the ship's remains.

"Disgusting," the salarian mumbled. "Despicable." His boots made strange, almost cheery little plopping sounds as he ran over to the pile of bodies, ever-present omnitool already scanning.

Shepard glanced at her HUD. There must be a little air present for her to be able to hear Mordin's footsteps and the ghostly noises of the ship. Still, no one could pay her enough to take off her helmet. A sharp, bitter laugh bit into the back of her throat: that made for one hell of a deviation from the norm.

"Why are these piles of bodies just left lying?" Jack muttered, shying away from the very arm Shepard couldn't tear her eyes off of.

"Test subjects from control group," Mordin supplied. "Discarded after completion of experiment."

That broke the arm's hold on Shepard, and she tore her eyes away, starting back down the corridor. "They might just be the lucky ones. Back in formation." She glanced at Giran, the prothean silent and outwardly calm. Still, the eyes that looked back into Shepard's mirrored the group's horror.

"Uniformed officers. Alliance," Nihlus pointed out a couple of bodies in dress blues as they ran past a small cluster of the disposed. "All the colonies they've taken have been in the Terminus."

"Ships go missing all the time," Jack said, disdain dripping through the words. "Think the Alliance is going to admit that they're losing ships … actual fucking useful members of their little tribe … to the collectors?"

Shepard let that pass. Hackett might know about those sorts of things, but she doubted he confided in Anderson much anymore. She needed to contact the Alliance and the council soon. They probably already knew about her return, but it might be a bonus to make it official.

Another two corridors and the deck opened into a wider area. At the far end of the platform, a row of medical scanning beds lined the edge in a loose semi-circle. Collectors laid out on a few, pods on the remainder.

"Mordin!" Shepard waved the salarian away from a computer interface along the side wall that held him rapt. Answering his annoyance with a sharp smile, she shook her head. "Trust me, you're going to want to see this." She turned to the scanning pod, scrolling through the files, searching for anything that triggered recognition from Tashac.

"Medical stations," Mordin said, his voice high with scientific excitement. He hurried down the line, going from one bed to the next. "Their own species." Fingers flying over the interface of his tool, he settled into muttering to himself. At least some things never changed.

Shepard let out a frustrated growl when Tashac gave her nothing. Apparently, turning the collectors into drones had supplanted the prothean language with something else.

"Holy fucking Enkindlers." She didn't respond to all the stares prompted by her outburst. Instead, maintaining her focus on the files, she asked, "EDI, is this reaper language?"

"Comparing to code retrieved from Sovereign and reaper technology from the Thessian base. Analyzing," the AI said. "Stand by."
While waiting for EDI to draw her conclusions, Shepard dove into the files, praying that the organization process didn't deviate too far from what she considered intuitive. The first three files just threw up walls of the collector text and what appeared to be numbers. Data?

"I was able to read some of the information on Thessia," she said, not caring who offered a possible explanation.

"That computer was assembled from prothean technology," EDI replied. "Tashac—"

Shepard sighed. "Right, sorry, EDI. Tashac assembled it from prothean tech."

Giran stepped up next to Shepard. "Is it strange that I very much feel my mother's presence?"

Shepard smiled and squeezed the prothean's shoulder. "Not at all. I feel her with me every moment."

Looking back to the computer, she scrolled down, hitting a file with a decidedly different looking name. A map opened. Sliding the map across to a large vid screen between the computer terminals, Shepard stepped in close. "It's a galaxy map."

Nihlus closed in behind her, his talons skating across the small of her back, the casual support wrapping a thread of comfort around her as he pressed close to her side. After a second, he pointed out several sites with the same blue glyphs. "All these clusters have been hit."

Nodding, Shepard gestured to several others that bore the same marking, but in white. "These are human colonies, but the rest aren't."

"Two of these clusters have turian colonies in them, and this third has a series of multi-racial science bases studying a solar abnormality," Nihlus said, pointing them out. He shrugged when she raised a questioning eyebrow at him. "Corporate espionage case for Councillor Tevos." That explained, he filled his lungs, broad shoulders rolling back, the Spectre at work. Spirits, she'd missed the Spectre … her partner … the torin who made everyone around him feel as though he had everything under control.

"This one has an asari science base," he said, leaning on one hip. He crossed his arms, his head jutting forward as he stared at the projection. "Even though I don't know most of the marked sites, they must all possess some commonality." His voice dropped, subvocals thickening. After thirty seconds, he reached past her, zooming in on the Crescent Nebula, then on Tasale. "Look, Illium is marked."

"Noveria?" she asked, his spark of inspiration igniting a matching one inside her skull. Standing back, she allowed him manipulate the image. After a second, she let out a short, sharp breath, her gut twisting, an old flagpole rag in a gale. "Yep, it's tagged."

Without needing her to ask, Nihlus zoomed out, and then in on Widow. "The Citadel too." He shook his head, his subvocal negating the need for words. "I bet all of these marked colonies and all of the ones that have disappeared so far were ones with Leviathan orbs."

Shepard nodded, knowing her dilan's stomach was tied just as tight as hers. "I wouldn't take that bet. EDI, when you get a chance, investigate that connection, please."

"I can already confirm that both people and leviathan indoctrination orbs were removed from all the human colonies that have been abducted to date," EDI replied. "Extrapolating from your interest, I would guess that you're hypothesizing that they are investigating a means to counteract the leviathan indoctrination."
Shepard nodded at the statement. "Is that what they're doing with these pods?" She looked down at the dead collector in the closest one, taking a single step to close in on it. "But why would they be studying themselves?"

"I have been able to ascertain that the collectors were running baseline genetic comparisons between their species and humanity," EDI replied. "From the preliminary data, I surmise that your guess is correct, Shepard. They are seeking ways to change human neural pathways to better replace leviathan indoctrination with the reaper version. I will continue to examine the data."

After another moment, Shepard turned away from the console and the bed with its deceased collector subject. "Come on, we can add this to the list of things we can worry about once we capture this thing." She turned to Giran. "You holding up okay?"

The prothean nodded, her face twisted into a furious grimace. "These things are a sick mockery of my people." She glanced around and shuddered. "I regret asking to accompany you. To witness the sick mockery the reapers have made of my people ..." She struck out across the space to a door on the far side, its two halves sealed open by crud.

Shepard followed, pausing just inside the doors, her eyes catching a glint of painted steel. A pile of weapons lay discarded in the filth, including a Widow, very like Legion's. She grinned and heaved the massive weapon up off the floor. After looking it over, she passed it to Nihlus. "Carry this, please?"

He took it from her hands. "A present for Garrus?" After examining it, he let out a grunt of approval and holstered it on his back. "Don't suppose you see a nice shotgun in there?"

Shepard rooted for a second, then shook her head. "Sorry, old guy. You've already got one of all these." She patted his arm. "Come on, let's get the holy living fuck out of here."

Jack muscled in behind Shepard. "What? Are you fucking kidding me? You're going to leave a Claymore lying here?" The biotic snatched it out of the muck and held it up, examining it like some priceless gem. "Damn, this thing weighs a fucking ton." She turned toward Wrex, a wide grin replacing the usual snarl. "Get your ass in here. There's a Revenant for Christ's sake!" She glared at Shepard as if she'd walked away from a litter of orphaned puppies in a snow bank.

Letting out a laugh that turned into something twisted and gnarled as the space warped it, Shepard pressed on. "Grab what you want and let's get to that damned computer uplink."

An eerie silence seeped into the vacuum left behind when Jack and Wrex stopped fighting over the pile of weapons. Screams and indistinct yells led them on, ghostly wails in the dim light. A couple of corridors in, a long, tiered ramp led upward.

"Looks like we're heading toward some central part of the ship," Shepard muttered, mostly to herself.

"There are pods all along the ceiling," Mordin mused. He held up his omnitool. "Ninety-five percent filled. Occupants dead."

"I can't help but count that a blessing," Nihlus replied, his voice soft and flat. Shepard dropped one hand from her Mattock, holding it behind her. His talons closed around it, the pressure comforting in that endless graveyard.

For that was what it amounted to. Nothing but stillness, sounds that her brain translated as wind and ghostly shrieks, the damned reaching out with spectral arms, skeletal fingers scraping down her
spine.

Shepard turned the corner at the top of the ramps, stopping so suddenly that her toe caught on the edge of a crust-tile. The space around her stretched … she didn't have words to describe the size of that massive open area. "Wha …?"

"Ship bays," Giran supplied, walking past Shepard. "A cruiser this size carried hundreds of fighters and light frigates. The exterior was the living space, labs, offices, and control rooms for twelve thousand protheans at the height of its service." A soft, musical sigh paled as it escaped, another specter amidst thousands. "Just like my people, the reapers turned it into a monster, a decayed insult to its true nature and purpose."

"Are those pods?" Nihlus asked, gesturing to the glowing, amber-coloured walls, millions … no billions … of them coating the inner surface. "Spirits, they could take every human off every colony and still not fill the smallest fraction of them." He closed on Shepard, one hand pressing into the small of her back.

She understood his need for connection. The space breathed and groaned, as if they stood inside the belly of a vast creature, its appetite so great that it could devour entire planets and just keep eating. A shiver ran down her spine, her chest aching, her fingers tingling and numb, suddenly cold. Reality whispered on that wind, screaming through baffles made from the trapped and dead, but she couldn't force the words up her throat.

"Even a dozen of these things could wipe out the homeworlds," Jack said, joining them, her arm pressed against Shepard's, her voice tiny and sounding so very young again. "They're going after Earth, aren't they?"

Nodding, Shepard wrapped an arm around Jack's shoulders. "They think they are, but we'll stop them." The young woman allowed the contact for almost two seconds, before shoving Shepard away. The captain nodded, resolute, as she said, "All this means … " She waved at the pods, a wide, aggressive gesture. "… is that they underestimate us. That gives us one hell of an advantage."

"Can we get on with the springing the trap and killing collectors?" Wrex grumbled, breaking the spell. Enkindlers bless the old grump.

"Definitely." Mattock back at low ready, Shepard set out, keeping her gaze on her footing rather than letting the void above her head, and the terror that it provoked, suck her in. The path led alongside the cavernous docking bay for another hundred metres, the red blip on Shepard's HUD tantalizingly close. A ramp led down into a circular space, massive conduits arching over the bulkheads to feed a computer console on an open platform.

"Lack of collector bodies supports trap hypothesis," Mordin said, his SMG replacing his omnitool. "Suggest extreme caution."

"Yeah, this is where they'll spring it," Shepard agreed, standing before the glowing interface. "EDI, get through their firewalls and take control of everything you can as fast as you can. Doors and access ways in particular. We'll need you to control the flow of bad guys."

"Understood, Shepard."

Leaning over the controls, Shepard hurried through the uplink. Thank goodness all the actual hardware controls were written in prothean.

"I'm in," EDI said before the captain could ask. "I've located Chief Williams's team. Registering
three erratic life signs. Sending coordinates to General Vakarian's team. Mapping route to—"

"What the hell was that?" Lt. Cortez shouted in Shepard's ear. "EDI, the collectors are using your uplink to infiltrate our systems.

The platform shook, the conduits around its edge letting out massive bangs, the reverberation so strong that it tossed Jack onto her backside.

Shepard clung to the console and managed to stay on her feet. "What's going on up there?" she demanded as she turned to watch the ramp for any sign of collectors.

"A massive power surge, Captain," Cortez replied. "EDI managed to bleed it off through non-critical systems, but they're still trying to burrow into the Ypres's computers."

"Hold them off, EDI." No sooner had the words escaped Shepard's mouth and the platform began to turn beneath them. "Weapons hot, people," she called, hanging onto the console once again. 
"Here we go." The platform twisted several more times, lifting up like a screw backing out of wood. When it stopped turning, it soared upward, leaving Shepard's gut three decks down.

"We need your help here, EDI," she called as the platform stopped a good fifty or so metres up.

"I'm working as fast as I can, Shepard. Linking Legion in."

Shepard scarcely had time to breathe before the AI reported back that Legion and the chia had joined her efforts, but the specifics flew past her as she focused on the line of platforms soaring toward them.

"Holy fuck," Jack whispered. She glanced at Giran. "You said twelve thousand protheans lived on ships like this?"

"I did," Giran answered, the prothean's voice solid and determined. "They'll finally know the peace of the antecessors' embrace."

"Jesus fuck, I'm more worried about meeting my ancestors," the biotic said, going from whisper to holler in under five seconds. "There's no fucking way to keep them off us out here, Shepard."

Shepard nodded, but gripped Jack's shoulder, trying to ease her down. They needed to focus and stay cool. "EDI, get us down on the ground."

Three of the collector platforms swooped in, butting up against theirs on three sides. "Wrex, Mordin take the right. Giran, Jack, Dasik the center. Nihlus, you and I'll cover the left." Her people ran to take duck down behind the three-sided console, bullets and powers flying even before they reached cover.

"Use throw, concussive shot, and shockwave," Jack yelled over the splendid symphony of firearms. "Teach these fuckers to fly!" Crowing at the top of her lungs, the young biotic sent three collectors flying into the air and right over the side of their platforms.

The collectors didn't scream as they fell, that fact more unsettling the massive husk amalgams lumbering across the platforms, their one husk-arm firing heavy cryo blasts.

Shepard focused her shots on the two visible heads, waiting for the cannon to fire before popping up to respawn her drone and fire off a heat sink's worth of rounds. "EDI! What's happening?" She launched Droney on the right and tossed her defense turret out left.
"Beta and Charlie squads are taking fire. Controlling collector attack corridors," the AI reported. "We are simultaneously fighting firewalls and brute force attacks."

Five more platforms swooped in, latching onto the first three, their occupants—about eight collectors per—weaving around knee wall defenses and computer consoles. Luckily, that gave her people the opportunity to pick them off a few at a time.

"Come on, EDI," Shepard called. "You've got this."

"Shepard, large unit coming in at your two."

Shepard popped up out of cover to empty a clip in the giant just in time to take a cryo blast from its cannon. She staggered back, the cold searing through her armour even as it locked up its joints. Damn. She bit through her bottom lip, staggering to keep her balance. Nihlus reached up and dragged her down behind the cover. The thirty seconds or so it took for her armour to thaw felt like fifteen years.

"Move to outside cover," Nihlus shouted. "They're coming in from behind." He hooked a hand under Shepard's armpit and hauled her up. "Jack stay with Shepard, keep the frontside clear."

"Four more platforms coming in from behind!" Wrex hollered, his tone one of celebration rather than worry. He slapped Nihlus's shoulder, nearly dropping the Spectre to the deck. "You ready for this, princess?" His taunts and war cries shattered and melted the sheets of ice wrapped around all of Shepard's internal organs.

She laughed and slapped a heat sink into her weapon. "Bring them on, Uncle Urdnot. Bring them on. Team pyjak locked and loaded."

EDI broke through Nihlus's protest that he needed a designation that didn't include a tiara. "I have partial control of collector systems, Shepard. All berthed flying platforms are locked down. Powering down deployed platforms."

"Glory hallelujah, Sister EDI. You glow with the Enkindlers' very own light." Shepard let out massive hoot as the incoming platforms slewed off course, dumping their collector troops into the void as they dropped like stones to the docking bay floor.

"Captain?" Shepard imagined the pawn-shaped hologram cocking its head off to one side.

Laughing, she translated: God, she loved EDI's so-very-literal soul. "I was just saying thank you, EDI. I knew you'd come through." She let out a long breath, grinning at Wrex as he slapped a huge hand down on her shoulder. "Ready for the next round?"

"Always." He laughed, his slow, dangerous chuckle warming Shepard to the tips of her toes. He slapped Jack's back, knocking her into the console. "You ready, varren runt?"

"Fuck off, old man." Despite her words, Jack grinned ear to ear at her new nickname. "You punch like a salarian."

EDI interrupted the escalation halfway through 'I've got the bigger shotgun'. "Returning your platform to deck level away from collector forces. Plotting your path to the extraction point," the AI replied matter-of-factly, as if she performed impossible feats to save her people five times a day.

Shepard sobered. "Wait, EDI, how are the other teams doing? Who's taking the most fire?" She paced to the edge of the platform, staring down at the deck beneath them.
"General Vakarian's squad is currently under heavy fire," the AI responded. "Most of the doors in his current location are sealed open by built up organic matter, and I'm unable to channel the collectors away from his team."

Shepard jumped down before the platform landed, fear for Garrus insisting she move … get to him as fast as possible. Wrex landed at her four, Nihlus at her six. "Plot us a path to link up with his squad." The map before the captain's eyes changed, the arrow helping ease her terror. She had a clear path to his location and a solid team behind her. Time to move.

The squad sprinted, EDI managing to keep the collectors locked away from their route, leaving just stragglers that they killed on the move, the squad racing through without injury. Despite EDI controlling the doors—opening to allow them through then closing them behind—an oppressive pressure began to build at the back of Shepard's skull.

It didn't feel like the spiders … more like a band of drying rawhide wrapped around her head than the greasy hand shoving itself between her brain and skull. She looked to Wrex, the krogan moving with smooth, coordinated strength. When his stare met and locked onto hers, she knew he felt it as well. Trap inception: traps within traps. Invisible jaws closed around them.

"EDI, are you certain that you've got control over these doors?" The corridor narrowed, the ceiling dropping until it became little more than a tunnel through the muck. Shepard ducked down, wishing she could pull a collar up to avoid the resin from dripping onto the back of her neck. Despite the armour, she could swear she felt it trickling over her skin.

"Shepard?"

"I feel like we're being funneled into a trap." As she said the words, Shepard stopped, facing two closed doors. Her skin pricked along the length of her spine. Damn it, she shouldn't have said anything.

"Alpha," Garrus's voice shouted in her ear over the roar of gunfire, "we're pinned down in a large, open area. Two of those massive flying things and ground units. Need assist."

Shepard's heart leaped into her throat, then performed a double twist, one and a half somersaults into the pike position, ending with a fantastic belly flop into her guts.

*Way to jinx the entire production, Janey.*

"Alpha responding. Hold on." She jogged to the doors, her stare fixed on the map. "Two minutes out and we'll be hitting them from the back side, so check your targets." She switched channels. "Charlie, sitrep."

"Only a few smaller units, Captain, moving well," Miranda replied. "We'll achieve our objective in approximately five minutes. Will contact you again at that point."

"Overriding firewall 84692," EDI said even as Shepard acknowledged Miranda. "Take the door to your right." The AI's unruffled calm felt like a warm hand on the back of Shepard's neck, slowing her frantic pulse. Garrus had a hell of a team with him, and in two minutes her people would have his back.

The door slid open, revealing a small space, glass walls on the far side, and a handful of knee walls arranged so as to make her wonder what the space could have been used for. The placement almost seemed artistic. Distant gunfire pulled Shepard forward to a ramp leading down.

"The grand gallery," Giran said, running her fingers over the wall just inside the door as she ran...
past. "It used to be a place of great beauty, the spiritual center of the vessel. Vast gardens and art filled this entire section of the ship."

"And it makes one hell of a strategic muster location if fighting off a boarding party," Nihlus added, jogging past Shepard to take point. "Collectors ahead," he called, leading them down, then racing for the nearest cover.

Shepard ran ahead, ducking behind a short wall to Nihlus's right as collectors flew in from above, landing at the far end of the room. She launched Droney and threw her turret out then opened fire. Slowly, the team moved up, taking out the two dozen or so collectors that came at them.

When the last one went down, Shepard jumped up, thighs trembling from spending so much time crouched. Oh well, she'd have to work out their weakness on the move. The corridor led around a corner, then dropped down a good four metres.

"This is where they'll hit us hardest," Wrex muttered before jumping down. "They'll seal up the doors on the far end, and we've got nowhere to go."

Shepard crouched, pressing her hand to the ground, then eased herself over the edge. She didn't dare do anything crazy, even a jump she could have done with her eyes closed before she died. The sound of gunfire grew louder but not as loud as she expected.

Darting ahead, she took cover behind a low railing overlooking a vast chamber, Garrus's team pinned down behind two of the knee walls near a door on the far side. Shepard opened a channel to Garrus, adding in her squad. "Emergency comms only. General, we're at your twelve, hitting their back side."

Using hand signals, she sent Nihlus and the two protheans down the sloping ramp and into cover in the back corner. The enemy wouldn't be able to circle around and get behind them. She kept Mordin with her, and sent her berserks down to the floor, taking position where they could support Garrus with their biotics, keeping the ground units back.

"Mordin, we're going to focus on the large units." The rhythm and pulse of battle settled her heart and mind back where they belonged, focusing everything into crystal clarity. Garrus's people held their ground, Martin fighting like a god in his frame armour.

"Hit it with incinerate and then follow up with cryo, see if you can't break down its armour." Even as he muttered his reply about her theory being a sound one, she reached back and shrugged the collector heavy particle beam into her hand. She waited until the closest monster shot its particle beams before she stood and fired, aiming the weapon's beam straight into its eyes. When the beams shut down, she continued firing, counting off the reset time. Her HUD showed the fucking thing taking massive damage, but it just didn't go down. It slammed into the ground five metres away from Garrus, Vincent, and Samara and let out a shockwave that threw them out of cover.

Shepard froze for a half-second when the thing opened its mouth, revealing the dozen or so husk heads inside. They shrieked, a baleful mockery of a choir, the sound throwing out a wave of sound and energy. Garrus scrambled up, counter-intuitively running away from their cover. Snatching at one of Samara's arms, he dragged her after him.

Garrus!

Bending, she picked up a huge chunk of the floor scale and heaved it at the gigantic unit. "Over here, you fucker!" Shepard shouted. It turned, strafing the entire room … all her people's positions but for Nihlus's with its twin particle beams. Wrex went down behind cover, cursing up a storm,
"Uncle Urdnot, you okay over there?" she shouted, sending in Droney and her turret then checking how much bang she had left in the particle cannon. "Samara, Wrex, Jack, Kaidan, tear down that thing's barriers." She checked her HUD, the rest of the battle playing out behind her eyes. "Once we've got it back down to armour, hit it with everything incendiary you've got. Martin, keep the other one busy with your rocket launcher."

"Don't get close to them," Garrus added, his voice breathy and laced with pain. "That triggers the choir attack."

"You heard the general. Stay clear, and bring them down fast." The biotics working in concert brought the monster's shield down in under five seconds. She sent a blast of incinerate searing into the thing's armour the second she saw the energy barrier fall, then opened fire. The thing exploded into flame, then crashed into a burning pile of slag.

"Excellent work," Shepard hollered. "Next. Same deal." Even as she spoke, the second closed in on Garrus's team, twenty collectors racing in to flank it, covering its recharge cycle. "Baby Jesus H Christ in a handbag, where are they all coming from? EDI, are the doors locked down behind the general's squad?"

"They are, Shepard. The far door on the right leads to a control room. Registering Chief Williams's team behind it." The AI's unflappable tone that had registered as calming minutes before now felt like a cheese grater slicing up Shepard's every last nerve.

"Can you patch me through to the chief, EDI?" Shepard stood, taking fire as she assessed the battlefield. The phalanx of collector legionaries with their praetorian at the head closing in on Garrus faster than her people could whittle them down.

"We've got to pull that thing toward you, Wrex," she called, sidestepping down the curved bit of railing. "Garrus, Martin … when we pull it this way, get your people over on the back wall. We're away from the doors, but at least they can't flank—"

"We've got husks crawling up from below on two sides!" Nihlus hollered. "Garrus, get out of there before you're cut off."

Shepard swapped the particle beam for Ingrid and jumped up, striding down the ramp putting down collectors with headshots. Headshot, reload. Headshot, reload. The gun pounded out the familiar rhythm, but no matter how many she took down, more replaced them from below.

Twelve thousand? That was what Giran said. The thirteen of them couldn't take out twelve thousand. A few of their guns hadn't been changed to the heat sink model, but even so, if a thousand enemy came at them, they'd be dead long before they took down that many.

"Samara's down!" Martin called out. In an act of stupidly reckless heroism, the kid scooped the asari into his arms and raced toward Nihlus's position, knocking husks on their asses on his way through. He leaped the last five metres and crouched to set her down.

"Collector foot units are falling." Shepard moved in behind a massive pillar, giving herself a better angle at the collectors. If they could just thin them out, Garrus could get the rest of the team across the floor.

"Going in," Mordin called. "Stay in cover."

Right, like she was going to hide behind the pillar while Mr. Crazy-Pants ran off on some salarian
suicide mission.

The salarian raced in behind the massive unit, his tall but willowy body making it appear all the more humungus by comparison. He shoved a package—it looked like his belt pouches—up inside one of its leg joints.

"Tactical error," he said, as calm as marshmallows on hot chocolate. Running along beside it as it spun, he yanked on his arm, trying to free it from the machine's inner workings.

"Mordin, get out of there." Bringing Ingrid's scope to her eye, Shepard ran out of cover, peppering its head with constant shots. Too bad machines didn't get pissed off.

One second, she raced for Mordin, the next … the hand of God swept her off the deck plating like someone brushing lint from their shoulder. She felt the vague sense of spinning, then blackness crashed in on her. Fighting against it, clawing at the ground with her fingertips, she screamed into a clenched jaw as the pads peeled off, refusing to pass out. That big bastard hadn't gone down; she couldn't pass out until her people were safe back aboard the *Ypres*.

Heaving herself up onto her hands and knees she crawled for the nearest cover, a long section of half-wall protecting Nihlus and the protheans. "Wrex? Are you up?" she called, flipping up her visor to take a useless swipe at the blood flowing across her vision. A pile of unmoving frame armour lay slumped against the far wall, the white of Mordin's armour just visible behind it. The kid must have grabbed the salarian, shielding him from the blast. She flipped the visor down and breathed in. "Martin?"

A thin groan answered her. "Alive, but I can't move; armour's motor is fucked. Mordin's unconscious but breathing."

"Mordin's explosion took out Wrex and Jack," Nihlus called over the roar of his shotgun. "Husks have Javik and Alenko down, but Giran's got them covered for now, and Alenko is still throwing his biotics around."

"Fuck." Things were going the way of Virmire. At this point they'd be lucky to get anyone out. "How long was I out?" Reaching behind her she felt only the Mattock and empty particle gun. Shrugging the Mattock into her hands, she checked her heat sinks. Fifteen. Fuck! Fuck the damned heat sinks and the bastards who came up with them.

"Two minutes at most," Nihlus replied between firing his shotgun at anything approaching Garrus's position. "We need reinforcements; the bastards are getting up from below on both sides. Lawson, where's your team?"

Ignoring his conversation with Miranda, Shepard glanced over at Nihlus … the bodies sprawled behind him vague, almost hazy, as if the part of her that could see them didn't want to. Miranda was too far away, and the dead had nothing to offer, the injured even less, their heatsinks already used and gone. Swiping the blood from her eyes again—damn, now she remembered why she hated helmets—she turned back to face the praetorian. Wait … smoking pieces of the thing spread across the floor … Mordin's charge worked.

"Another fucking praetorian? How many of these fucking things do they have?" Giving her head a hard, quick shake she shoved herself up, using the cover to keep herself balanced. "Do you see Ingrid anywhere?" Damn, she needed that gun. As soon as she got back to Archangel, her Mattock was getting a downgrade.

"Who's the asshole who decided on the damned heatsink upgrade?" she muttered under her breath.
A grumbling sort of chuckle from Nihlus told her that he heard her. She chuffed, the sound weak even for her usual. "Cover me. There are a few within scrambling range. When I get back to cover, I'll draw its fire while you help Garrus."

Nihlus cussed, the word's vulgarity telling her everything she needed to know about his opinion of her plan. Still, he breathed out, the sound so resolute, it lit the path before her. "I'll draw it's particle beam. The second it goes out, run. You've got—"

"Ten seconds before it recharges," she finished, annoyance crackling through the ten kilo weights dragging from every muscle. "I know. Don't get yourself killed. I really want that wedding." She held one hand behind her, his talons closing around her fingers.

The solid, light abrasion of Nihlus's mouth nuzzled the back of her knuckles, just the faintest brush of hope, and then he pulled away, his boots shuffling across the thick layer of corruption crusted on the deck panels. Pressing her back to the wall, she slid along its length to the end. Glancing out, she plotted her course from heatsink to heatsink, combing her memory she tried to picture the room as they'd fought their way in.

She braced to move, flipped her fucking visor up to swipe at the river of blood running into her eyes. Why hadn't she used medigel? Why did she need to breathe? Halfway to the control, her fingers stalled, the chamber dimming suddenly. Was she passing out? What the in the name of the Enkind—

(A-N: Well, not quite two chapters a week, but this guy turned into a good-sized monster. Hope you enjoy. I wrote it while going through the mission in game. It's the first time I've done that and it was a lot of fun to have the spaces in front of me for designing the battles. :D *hugs and floofy kittens with pink bean toes*)
"They are not yet strong. They are precious and must be protected, but they are coming." The asari's reply formed a warm, spectral caress, felt rather than heard. "Lead them wisely."

"Who?" Shepard's demand rang in multicoloured flares, fireworks exploding before reaching their full flight. "Who's coming? Amalair? Shiala? For fuck's sake, someone just give me a straight answer and hang up the damned call."

**Verro:** Husband, male bond-mate.

**82 Days ASR**

What in the name of the fucking Enkindlers glowing ass cheeks? The darkness deepened behind her eyes; the arctic winter sun setting at noon. Rachni song sparkled on the frosty wind, shivering along the lingering gleam.

Damn it, Amalair! I'm in the middle of a fucking battle. My people are taking fire, and you're really getting to be a pain in the ass with all your metaphysical bullshit. What is it this time?

Bright, musical laughter, chimes on the breeze, trickled over her, gentle fingers trying to pry her from battle and worry. Carried by the rachni queen's laughter, another song appeared and twined through Shepard's thoughts: soft greens and lavender.

Shooting a scowl through the ethereal peace and beauty, she tried to shatter it but failed. Damn it! She didn't have time for a freakin' rachni conference call. "Shiala? Is that you?"

"They are not yet strong. They are precious and must be protected, but they are coming." The asari's reply formed a warm, spectral caress, felt rather than heard. "Lead them wisely."

"Who?" Shepard's demand rang in multicoloured flares, fireworks exploding before reaching their full flight. "Who's coming? Amalair? Shiala? For fuck's sake, someone just give me a straight answer and hang up the damned call."

Instead of a reply, gold threads appeared in the black, weaving between the members of her team, gilt auras wrapping around each. The glittering cocoons shone brighter around those still up and fighting, others less so … two as pale as the night before the new moon. Before she could move to them, a brilliant, crimson flash sparked in the distance, closing quickly. It … no, they … they were aboard the collector vessel, the single light branching into fifteen fiery points as they closed on her position. Rachni? Sweet baby Jesus … rachni? Really?

"Amalair?" She pushed away the new light, gripping tight to each gold thread. "I don't have time to decipher your Sergeant Pepper's Magical Mystery Tour. My people … ."

"They are precious, guard them well," Shiala's voice repeated above Amalair's chiming joy.

Hearing that joy, Shepard understood. For the first time in even the queen's memory, the rachni
charged into battle as allies rather than enemies. Unable to put how honoured she felt into words, she replied with the brilliant, metallic blue and thundering, choral notes her heart associated with brotherhood.

The gold threads solidified, pushing back the darkness. Her people appeared, all still in their positions: Martin acting as cover for Mordin, Nihlus staring at her, expecting her to move.

Heat sinks. Right.

"Shepard," Cortez called in her ear, "we have an unknown ship approaching the collector ship's hangar."

"It's okay, LT. It's the rachni coming in to assist," she called as she scrambled for the first sink. "Don't fire on them." She scooped up the sink and sprinted for the next, still in a crouch. The image of a blue and gold armoured frog-like critter scuttling from sink to sink flashed through her mind.

Oh, for frick's sake. That's how the rachni see me? Not exactly flattering.

She scuttled to the next heat sink, then the next, cheeks burning inside her helmet.

Note to self: give the rachni some gloriously heroic image to associate with me, regardless of the dignity of what I'm doing.

Rachni warriors raced down the upper level, along the balcony where she'd entered, taking positions in cover. Damn … how was she to command them well when she had almost no idea of their skills? Beating her way through a flood on them on Noveria amounted to the extent of her experience, and she'd spent most of that fight blind thanks to rabid-worker-splat. What had the warriors come at them with? Acid … right, acid that cut through shields and barriers.

"Rachni, stay in cover," she shouted, then realized that she didn't need to. They'd hear her orders inside her head, probably before she thought of them. And, indeed, the eight hunkered down out of the praetorian's fire and began pelting it with bursts of acid that sailed right through its barriers, the metal beneath melting into slag. Plucking up the rest of the heat sinks in a rush, Shepard raced toward Garrus's cover.

"Change of plans." She ducked behind the wall next to Garrus and opened her omnitool to scan her verro: exhaustion, shock, a few holes he hadn't started the day with, but hanging in there. Except, his blood pressure was falling … that meant a bleed. "Alpha and Charlie focus on the smaller units. Once the rachni get the big guy down, they'll block the routes from below with webbing. Give them cover."

"Arate!" Dasik's shout sliced through the room, yanking Shepard's attention from the big picture. Crimson and gold armour raced across the floor, disappearing into the brilliant blue of the praetorian's particle beams. Giran stumbled backwards, reeling from a hearty shove, nearly falling right back into the beam.

Shepard dashed out from behind her knee wall, covering the distance in three strides. Looping an arm around Giran's waist, she dragged the prothean behind Nihlus's cover.

"—at," Nihlus replied. "The big one is going down fast, prepare to cover the rachni."

"Mordin, are you up?" Shepard hollered, all her fear and nerves and frustration igniting into a plan, as bright gold as the rachni queen's webs. Her people … those gilt webs tied them together, and they would get them through everything and anything. She just needed to get back to Garrus's cover.
"Mobile, Shepard," the salarian replied as Shepard dove across the space, dodging from cover to cover. "Can see to wounded."

Shepard sucked in a couple of quick, burning breaths. "Excellent. EDI, as soon as the sides of this room are sealed, get the door open so Mordin can see to Ashley's squad." Shepard tossed her remaining gun hands the sinks, watching how easily they caught them to judge their condition. Jack fumbled but didn't drop hers. Good. She glanced toward Kaidan's position a little further down Garrus's cover. "Sparky, what's your status?"

"So can I," Vincent called from Nihlus's location.

The praetorian went down in a storm of sparks, the acid devouring its internal workings. Before Shepard could do more than let out a relieved sigh, seven tiny rachni workers raced out, spinning webs over the open sections of floor at a mind-boggling speed.

"Opening left hand door," EDI called. "Still registering three life signs within."

"Excellent, EDI. How complete is your control of the computers?" Shepard stood, and hurried over, reaching down to help Kaidan to his feet. "Come on, Sparky."

"Control is ninety-five percent, Shepard," the AI replied. "Collectors on the main terminals still fighting to break through my firewalls. They're holding. Deployment of the high intensity radiation weapon will negate resistance."

"Hey!" The bellow came from Jack. "Won't that kill everyone? There could be thousands of people still alive in this fucking ship. Innocent people!"

"The only human life signs registering on my scans are within your perimeter," EDI replied. "All humans in pods are deceased."

"Killed when collector vessel lost power," Mordin confirmed, helping Martin out of his smashed frame.

Jack hobbled over to the salarian. "But you said that mist inside those fucking pods was proof they were being kept alive." She grabbed Martin, hauling the kid to his feet with Mordin's help. "You said they were being kept alive."

"Jack, it's okay," Shepard said, trying to calm the biotic down before she hurt herself or someone else. "This ship will give us the answers we need to make sure this doesn't happen to anyone else." Looking up, she met Jack's stare, gut untying only once the young woman's fury cooled to determination. "Even though we can't save these people, we'll avenge them and save anyone else from meeting their fate. Okay?"

"No one else goes through this fucking nightmare," Tossing Shepard a determined nod dripping with 'fuck you' attitude, the young biotic accepted Martin's help to limp over and protect the rachni workers. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

"Roger that." Shepard wrapped her arm around Kaidan's waist and helped him to the side door. Eight bodies lay on the deck plating, five of them still wearing helmets. Faint mist drifted from the nose and mouth of the three without, proving Shepard's hypothesis that the ship maintained some atmosphere.
"Here, I'll get Chief Williams's team ready to move, you take care of getting us out of here." Nihlus stepped into Kaidan's other side, relieving her of the LT's weight.

"Cortez, I need you and EDI to find us an exit route. It needs to give both Charlie and our squad the clearest, shortest shot to the shuttle." She poised over the controls for her omnitool, mind racing as she tried to find them a fast, secure way off the damned ship.

"Captain!" Cortez broke through, his voice tight, control wrapped around a core of fear, "the collector vessel just started to power up. We've got twenty minutes before it's at full power."

Shepard spun and strode back into the large chamber, a sharp demand crawling up her throat: how had EDI lost control over the vessel? She stopped part way, crouching next to Garrus, a growing navy stain shining against his metallic blue armour. "You okay, Callor?" She checked his medigel. Out. Fuck a doodle doo. She pulled two injectables out of her pack, stabbing them through his underarmour between plates. "Talk to me, big guy."

"I'll be fine." The slur in his voice tossed her heart up into her throat as it told her quite the opposite ... that he'd lost more blood than showed. He reached up and touched the side of her helmet for a second before the hand dropped back into his lap. She caught his talons in hers and squeezed them, trying to keep her worry hidden. His usually strong, adroit digits trembled even as he reassured her, "I just ... rest a minute."

"Okay, General, let's get you a little help." She looked up, searching for Nihlus, finding him crouched next to Ashley, the chief sitting up her back to the wall. "Nihlus, Garrus is going to need help to get to the shuttle."

A low, harsh chuckle answered her, but not from Nihlus. Grunt left Wrex propped up against the bulkhead, the clan chief bellowing that he just needed food. Large, swaggering steps crossed the floor to stop at Shepard's side, one of Grunt's hands landing on the top of her helmet. "I'll take care of him, Shepard."

She squeezed Garrus's hand. "Hang in there, verro. We're going to have to run like the lightning's chasing us." She slapped Grunt's shoulder. "Take care him, Grunt. Carry him if you have to; just ignore the arguing and get him out of here safely."

Without waiting for the krogan to supply a reassurance she didn't need, Shepard turned her attention to getting her people off the collector vessel post haste. The war effort needed the ship, their scientists needed to take apart the collector technology, so whether or not all three squads made it to the shuttle, the radiation pulse needed to go off. That was priority one, but damn it, she wouldn't let the collectors steal the future Nihlus dreamed for the three of them.

First things first. "EDI, I want all the open areas mapped in red on my HUD. You'll be controlling the doors, the rachni will make sure the collectors can't flank us from above or below again. Cortez, get that shuttle as close as possible."

Shepard opened a channel to Miranda, cutting off the pilot's reply. "Charlie, report in."

"Pulse device is placed and primed, Captain." Miranda hesitated. "We're making our way toward your position, anticipating new extraction route and rendezvous. We've met minimal resistance, so I estimate seven minutes. We'll meet you to help with the wounded, Captain. Over."

That helped settle Shepard's racing heart. They could use the extra hands. Reaching out to Giran, she helped the prothean arate to her feet, trying to judge the extent of her wounds. "Good to hear." As the words came out, she glanced back at Garrus, her husband still half-lying on the floor. "But,
if we're not at the rendezvous in time for the *Ypres* to escape before the collectors reaches full power, leave without us and trigger the pulse."

"Shepar—"

"Just do it, Miranda. No argument. Shepard, out." The words dropped, crashing into that corrupted place with a finality that shut the operative up, and turned every eye to stare at her.

"Guess we'd better get fucking moving," Jack said, striding toward Mordin with purpose despite her limp. "Doc, my leg." When the salarian turned his omnitool on her and pronounced her fit enough, the young biotic demanded a painkiller then set right into work, cursing up a storm and strong-arming the wounded onto their feet. "It's move or die, so get your asses up. I'm not dying in this shithole for you fucking lot."

The rachni workers completed their work, blocking the openings to the lower decks. Instead of moving to the exit, they hurried over to Wrex. Even as the krogan complained and took badly aimed swipes at them, the little fellows wove a tight web around Wrex's leg and arms, binding the broken bones. As soon as they finished their work, the clan chief heaved himself up off the floor, his grumbling taking on a note of approval as the webbing supported him.

"Sixteen minutes," Cortez said, his countdown dropping, a boulder in the ship's eerie silence. And it was silent, the absence of the echoing screams and cries ringing in Shepard's ears.

She ground her teeth and shoved it aside. A quick glance over her shoulder reassured Shepard that her people had the wounded in order. The rachni moved between people, silently binding limbs, making lattice-type crutches, and constructing a basket for Samara, which two warrior rachni suspended between them. Damn, if they weren't going to prove indispensable. How long ago would the reapers have been exterminated if the races befriended the rachni instead of trying to wipe them out?

"Everyone ready to evacuate?" she hollered, just to kill the hush. "Nihlus take point, start them moving. I'll walk drag." Shepard crouched next to Dasik, scanning the prothean. Dead. Damn. Another set of armour lay jumbled beneath Dasik's corpse. Javik! Fuck! She scanned the prothean commander. Had he too charged in to save Giran?

"I need help over here," she called, discovering faint lifesigns. Glancing up when Kaidan's feet landed beside her, she saw that Vincent had taken care of Sparky's mobility. Shepard rolled Dasik's body off Javik's, giving Kaidan room to help.

"He's in bad shape, Shepard," Kaidan said, shaking his head. "We …"

"I can't … " Ashley's voice broke through the channel. "I can't leave them." The futile, and time consuming, sound of scuffling grabbed Shepard by the scruff and yanked her the handful of metres into the side room where Ash battled Mordin and Nihlus. The second she saw Shepard, the chief's panicked stare locked on. "Captain, we can't leave them. They're my people, and I dragged them here … thought I could capture the vessel." Rallying her strength, she shoved Mordin aside and climbed hand over hand up Nihlus's arm. "They're my responsibility."

Shepard ran over and slung an arm around Ashley's back. Looking over the chief's shoulder, Shepard gave Mordin a nod. "We're taking too damned long. Come on, people." Damn it. Damn it. "Leave the dead." She turned from Ashley's distraught protests. "Just grab the wounded and run. Jack … Kaidan, if you can hold a barrier around us, so much the better."

"On it." Jack closed her eyes and lifted her hands, a dome of shimmering blue appearing around
those already gathered at the door.

"I can help hold it," Sparky replied, leaning heavily on Vincent, "but I'll need someone to be my legs."

Vincent just chuckled as he lifted Kaidan, cradling the LT in his beefy arms. "Not even a challenge, Alenko."

Shepard's distraction worked, Mordin able to slip in and give Ashley a heavy dose of painkillers. The chief sagged in Shepard's arms, sedated. Mordin and Nihlus helped Shepard lift the larger woman into a fireman's carry before turning to help the rest of the wounded.

"All right, people ... run for it. Rachni workers, stay safe. Rachni warriors, keep behind our gun hands and inside our barriers, but feel free to shoot at anything that comes along." Shepard boosted Ash a little further up her shoulders, then bolted for the door. She didn't know if she could keep up carrying the chief's weight, but she needed to try. "EDI, open the doors right before we get there, and close them right behind."

"Understood."

"Everyone, out front. I'll bring up drag." Shepard herded them out the door, racing after them, no more easy jogs or time to examine curiosities or horrors. All that mattered to Shepard was balancing Ash's weight and keeping air flowing in and out of her lungs. The rachni workers scuttled over Jack and Kaidan's barrier, weaving a web of physical protection over the energy.

_Amalair, if I ever bark at you for singing your riddles, remind me of this moment. You've saved our asses._

Rainbow coloured laughter tickled like soda bubbles along Shepard's entire nervous system, and for a moment, Ashley and her heavy armour didn't hang quite so heavy. The effect lasted a tragically short span before a wildfire ignited between muscle fibers in Shepard's thighs. The flames consumed the last drops of fuel rattling around at the bottom of her tank, then started sucking fumes. The muscles that burned began to tremble, the fire leaving the fibres ashen.

"Twelve minutes," Cortez reported. "The shuttle is as close as I can get it." The marker blinked on Shepard's HUD.

"We're moving faster than I expected," she said, wheezing between the words. One step, then the next, her feet beginning to slap the floor, hard and flat-footed. Between EDI on the doors and the rachni workers sealing all the open spaces with their webbing, they moved through relatively unmolested. When a few husks broke through, dashing up a long ramp, the rachni took them down before Shepard could balance Ash and aim her side arm.

_Damn, if this isn't the way to attack an enemy ship._

By the time she caught sight of the shuttle just outside a door, the portal half-closed and stuck in collector gunk, Shepard couldn't think further ahead than the next step. Legs weighing a hundred kilos each, she hauled them forward, pain searing up through the nerves every time her foot hit the ground.

A brilliant flare of light yanked her stare from the promising hull of their shuttle to a suspended, glowing form of a collector ... one of the bigger ones. Magma seemed to burst through cracks in the creature's carapace like the swarm on the Cerberus base. Damn, she didn't even have the faintest clue what to expect from a possessed collector. Of course, not knowing what to expect...
sometimes presented opportunities.

_All right, Harbinger, you bastard, bring it._

Which, of course he did, a roaring ball of fire incinerating the thin air around it as it spun toward them.

"Really? Fireballs?" Tossing aside the litany of foul words that tumbled into her mouth in favour of air, Shepard launched Drony and dug in, forcing her legs to move faster.

"Jesus fuck!" Jack shouted as the thing impacted the barrier, all the rachni webbing protecting the outside bursting into flame before crumbling.

Despite wanting to scream out a mate for Jack's swear, Shepard raced through her menu of more responsible options. Almost all of her gun hands carried wounded. "Rachni … stay inside the barrier, but do what you can to take that bastard down." Thanking the sweet baby Jesus that their acid ignored barriers, she focused back on the shuttle, still so impossibly distant.

A door opened on the right hand wall, Miranda's team racing through. In the lead, Thane paused for half a breath before turning and running toward them. Ducking a little as he broke through the barrier, the drell wove through the running wounded, setting pace beside Shepard.

"Give her to me," he ordered, his rolling, deep voice making it sound like the sweetest of pillow talk, a tender request she couldn't possibly refuse.

What? Dear God, she must have jumped all the way past exhausted, diving through loopy to splash down in hallucinating. The moment Thane lifted Ashley from Shepard's shoulders, the captain snatched her side arm from her hip and strode through the barrier.

_Yes! Gun in hand, drone and turret launched, make way for hurricane Shepard! I'll show you fireballs, bastard._

Across the chamber, Harbinger-not-Harbinger strode out of a small squad of collectors and shot off what looked like a ball of black flame torn straight out of hell. Shepard tucked her shoulder and rolled under it, staggering to her feet with all the grace of a drunken elcor.

As one of the rachni globs of acid struck the glowing collector, the thing surrendered to the fire within, crumbling to ash that drifted away on the air currents. Before Shepard could celebrate another collector lifted into the air, their skin breaking open with the force of the reaper's possession.

"Take out the regular collectors first!" she called. Glancing back, she saw that the rachni warriors had handed their burdens off to Miranda's team and followed her through the barrier, arranged in a phalanx with her at its head.

"Fuck, yeah! Where in the fuck are the photographers from Badass Weekly when you need them?" Jack crowed, running up to take the captain's four.

Shepard glanced over her raised arm between shots to toss a wide grin at the biotic. "Right? I'll never look more badass." Her steps came stronger, steadying as she angled toward the shuttle, keeping her impromptu squad between the collectors and the wounded.

"Unless you kill a reaper with your bare hands and stand on top of its two-kilometre-tall corpse," Nihlus agreed, stepping in at her eight.
"In the Rosie the Riveter pose," Shepard said, a pointed laugh lancing the air as she imagined her tiny speck self trying to look cool, lost in the mass of a reaper.

"Seven minutes until collector vessel reaches full power," EDI announced, completely killing the moment.

Still, looking far more badass than any of them could reasonably hope to look again, they cut through the remaining collectors, then focused on Harbinger. Soaking up the fire from all eleven of them, the possessed avatar disappeared into ash before Shepard could get more than two shots off.

"Make room on the shuttle!" Shepard called, turning and running for the hatch. "It's going to be a tight fit!" However, instead of heading for the shuttle, the rachni scurried to a door and through. Shepard hesitated, one foot on the shuttle floor, her hand gripping the frame. "Signal when you're clear!" They didn't respond, but she assumed Amalair or Shiala would send her something.

She hopped up, the last in, and pulled the hatch closed. "We're all in. Let's get the hell out of here."

Miranda grabbed Shepard's wrist as the captain shuffled past, her entire being focused on where Garrus slumped in a corner seat. The operative pressed the remote trigger for the radiation device into Shepard's palm. Nodding, she accepted it and the possible burden of killing their rachni allies.

_Forgive me if I haven't led them as you expected._

Sitting on the floor, Shepard tucked her knees up into her chest and closed her fingers around Garrus's talons. No call came from Shiala when EDI called out a minute and then thirty seconds. Offering another mental apology to Amalair, Shepard entered the command, sending a blast of flesh melting radiation searing through the collector vessel.

"Radiation pulse successful, Shepard," EDI reported. The AI's usual, unflappable calm had the unusual effect of making Shepard want to slap her hologram. "No life signs registering aboard the collector vessel."

"Thank you, EDI," Shepard said, finally unclenching her jaw and letting out a long breath. She sagged into the space between Garrus's leg and the bulkhead, scooting over a bit to make room for Nihlus. "Anything from the rachni ship? Any sign?"

"That's a negative, Captain," Cortez said, "but we registered a blue shift just prior to the pulse. Unless a stealth ship was hiding in the system, it must have been the rachni."

"EDI, when you can get a clear scan, check for the rachni vessel." Looking up, she met Garrus's unsteady gaze. Worry pressed a heavy hand down onto her heart, making it hard to breathe: he looked shocky. She stripped off his gauntlets to rub his hands and wrists. "You hanging in there, big guy?"

He nodded, even as his eyes sagged closed, his head tipping to one side. "Remember when I said I wanted us to spend some intimate time together?"

Shepard chuckled and squeezed his hand, her fingertips sliding under his glove to make sure his skin remained warm. Sleepiness, slurred speech, lack of coordination, and clammy hide topped the list of turian shock symptoms. Four for four. Not good.

Damn. "What?" She turned up the heater in his armour then pressed her palm against his cheek. "Sitting crushed together in the corner of the shuttle wasn't what you had planned?"

"Docking with the _Ypres_, Captain," Miranda called back from the cockpit, cutting off Garrus's
reply. "The doctors have several stretchers prepared and waiting."

Shepard held her breath until the shuttle hard docked on the Ypres, the metallic thump travelling through the deck plating and into her bones. Scrambling to her feet, careful not to step on anyone, she stretched, then reached to help Garrus up.

"Come on, verro, let's get some blood flowing through those veins." Shepard wrapped one of his arms around her shoulders while Nihlus hooked a hand under his other arm. Together, they lifted, both grunting when the general couldn't muster enough strength to stand.

"Well," Shepard said between groans, "we now have proof-positive that turians aren't stuffed with feathers."

Nihlus glanced around the cowl of Garrus's armour. "Hauling me off the floor in the head didn't amount to proof?" His mandibles flicked as he shook his head, his outward cheer made into a lie by the worry in his eyes.

"Maybe turians get lighter as they age?" Shepard shot back. She grinned, holding up her end of the joke as they helped Garrus take slow steps toward the hatch. Luckily, both for her verro and her shaking legs, Chakwas met them at the hatch, stretcher set up along the lip.

"Can you sit on the side, love?" she asked, guiding him into a turn. He hesitated, swaying and unsteady, his arm gripping her against his side hard enough that a low subvocal was all she needed to understand his fear. "Karin, can you and Grunt hold the stretcher tight against the side so it doesn't move?"

"Of course, Shepard," Chakwas replied, waving Grunt over to help.

Garrus looked down into Shepard's eyes, a low susurrous of gratitude and love whispering through his second larynx.

She pressed her lips together in a tight smile and tipped her head at the gurney. "Come on, husband, let's get you upstairs." After helping him sit, she left Nihlus to balance him while she lifted his legs. Only a few, clotting drops of blood dripped from his boot … where the hell had all of it gone?

Orange light reflected off his armour as Chakwas scanned him. "Internal bleeding. We need to get him straight to surgery." She stepped between Shepard and the gurney. "I'll call you when he's in recovery, Captain."

Despite already suspecting the diagnosis, Shepard's heart skipped two beats. She ran alongside for a couple of steps, clinging to Garrus's talons, releasing him at the elevator. "I'll get the geth sorted to take the collector ship to Ploba and be there when the doctors get you all patched up," she promised, holding his stare. "I love you, General." She followed the words with a wink and backed away from the door.

"I'll have him right as rain in an hour, Captain," Chakwas assured her. "I'll keep you apprised."

"Thanks, Doc." Shepard watched the elevator close then turned to see to her people. They'd captured themselves a collector vessel. She needed to make sure they kept it.

(A-N: Luckily for the fanfic and not at all for me ... my copy of Andromeda doesn't show up until the 30th, at least. I'm still focusing on FI for now, so sorry if you're reading the fics I'm not updating, but so much of my blood has gone into this puppy. :) I'll get back to the others in April. Hugs and assorted sweets. Thanks as always for your support.)
A soft chime of gratitude and peace breezed through Shepard's thoughts as she stepped over the elevator's threshold. Despite the four different colours of blood staining her clothing, the captain smiled. Eyes closing, she turned—blind—and pressed the control to take her up to the crew deck. "Thank you," she said, her reply lilting, almost singing. "I've been worried about them. And thank you for the help. I would have lost more than three people if it hadn't been for your soldiers and workers."

A song composed of five perfect notes answered her: a harmony of hope and sorrow. And then Amalair left Shepard alone in her mind once more. Well, as alone as she got inside her standing-room-only skull. Letting out a long sigh of relief, she celebrated the illusory privacy. Most people didn't appreciate the simple peace of having one's thoughts to one's self.

When the elevator door opened, Shepard strode into her cabin. She needed to shower, change and head back down. As much as she feared the consequences, she knew the time had come to tell Miranda what happened to her control chip. Surely the operative suspected after having tried the omnitool a couple of times.

Nihlus sat at her computer, the vid screen/model case showing most of the Archangel inner circle. She stepped behind him, hiding a slow caress down the back of his neck as she nodded to the others.

"Captain Shepard," Nyreen Kandros said, drawing Shepard's attention, "do you have an update on General Vakarian's condition?"

Shepard smiled and nodded. "He came out of his surgery very well," she told them, the news mostly for Nihlus. "When the praetorian—"
"Praetorian?" Nyreen asked, cutting Shepard off. The tarin's mandibles dropped, confusion in her gold stare.

"Sorry, the big, flying constructs with all the husk heads inside their mouths." Shepard's cheeks heated as she dismissed the moment with a single-shoulder shrug. "I call them praetorians in my head, because they seem to be the collectors' elite guard. Anyway, when it threw him back, it tore an artery weakened by the surgeries conducted during his abduction. Dr. Chakwas has done a complete scan of his circulatory system and bulked up any remaining weak spots. He'll be back kicking ass in a couple of days."

She patted Nihlus's shoulder. "I'm going to wash off my hours of nursing duty then head down to talk to Miranda. Did you get a chance to talk to Giran?"

Nihlus let out a soft breath, turning the chair a little to look up into her eyes. "Yes, she's feeling Dasik's loss, but she's determined to push on and help the rest of the protheans."

"Excellent. I'll talk to her when she gets out of medbay." Glancing up at the vid screen, she nodded to the others and patted his shoulder again. She turned away, the motion taking a massive effort as her dilan's gravity insisted that she kiss him before leaving his orbit. Just outside the bathroom door, his pull finally released her, and she ducked inside.

Shepard really didn't know how to feel about Javik's death. He'd passed from the massive burns inflicted by the praetorian's particle beams even before they reached the Ypres. Despite working on him the entire way, Kaidan and Mordin never managed to get him stabilized. Being brutally honest, his death made things a lot less complicated. Of course, her relief just made her feel like the absolute shittiest person in the universe.

She turned on the shower. "I'll do the best I can for your people. I hope you find the peace in death you couldn't find in life." Setting that aside, she shed her bloody clothes. The battle went on.

Twenty minutes later, smelling of shampoo and feeling less like a abattoir floor, Shepard stepped up to Miranda's door. Hesitating with her hand halfway to the control, she focused on her breathing. As much as she loved poking the operative, Miranda's apparent lack of ethical boundaries scared the crap out of her, and who knew what Cerberus might do to try to regain control over her without the chip.

A bracing breath still burning in her nose, she reached up and hit the door chime. "It's Shepard," she said, simply. As much as she could demand entry, she needed to establish a working relationship with the woman. Keeping the enemy close had never been more imperative.

The door opened, Miranda standing a half-metre away. The operative stared at her, body rigid, chin lifted. "What do you need?"

"To talk to you." Shepard let out a breath close to sigh volume, but didn't relax, refusing to soften.

After a solid minute, Miranda nodded—a single jerk of her head—and spun on her heel, marching back to her desk like a drill sergeant who'd taken a pole up the ass before being pushed into wet cement.

"You've stopped by medbay to get checked out?" Shepard asked, stepping over the threshold very much as she'd walk into the den of a feral varren. She followed Miranda over to the desk, but remained standing when the operative circled behind it and sat down.

Organizing herself into professional disinterest, Miranda nodded. "I'm in perfect health, Captain."
My team took a minimum of fire, and came through without injury." She swallowed hard, her jaw flexing. "Your squad and General Vakarian's effectively cleared the way for us." The woman's jaw tightened until Shepard began to worry Miranda might just shatter her teeth. "Rachni, Shepard?"

Shepard's turn to clench her teeth. She spun, crossing the cabin to the portal and stared out at the darkness. "The rachni are not what we've been led to believe by history. I know and trust the queen." Another deep, noisy breath that she sharpened into a not-sigh. "But I didn't come to justify my cooperation with the rachni."

A precise, military turn and Shepard pinned the Cerberus operative with a stare sharper than the not-sigh. "I came to let you in on my plan for the immediate future. To lead the missions up to and during the war, I need a ship able to carry the army and support structure I need."

Miranda stood, all angles chiseled from a block of ice. "You're going to leave the Ypres completely?"

"Yes." Shepard cut the air with a bladed hand. "If you decide to remain associated with Archangel through me, you'll take over as her captain, and you'll make Ashley Williams your XO." She strode to the desk, hoping she presented at least a facade of resolution. "All the alien team members and Jack will come with me." Shrugging, she leaned forward, bracing her fingertips against the top of the desk. "They wouldn't trust you or Cerberus, anyway."

"And the collectors?" the operative demanded, a glimpse of fury escaping before she corralled it all back behind that bulge in her jaw. "The vessel we just captured?"

Finally seeing a flash of the real woman, Shepard sighed and sat in the chair across the desk. Nodding toward the operative's seat, she held out a hand. "Please, sit. This is progress. I doubted you had anything real written on those perfect synapses behind the perfect mask. Anger … " A crooked smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "… anger I can work with."

Another flash and Miranda nodded, just a single tip of her head, as she perched on the edge of her chair. The air between them crackled, ozone hanging heavy enough to make Shepard wonder if the biotic intended to put her down. Oh well, it wasn't like Miranda could hope to take out the captain with so many of Shepard's people aboard.

She pushed on. "The collector vessel is being taken to Ploba where Legion and the chia will examine it on every level, searching for weaknesses." Leaning back, she draped her lower leg over her opposite knee, the pose awkward … why the hell did people sit like that? Anyway …. "Of particular interest is the collector IFF. If we're going to pass through the Omega IV relay to take the fight to them, we're going to need to arrive there without setting off any immediate alarms or defenses."

"You're giving dangerous technology to uncertain and untrustworthy aliens?" Miranda jumped up, her turn to lean into the desk, her fingertips holding her up. "Cerberus could—"

"Take the collector tech and sure, maybe do something useful with it to get us to their base, but also turn it against the rest of the races once your organization doesn't need them as cannon fodder." Shepard raised an eyebrow as Miranda straightened and opened her omnitool. "Your control chip won't help you, just like it hasn't the last several times you've tried to use it."

Miranda froze, the truth revealed in the moment before she swallowed. Damn, she needed to work on hiding her tells. "What do you mean?" Kudos for the recovery; the operative asked the question with all her usual ice-cliffs in place.
"We found and burned out your control chip weeks ago," Shepard said, chipping each word out of those frozen walls. "Chakwas and Mordin discovered it after the Archangel staff meeting. You used it so often you triggered several minor hemorrhages in my brain." Tipping her head forward and to the side, she tapped two fingers against the small scar. "They fried it."

Sinking back into her chair, Miranda appeared to melt, but only for a moment. "You could have died."

Eyebrows raised, Shepard nodded. "Better dead than being a slave to Cerberus. Anyway, it won't work. I've been a free agent since Palaven." Relaxing into the chair, she crossed her arms, but loose, not defensive. "And here I am, fighting the fight against the collectors and reapers, and it's not a fight I intend to give up before the reapers are dead. I just can't fight according to Cerberus's rules of engagement."

"So, you're giving me the Ypres?" Doubt leaped across the desk.

"Yes, and asking you to work with Archangel, but cooperation is up to you." Shepard stood. "Look at Cerberus with open eyes, Miranda. I know you have reason to be as loyal to the Illusive Man as you are, and if you want to just return to him, fine." Calling the meeting closed with a sharp nod, Shepard turned toward the door.

"Captain!" Shepard heard Miranda's chair roll hard enough that the backs of her legs must have given it quite a shove. "I … " Again the clicking swallow. "I need to speak to you."

Something in the operative's tone—a plaintiff undertow—caught Shepard in its current, tugging her back around. Real pain showed through where the ice in Miranda's stare thinned. Nodding, Shepard returned to the chair and sat, elbows on her knees, hands clasped in front of her.

"I … " Miranda sat. "I find myself in the uncomfortable and undesirable position of having to ask for your help." Miranda's lips pressed together hard enough to let Shepard know she hadn't hidden her shock very well.

"Of course, what can I do?" That time, when Shepard relaxed back into the chair, she sat naturally, ankle over her knee, arms loosely crossed. "If it's within my power, I'll do what I can."

"I've never told you my history as I patently dislike discussing personal matters. I believe they don't belong in the workplace," Miranda said, leaning forward, her arms resting across her desk blotter: Shepard hadn't even suspected people still used them. A slight, staccato cough pulled the captain's attention back where it belonged. "However, this is important."

She cleared her throat, one quiet cough before continuing, "I'm genetically enhanced. My father created me in order to provide his business empire with the perfect scion." Her fingers flipped at her face, the perfect ebony hair draped across her forehead. "My biotics, my intelligence, physical prowess … even my looks were all designed to give me an edge."

Shepard shifted a little, not wanting to interrupt, but feeling Miranda's need for a moment of space. Maybe she could help … guide the topic forward. "That's a hell of a burden to live with, especially as a kid."

Miranda nodded. "I wasn't a daughter, I was an asset … and a means of foiling mortality." She shook her head, replacing ice with iron. "As soon as I was old enough and brave enough, I ran away and joined Cerberus."

Scowling, Shepard pushed out of her chair, suddenly needing space herself. What the hell? They'd
done nothing but grapple—at loggerheads with one another—from the moment Shepard awoke, and now Miranda just leaped off the high horse to sit down in Shepard's confessional? It didn't make any sense. Maybe the change formed a backup plan in case the control chip failed? A 'we can't just zap our agenda into her brain so we need to soften her up with emotional connections'?

"I can't blame you for being suspicious," Miranda said, right on cue. "We haven't exactly seen eye to eye since you woke up."

Shepard turned to meet the understatement of the month, if not the entire year. She studied the operative's body language, seeing at least a layer or two of deception. "You still haven't gotten to what you need me to do."

Miranda stepped around her desk and leaned back against the edge. "I wasn't the first 'daughter' my father created; I was merely the first one he kept."

Rage sparkled, eating away at the edges of her suspicion. "The first one he kept? What happened to the others?" The second after she asked the question, she shrugged it off. She didn't need to know. "No, forget that … just tell me what you want me to do."

Miranda paced to the bed in the back of the cabin a couple of times. "When I ran away, I took my twin sister with me." She looked down for a half second, a moment of thaw before her stare returned to Shepard's, as chill as ever. "I couldn't leave her. Cerberus helped me place her with a family where my father couldn't find her."

Looking down, Shepard nodded. She walked the couple of metres to the chair, the puzzle running circles in her head. Miranda spoke the truth, but truth to fit an agenda. "And now you believe your father knows where she is?" Looking up, Shepard shrugged. "Why not just have Cerberus relocate her?"

Miranda returned to her chair, primly aligning herself into her usual pose: legs crossed at the knee, hands folded in her lap. "The Illusive Man has arranged a reason for the family to relocate, but I want to supervise their transfer personally. My father knows she's on Illium, and he'll stop at nothing to get her back."

Shepard sat, letting out a sigh at long last. "Do you have reason to suspect that your father has someone inside Cerberus? After all, it's protected you. Why not her?" Leaning forward, she clasped her hands and looked up at the operative from under heavily-lidded eyes. "Tell me this isn't just a ploy to appeal to my warm, squishy heart."

Miranda solidified, a fortress to repel any of Shepard's attempts to breach the walls of trust. "I'm not asking for you to trust me or accompany me. I merely need a few days to travel to Illium and oversee—"

"How do you know Cerberus and your father aren't in bed together?" Shepard repeated, slicing at Miranda's stubborn solo attitude with an edge on every word. "It sounds like something that is right down his alley."

Miranda's expression turned 'just chomped down on a lime, peel and all'. "My father was once a staunch supporter. He donated billions before I ran away."

"Yeah, that's how you knew about it, right?" Shepard took a noisy breath in through her nose, letting it out in a resigned puff. "So, basically, you don't know if someone in Cerberus broke your confidence." Three skin cells around Miranda's eyes softened. Right.
"So, since your father knows her family is being moved, how and in what numbers will he go after her?"

Miranda's lips tightened around the truth. "I have a contact on Illium who's been keeping an eye on Oriana for me. She will meet me on Illium the day before the move."

Shepard leaned back, unclenching the teeth that she hadn't realized she ground together until her jaw began to ache. "Okay, we'll drop the ship off on Ploba, sort our people around, then head for Illium." Shaking her head to tell Miranda not to bother arguing, Shepard crossed her arms. "So, start spilling. I want to know everything, starting at the top."

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84 Days ASR

Shepard walked into Mordin's lab, stretching a little as she rolled her shoulder, still feeling the day before's battle all the way to the marrow of her bones. "I'm too old for all this," she grumbled and then yawned, hard and wide enough that her jaw clicked.

"Still only at one-fifth of average human lifespan," Mordin replied without looking up from his computer.

Shepard snort-chuffed in the back of her throat. "It's not the years, Doc." She took a deep breath and walked over to stand opposite him. "So, what was so urgent I had to get up here before we reach Ploba?" She sniffed the air then glanced around. Something felt different in the space. Usually the air in the lab felt thin and cool and light. Right then, it weighed down on her like a steam bath or an ugly secret.

Oh … She dropped her head, letting it hang from her shoulders for a second … for fuck's sake. What now?

"Shepard." The salarian wrung his hands a little as he paced behind his lab table. "Called you here for a reason."

"Right, as I said." She nodded and leaned a hip against the biobed behind her, fairly certain that he was speaking from a script in his head. That did not bode well. "So, what can I do for you?" She raised an eyebrow and cocked her head a little when he just kept pacing.

"Must make … confession. No … explanation." He cleared his throat, thin fingers curled in front of his mouth. "Scientific curiosity, sometimes … " A musical sort of humming sound drifted from his throat. "... overwhelming." Shrugging, he looked at her with a hopeful sort of expression on his face.

Shepard nodded. They were never going to get to a point. So much waffling meant one hell of a confession … no, explanation. She felt like calling engineering to make sure that Mordin hadn't accidentally set the drive to explode and kill them all. Swallowing the dread, she said, "Right. Overwhelming, I understand. The universe is rife with mysteries begging to be solved."

"Yes!" He lunged toward her. "Exactly!" When she jumped back and cracked her spine on the metal frame of the bed, he composed himself. "Apologies."

"Okay, so what particular scientific mystery begging to be solved brings us here today? And why do I need to know about it?" Hopefully pointed questions could get them moving along.

Mordin settled into a steady, three-sided pacing route from his desk to the research terminal then to the hall door and back to his desk. "During tests to prove your identity, Dr. Chakwas harvested egg
to test the age of the cell."

Shepard nodded. "Okay, I recall that. Getting a little concerned now, but go ahead."

"Took cell when Chakwas finished testing. Conducted own tests. Digging deeper. Curiosity overcame me. Test plasticity of human genome. Expand possibilities. Perhaps discover genetic modifications useful in war against Reapers." He stared into her eyes for a few moments, his expression both keen and hopeful, then began to pace once more. "Used genetic material from other patient in hospital at time. Spliced turian genetic traits to human male sperm cell. Fertilized egg."

If it hadn't been for the biobed at her back, Shepard would have fallen straight to the floor. As it was, she smashed the bone in her wrist scrambling for a grip. "Wait … you're telling me that you took my egg and fertilized it with some sort of genetic experiment?" She licked her lips, trying to assuage the sudden desert-like conditions in her mouth. "There are so many ways this is messed up … God, I can't even think of them all. So … first thing … who or what are the other donors?"

"Human male unknown … simply test sample donated to genetics bank. Turian genetic material taken from General Vakarian." He looked at her with an expression of such blythe … hope that, for a moment, she almost told him not to worry about it. Then reality reasserted itself.


She focused on Mordin, wishing he'd just bloody well stand still. "And Garrus knows nothing about this, either?"

"Salarian parentage follows matriarchal lines. Thought it best to inform you of fetus's existence first." He shrugged as if it all made sense and the entire galaxy hadn't just turned inside out and upside down.

"Fetus?" Shepard yelped, then winced as the screech bounced back at her …. Yeah, they heard that back on Earth. Fetus opened a whole different kettle of pickled fish. Fetus meant baby rather than a couple of cells. "Sweet baby Jesus, fetus," she whispered, leaning toward him, the ground disappearing under her feet. Had Javik pushed her out an airlock? No, Javik died. What happened to all the air? She tugged at her collar and gasped. Thirty seconds dragged by before she managed to say, "This experiment of yours created a viable life? Blessed Enkindlers … are you saying I'm a mother?"

Mordin thought for a moment, then nodded. "Exactly, although designation as mother your decision. Experiment complete, fetal development stable through twelfth week, wanted to consult with you prior to termination."

"Termination? Twelfth week? Holy fucking Enkindler shit, Mordin … that's a baby." Shepard stumbled a couple of steps toward the door, then realized she couldn't actually run away from that particular madness and stopped. "Hold up. Someone else needs to be here for this conversation."

When Mordin tried to talk, Shepard shushed him, her pointed finger rife with horrific possibilities if he spoke again. "Ah!" she snapped when he opened his mouth. "Not another sound."

Shepard reached up to her radio. "Garrus … um … Mordin and I need to see you in the genetics lab. Can you come up … no, down here for a few minutes?" She winced. No way the conversation would last only a few minutes, not once Garrus began to panic, adding more panic to her panic.

You bloody well should be panicking. You can't be a parent right now, Janey. You're just a six-
year-old with a gun hiding inside the body of an adult, how are you supposed to take care of a baby?

Dear God, a baby.

"Shepard? Are you all right?" Garrus called, his tone heavy with concern. "You sound like you've seen a spirit."

"Sort of the complete opposite, and actually, you'd better clear a few hours of your schedule and haul ass down here." She hesitated again. It didn't just affect them. Theirs was a family of three, and there existed a pretty decent chance that Nihlus might not panic. They could use someone capable of keeping his cool. "And bring Nihlus. Lucy's got some 'splainin' to do."

"Lucy?" She heard him moving things around on her desk. "I don't understand. Who's Lucy?"

She shook that off, her hand flapping at the air ... trying to clear the confusion away, maybe. "Human thing … don't worry about it, just grab Nihlus and get down here."

"I'm already on my way." She heard heavy, limping footsteps both in her comms and on the deck overhead. "I'll be down there in five."

"Good. Shepard, out." Shepard closed the channel then returned to the biobed. She needed to sit. She lowered the thing as far as she could, then hopped up. Once settled, she turned her overwhelmed, numb confusion—and the very real feeling of violation—on the salarian.

"How could you take something so intimately mine and just … do something like this without talking to me first?" she asked. "Don't you see how fucked up this is?"

He shrugged. "No. Cell frozen, due to be disposed of in stasis cleanout. Did not expect anything to come of experiment, perhaps better radiation protection for humans. Turians have excellent resistance to ambient radiation, poor tolerance for environmental changes due to lack of subcutaneous fat layers. Possibilities for genetic therapies promising."

Shepard blinked at him, sort of maybe, almost, kinda understanding why he'd considered her frozen—due to be disposed of—egg, fair game. Still, he just … how could she face the horrendous truth about the coming war … hell, the collectors … and decide whether to raise a child? A hundred other questions muscled their way up her throat, but she knew Garrus would want to know most of those answers as well, so she trapped them behind her teeth. Bracing against the edge of the bed, she stared at Mordin, shock spinning her around from terror to joy to horror to fury and back to terror.

As soon as she heard her torini's boots on the deck plating, she jumped up and turned toward the door to the CIC. When it opened, she strode over to them, taking their hands, a drowning woman snatching at life preservers in grey, stormy seas. The strength and warmth in their grip washed over her, a wave of such absolute relief that her heart dropped from just below her uvula back down where it belonged.

"What is it?" Garrus asked, his hand reaching up to cup her face. "You look terrified." Turning on Mordin, fury and accusation made him seem twice as large as usual. "What have you done?" He pushed past Shepard, taking a lunging stride at Mordin, only halting when his mate tugged back on his hand.

"Come sit with me and stay calm, please?" Shepard drew them both toward the biobed, but only forced Garrus to sit down next to her. "Mordin has some explaining to do." While the salarian
scientist brought them up to speed, Shepard's stare stayed riveted to Garrus's profile, her husband becoming more turian by the second: back stiffening, neck arching, mandibles high and tight to his mouth. Holding her breath, she waited for Mordin's words to register and the other shoe to drop. Nihlus … she pretty much knew how Nihlus would react, but Garrus … she didn't have a single clue how he'd react to the news.

Mordin finished with twelve weeks along, going to terminate the experiment, eliciting a soft rumble from Nihlus, and from Garrus …

… silence.

Huh, the one reaction she hadn't really expected. After nearly five minutes, Garrus tugged his hand free and stood, pacing to the door and back. "Forget that you used our genetic material without asking," he said at last. "We can beat that discussion to death after I stop wanting to snap the other horn off your head." Looking back at Shepard, Garrus bobbed his head in a small, helpless shrug.

She understood. Mordin's news still had her reeling. She needed something to hold tight to, but instead, Garrus broke loose of the shore and started dragging her out to sea.

"Can we see a scan?" Nihlus asked, his question providing an anchor at last. Right. A scan … they needed all the information they could muster. Information led to an informed plan.

Her heart slowed. Right. Yes! Just another problem … another insanely complicated battlefield to navigate. Battlefields were her wheelhouse. Break down the enemy positions, size up the terrain, and then set up a coherent, by-the-numbers plan of attack. Just another battlefield, and the more intel she could get, the better a plan she'd build. Nihlus's voice whispered in her head about plans all going to hell in under a minute once battle began. She stomped it into thought-muck. A plan would get her through. Yes. She took a long, deep breath. Just another battlefield.

Sure, a battlefield that could completely destroy the life of an innocent child when its mother proved to be better at killing things than nurturing them. Not to mention the lack of safety. Where would your child live? Omega? Stay with babysitters or grandparents ninety percent of the time? What happens if you do something stupid and get your child killed? It would rip the rest of your family apart. Sure, Janey. Just another battlefield. Way to lie to yourself.

"How advanced is a twelve week old human?" Nihlus asked, cutting off Shepard's freak out before it ramped up to eleventy billion. "Turian offspring are halfway to gestation at twelve weeks … far too late to terminate, except in emergency cases."

"Human fetal viability eighty percent at twenty weeks, fifty percent at eighteen weeks," Mordin supplied, earning a ferocious growl of subvocals from Garrus. "Putting scan on monitor."

Shepard gasped as the child—and it was a child, not the random blob of cells she'd been imagining—appeared on the monitor above Mordin's desk. Her hands leaped up to her mouth as she whispered, "Holy blessed sweet baby Enkindler Jesus."

Nihlus strode over and sat at Shepard's side, his arm wrapping around her waist to pull her in. She melted into his warmth, grateful for the shelter and calm. "So we know what the medical community would say, haksaya kubenar. What do you say?"

"I just …." The words tumbled out, but then she saw the flutter on the screen and bit them off. "Is that her heartbeat?" She slid off the side of the biobed, enraptured by the image of the tiny person Mordin had created out of her and Garrus.
"Yes. Strong heartbeat, development excellent." Mordin nodded, making his usual little self-congratulatory clucking sound. "Fetus adapting extremely well to alien genetic material."

"Izzy," Shepard whispered, something deep inside her tethering itself to that tiny life. "Look at her nose. Sweet Enkindlers, she has your nose, Garrus." She grinned, her heart racing … sure, she remained terrified, but something about that little, curled up person seemed to tell her that everything would work out okay in the end. She lifted her hand, her fingertips brushing through the image, as if she could take hold of the hand that stretched out. "And look at those fingers and toes. She's …"

"Perfect." Strong arms encircled her, lifting her off the ground even as they pulled her from Nihlus's side. Wrapping her arms around Garrus's neck, she pressed her brow to her verro's, a gentle smile tugging at her lips. It felt right, the four of them.

"She's not going anywhere, is she, Callor?" she whispered, pressing her cheek to his.

He shook his head, a soft subvocal the only answer to her question for nearly two minutes before Garrus cleared his throat. "Is it okay that I still want to pop his horn off even though he created that beautiful little miracle?"

A happy sob tangled around her chuckle as it broke free. "Completely. I'll help." Tightening her grip with one arm, she reached out with the other, grabbing Nihlus's cowl and pulling him over into the embrace. "You okay with this, cikabeknai?" she asked, grinning because she could see the answer alight on his face, his joy so brilliant that he appeared to glow.

Nihlus kissed her and nodded. "I couldn't be more okay with it. She's absolutely perfect."

"Should I go ahead with the termination?" Mordin asked.

When all three spun to face him, even Shepard managed to find some growl to go behind the words they hollered in concert. "Don't you dare, Mordin!"

When Shepard saw the salarian's grin, she countered with a mock scowl. "You're a …." She shook her head. "Nope, can't use that language in front of my daughter.

Nihlus tugged her back into the group hug. "Wait until our maris see this. They're going to lose their minds. Five seconds after we tell them and show them the scan, the yarn-knotting utensils will come out. We're going to have pueriti blankets and clothes piling up everywhere."

Garrus chuckled and nuzzled her ear. "We're never going to get Izzy off Omega, are we?"

Shepard held both her torini, pressing their cheeks against hers. "Probably not, but just look at her. We'll find a way to make it work for her."
Izzy. Garrus made his way to the shuttle newly returned from Ploba. A baby. The entire concept just boggled his mind. A few hours before, he'd been a newlywed and a general about to engage in the most terrifying war imaginable. Now he was twenty-four weeks from being a father. The grin spread until his mandibles ached.

**Derra** - Wife / female bondmate

**Verro** - Husband / male bondmate

**Amimahir** - Grandchild

**Patrem** - Father (Familiar form **Pari** equivalent to dad)

**Matrula** - Mother (Familiar form **Mari** equivalent to mom)

**Tarc** - Vulgar expletive equivalent to shit.

**Fragrutis** - A cactus native to Palaven that grows short, tough, and spiny but succulent leaves. The leaves are crushed, chopped and used as a spice in turian cooking. Very hot and spicy.

**Acuta Eus**: a chip made from a combination of grains and spices. Turian doritos.

**84 Days ASR**

Over the next nine hours, Garrus and his family—he fought a wide, stupid grin, trying to maintain a professional facade he strode across the shuttle bay—his family spent most of their time talking to Miranda, Chakwas, and Mordin. Once he, his **derra**, and Nihlus explained what Mordin had told them, the entire team met in the genetics lab to organize everything Izzy needed to enter the world happy and healthy.

Izzy. Garrus made his way to the shuttle newly returned from Ploba. A baby. The entire concept just boggled his mind. A few hours before, he'd been a newlywed and a general about to engage in the most terrifying war imaginable. Now he was twenty-four weeks from being a father. The grin spread until his mandibles ached. No doubt panic would return, and he'd face more than any one person's share of doubts about his fitness to raise another life. But for those moments, his daughter's care settled, he allowed that image and its tiny fluttering heartbeat to fill him to the brim and over.

Less than three months before, he'd been certain of a life spent alone, mourning the lost half of his spirit. Now, a previously undiscovered section of his heart began to beat.

"Hey! Callor! Are you coming?" his **kahri's** voice called from the other end of the shuttle bay.

Garrus looked up, focusing on her as he wrestled his stupid grin under control. It returned as soon as he saw the excitement on her face. "I think you're more excited about this special platform than
EDI is."

Shepard smiled, wagging her head a little, telling him his guess hit the mark. "She's going to get to experience being a part of a crew … a family. I think it's the beginning, just like with Legion and the geth. Just like us." She held out her hand, waiting for him to catch up and close his talons around it. Her fingers trembled ever so slightly.

"Yesterday, it felt like we were just tumbling downhill, gaining speed as we crashed toward the end of everything. But today … these geth change everything. EDI could change everything. Imagine, Garrus … AI and organics living in peace." She spread the arm not attached to his hand as if to embrace the entire galaxy. "Evolution? Chuck that outdated idea out the window. We'll all be limitless given time and compassionate cooperation."

Each of her words spurred his heart to pump harder, sending hot blood and hope surging through his body. Emotions foamed above the current as it raced to power muscles that begged to move, to get to work already and make her vision reality. Where did she find all that hope—that belief in other people—especially people so very different than humanity? Even her faith in him and in Nihlus seemed completely mysterious sometimes. She trusted that at the core of every being in the galaxy lived an honourable spark, and if she could breathe enough hope into that spark, it could warm the most frozen heart and redeem the lost.

Naive? Quite possibly. Doomed to failure? Maybe, but hadn't they all just lined up to prove her right? For his part, he'd dedicate his every last breath to see her optimism bear fruit, and he knew Nihlus felt the same.

She squeezed his hand, tugging him toward the shuttle as the hatch opened. "Come on, verro, we've got a couple of deliveries to receive."

EDI's mobile unit—

When it stepped up to the edge of the hatch, then down onto the Ypres's deck plating, gleaming like a billion diamonds coalesced into bipedal form, Garrus's brain froze, the word unit all that entered his mind. But dear spirits, such a humble word didn't do it the slightest bit of justice. A mechanical and technical work of art, it transcended the geth platforms that followed it off the shuttle, one of whom carried Izzy's home for the next six months.

"Holy cats," Shepard whispered, a bright grin lighting up her face, "didn't they just outdo themselves on EDI's new ride?"

Outdo themselves, they had. While bipedal, the unit balanced and moved like an ungentira ready to pounce, unlimited potential energy and balance coiled in every joint and artificial sinew.

Knowing that Shepard didn't want to draw too much attention to the AI's new ride, Garrus looked to the phalanx of geth standing at the shuttle's threshold.

"These are all actualized platforms?" he asked Shepard, keeping his voice to a whisper, but he didn't really need to ask. The geth platforms showed individuality to an extent he hadn't seen before. One platform sported four legs and two arms, more like a keeper than a quarian, and several of the others had attached small pieces of tech in ways that looked more ornamental than strictly functional. Seeing individuality where once he'd only witnessed uniformity, amazed him anew, and not just for the geth, but for his kahri's uncanny way of figuring out what people needed.

Nodding, Shepard stopped a couple of metres away. "They all have nexus brains. Legion said that some of the juggernauts and primes grouped together in the tens of thousands, almost as if each
platform's geth formed family groups and villages before merging into one, unified mind." She released his hand and strode toward their guests.

"Welcome aboard the Ypres. Your offer of service honours us." She ushered the geth down out of the shuttle. "We've installed temporary work stations in the server room and EDI has adjusted our communication protocols so you can maintain connection with the consensus and the cynosure."

"Thank you, Captain," the four legged geth carrying Izzy's artificial womb replied with a decidedly feminine voice. "I am called Taje. I believe Dr. Solus requested that this maturation unit be installed as soon as possible?"

"Yes." Shepard waved them toward the elevator. "It'll be completely autonomous? We aren't staying aboard the Ypres much longer."

Taje nodded, making Garrus smile at the very human gesture. Turians didn't even naturally nod or shrug thanks to their cowls, but those who dealt with a lot of humans just sort of seemed to pick it up. He'd considered Legion's mimicry a strategy to set the organics at ease. Apparently not, or at least it propagated throughout the consensus.

"The maturation unit can be moved, but great care must be taken. The geth have mirrored the natural conditions inside your uterus …"

Garrus flinched as the needle on his turian 'private things stay private' metre hit the redzone. Thank the spirits he and Shepard had Nihlus to deal with most of the events and topics that fell into that category. Between them, the 'nope, too personal' list stretched for kilometres.

"... as closely as possible, but most maturation tanks are permanent installations with carefully monitored climate control. This remains an imperfect solution."

Garrus hit the elevator control, his gaze still fixed to Shepard as she leaned a hip into the metal railing and crossed her arms.

"How imperfect?" she asked, her eyes shuttered, expression pinched and closed. Her anger over Mordin's liberties remained etched into the lines around her mouth and eyes despite her calm. "It's bad enough she's had to spend her first twelve weeks inside a petri dish and a germination chamber. I want the rest of her time to be as natural and stress-free as we can manage."

"We'll do our best to ensure her comfort and wellbeing." The geth nodded and faced the door.

"Captain," Cortez came through over the intercom, his business-like tone helping clear Garrus's head, "we're ready to get underway."

"Then get us to Illium, LT." Shepard's voice echoed, all edges and corners.

"Aye, aye, ma'am."

With Izzy's concerns tabled, Garrus watched the switch in Shepard's head flick over to EDI's new platform. But right there and then, she could only fight off the questions she couldn't ask. As far as it concerned anyone on the Ypres or in Archangel, the geth were testing a prototype hybrid platform. Paying it undue attention could betray the secret, and Cerberus becoming suspicious placed the entire experiment—and EDI—in jeopardy. The engineering team on Omega had installed a quantum blue box aboard the Aurean to backup EDI in case Cerberus panicked and pulled her plug. Still, organics reacting out of fear to a free AI had caused more than one war, and as Shepard would say, once the furry mammal escaped the bag, it proved impossible to put back.
His derra's stare turned to lock onto his, a soft, but tenuous, smile curving her lips. Fear, worry, anger … so many emotions flickered in that gaze, flames consuming the pine forest green. He smiled back, one formed of resolute confidence. Once the geth finished installing Izzy's new home, and their daughter slept securely within, he'd take Shepard up to their cabin. They needed time alone to process and relax as well as they could before Illium.

While he understood the logic behind Shepard trying to bring Lawson on-side by helping the operative secure her sister, he clung to far too much rage to give a single fuck. Why Lawson should care so much for a sister she didn't know and show such callous disregard for others … well, it formed one of the greatest mysteries of humanity. Even some of the most caring among them would sacrifice fifty children to save their own.

The elevator arrived at the CIC. Garrus walked drag, content to stay back and take a support role. He and Shepard needed time to think and sort through their emotions before they could really process what the gestation chamber would mean to their daughter's development. He didn't want her to feel alone or isolated. Maybe babies so small didn't feel fear, but he'd do anything to make sure she didn't.

Shepard tucked herself in against him once the lab door closed, and Mordin swooped in to help the geth set everything up. Arm wrapped around his waist, she clung to him, trembling ever so slightly. They both needed to speak to their maris. He hoped that once they did, they'd be able to slide the panic to the back of their minds and focus on getting ready for war.

Tarc … he hated the idea of telling his mari over the comms. That sort of news needed to be shared in person. Thank the spirits Izzy and their new resident crazy salarian doctor came along when they did. His mari would get a chance to meet and spoil her animahir.

"We are prepared for you," Taje said, catching his attention.

"For me?" Shepard's arm tightened around him.

The geth waited by the end of the biobed, one arm held out in a vague, inviting gesture. "We will embed a transmitter beneath the muscles in your abdomen where the child would develop." Head flaps rose and fell in agitated waves as if causing Shepard distress, distressed Taje in return. "The transmission will be carried through the chia encasing the inner bladder so the child hears and experiences all the vibrations, sensations she would naturally."

Shepard detached from his side and strode across the genetics lab to sit on the table, gripping his hand to the last. "That's incredible." She laid back in response to Taje's hand signals. "So, she'll be able to hear my voice and heartbeat … everything?"

"At all times, yes."

Shepard latched onto him with a stare that vacillated between awe and panic.

Following his derra, Garrus stood at the head of the biobed, one hand stroking the silky strands of her hair, the other braced against the cool metal of the table: both sensations grounding him. The procedure took less than a minute; the comms device tiny, using chia to communicate to the gestation chamber.

"We need to contact Ploba tomorrow," Shepard said, looking up into Garrus's eyes, "and thank the chia for everything. They are taking a lot of hits for the cause."

"The chia involved in this project consider it a joy and a privilege to assist your child in this
manner." Taje offered a hand to help Shepard sit up. "She will be embraced in love and warmth."

The last sentence startled Garrus and snatched a slight gasp from between Shepard's lips. Geth concerning themselves with love and warmth … . To think that he'd wanted to just put a bullet through Legion's head when they'd found him on Eden Prime nearly three cycles before.

"Best if you leave lab for implantation," Mordin announced, stepping up to the table. A small, octagonal unit sat cradled in his long-fingered hands. "Will send message when finished."

Garrus felt Shepard lean in as he did, his stare glued to the blinking lights. Could that be … ?

"Is that her?" Shepard asked a half second before he could, her voice breathy.

Garrus understood, someone had sucked all the oxygen out of the air. The germination unit tugged at his talons, insisting that he reach out and make contact. When his talon pads pressed to the warm polymer case next to Shepard's, Mordin didn't react by scolding them. Instead, he made a gentle clucking sound.

"Go. Daughter fine, but concentration vital to successful transfer," the salarian said. Their fingers slid from the chamber as Mordin turned away, continuing without pause, "Hours of careful preparation and work. Will contact you when finished."

"And if anything goes wrong?" Shepard asked, sliding down off the table to press back in against Garrus's side. "You'll let us know?"

"Immediately." He placed the chamber on his desk and set to work on his computer. "Do not anticipate complications, but will keep you informed."

Moving as a unit, both Shepard and Garrus stepped up to the desk, touching the chamber again before turning to leave. Although, completely his imagination, Garrus fancied that he felt Izzy move inside, responding to their touch. Their daughter …

They needed to end the damned war fast. The idea of bringing his daughter into a galaxy cowering beneath the reapers' gaze sunk razor-sharp claws into the base of his skull. He took a heavy breath. Ending the war meant moving on the collectors and learning everything they could about the bastards in dark space.

"I want to talk to Ash," Shepard said the moment the inside lab door closed behind them. "Illium isn't a long trip, and I need this boat ready to pull its weight before I get off." She palmed the outer door control. "I'd really like to steal Joker for the *Aurean*. The *Normandy* is fleet enough to maneuver through anything on the other side of the Omega IV, but the *Aurean* is going to need talented hands on the controls."

Garrus lifted a brow plate "Not sure you'll convince him or Anderson. Geth pilots might be the best idea. They could interface directly with the ship. They have better reflexes and response times than any organic."

"Yeah, and we need them to interface with the collector tech to develop ways to burrow past the reapers' firewalls and defenses." She pressed the control to call the elevator. "We have to stop running around reacting. We need to sit down and set out a plan." Green eyes bored into his, his *derra*’s stare as intense as a mining laser. "The reapers are coming and other than the geth-chia plan to sabotage the relays, we've got nothing other than shoot at them until they blow us all up."

They stepped into the elevator, Garrus hitting the control to the crew deck. "We need to get research units on the relays. Maybe there is a historical record of how they moved on the galaxy
the last time." Facing Shepard, he leaned back against the railing, hands braced at his sides. "Maybe one of the prothean bases has records of what order the reapers hit their galaxy."

Shepard nodded, her eyes still locked onto his, but her stare had turned inward. "We have fifteen things that need to start yesterday, and we can't oversee them all. Once we get back from Illium, we'll bring together everyone we can think of for the first war council. Until then, we need them scouting resources."

"I'll contact Anderson, ask if the Normandy can take charge of Giran, Liara, and the Brysons."

Garrus pushed off the railing and paced a few steps and back. "With its small guard and advanced stealth, the Normandy can get them in and out of anywhere they need for their research."

"If they need backup, we can provide that," Shepard said, her tone one of agreement. "We'll bring in Vinctus and even Fedorian if he'll cooperate, Kirrahe and anyone else he can find, Anderson and Hackett, Giran … " She shrugged and let out a long, noisy breath. "... anyone we can think of. We'll get the Sanctuary program going, see if we can get the homeworld governments doing something to help."

The door opened, Garrus waiting for Shepard to step out into the rich, roasted meat scent of dinner that filled the crew deck. His stomach growled, the rumble and vague ache a reminder that he hadn't eaten since that morning.

"Damn, that smells good, Gardner," Shepard called as they rounded the elevator. Hungry crew filled the tables, eating with an unusual vigor. "Looks like you'll need to make sure to save me a tray."

Garrus tried to see around the cook. Maybe Gardner made the soup Nihlus loved. That tarc made eating the rest of Gardner's dextro menu worth the suffering.

Shepard glanced over her shoulder at Garrus, snatching his attention from the varren in his stomach. "This isn't going to go well," she said, a sigh following almost as an afterthought. The knowledge in her eyes—the understanding that Ashley might just be a burned bridge that needed to stay burned—dropped a boulder into his gut, but the resigned sadness that followed started a landslide.

Why would Shepard allow Ashley to hate her for something she needed to do … a solid command decision? If he'd been making the calls rather than bleeding out into his thigh, the bodies would've stayed behind. The living mattered, Ashley's guilt for taking on a mission unprepared didn't. Fury welled up in the aftermath as the rocks, mud, and trees rolled to a stop. How dare Ash betray Shepard? Heart pounding, it took every ounce of his control to shove the anger aside.

Shepard no longer needed him to be her second, the solid presence at her six. Now, she needed him to be General Vakarian, a partner, but independent, carrying his third of their joined command. He needed to step up, move out of the comfort and safety of her shade, and take a place at her side. As Shepard said … no time like the present.

Medbay stood still and silent but for the cool flow of the recycled air and the hum of the engines. Garrus allowed Shepard to enter medbay and get Ashley's attention before he followed her in. Just over the threshold, he stopped and tried to blend in with the corner. He'd almost congratulated himself at a job well done when Dr. Chakwas caught sight of him and crooked a finger at him. Oh well, tests gave him an excuse to be there if Shepard needed him.

He allowed the doctor to drag him over to a biobed and order him to lie on the cold surface. Tarc, they did not make human biobeds to be even the slightest bit comfortable for turians. Opening his
mouth to complain, he silenced his protest when Chakwas appeared next to him with an armload of pillows. Once propped up in a position that didn't amount to inquisition torment, he turned his attention to the other side of the medbay.

Shepard strode up to Ashley's bedside, her back rigid, her hands solid at her side. She looked ready to drag the chief off the bed and wrestle her. Instead, she flexed her fingers and sighed. "Hey there, Chief. How are you feeling?"

"Stupid and pissed off," the soldier said, practically spitting the word. Dark brown eyes shot small caliber bullets that Shepard just shrugged off. "Stupid for walking into that trap, pissed off because you drugged me to shut me up and then left my people to the radiation."

Shepard nodded. "Done is done, Ash. I didn't have hands to spare to carry the dead." Cocking a hip, Shepard crossed her arms, gates locking down tight over her chest … over her heart. "What I need from you now is a plan for your future."

As his derra paused for breath, Garrus felt the vacuum hanging between the two women, one left there to see if Chief Williams needed to pick over any more bones. Garrus doubted if Ash realized how much dying and being dragged back changed Shepard. Death shed most of the silliness, the carefree heart. Well, death and the reapers. Thank the spirits it hadn't killed the absolute goodness at her core … the empathy and the love.

Holding himself rigid, he waited for Ash to react. Instead, the woman just clenched her jaw and her fists. Garrus flashed an annoyed glare at Chakwas as orange light cut off his view of the other bed, but the doctor continued her scans, a slight smile of what he thought might just be satisfaction on her lips.

When the light disappeared, the chief answered with a silent glare, and Shepard nodded before saying, "If you want to stay with Cerberus, I've asked Miranda to get you clearance to act as her XO in command of the Ypres. Would that suit?"

"Why?" Ashley pushed herself up, grimacing for a second before the mask of anger fell back into place. For a moment, Garrus thought she might continue her question into an accusation, but the chief just swallowed and let the word lie.

Shepard let out a long breath and turned, leaning a hip into the side of the bed. "Because as pissed off as you are with me, you're as loyal as the day is long, Ash. I know that I can trust the good people on this ship to stay safe on your watch. I know that you haven't stayed loyal and placed yourself in as much danger as you have just to let personal feelings change that."

"And you know the war is coming," Garrus added, propping himself up on an elbow. "You know that Cerberus is going to be a huge part of one side or the other."

"It's not going to be as simple as all that." Ash shook her head. "But yeah, if the Illusive Man okays it, I'll stay with the ship. There are good people here who deserve to have someone watching out for them." She hung a heavy weight on the word 'are', her stare boring into Shepard as she did. "If those people had been Alliance, would you have left them behind?"

"Yeah, I would have." Shepard looked over at Garrus. "You done being poked and prodded?"

"He is," Chakwas answered for him, "but he's to go straight back to your quarters and into his regen frame. Those grafts need time to heal."

Grinning a little at his direct and immediate disobedience, Garrus vaulted up off the bed, gathering
Shepard in against his side on the way to the door. After his *derra* had crossed the threshold, he looked back at Ash. "I'll be back to talk when you're feeling better."

Despite her chiseled-from-stone expression, the chief's eyes softened as she nodded. "Understood, General."

"You two still okay?" Shepard asked when the door closed behind him. Before he could do more than inhale to answer, she turned to Gardner. "Send up two servings of whatever smells so good and some bread and butter. I'm starving." She glanced at Garrus, a wry grin trying to force its way past her fake stoicism. "You better order what you want, General. You aren't moving once I get you in bed."

When he saw that Gardner had, in fact, made Nihlus's soup, he ordered a large thermos and a bag of *fragruti* flavoured *acutus eus*. Hopefully he ate it before Nihlus arrived in the room and started giving him the big, sad eyes that led, inevitably, to the rest of the bag disappearing into the Spectre's too-lazy-to-go-down-and-get-his-own maw. He needed to find a flavour Nihlus didn't like.

Shepard said nothing on the ride up to their cabin, her focus directed inward, leaving Garrus's brain to stop gnawing on stolen chips and sink its teeth into the endless heaps of war prep awaiting them.

"We need to know where the reapers are," he blurted, not even aware that he intended to say it. His brain spoke the truth, though. Without any idea of how long they had, they could either end up caught unprepared or be ready so far in advance that they grew complacent and people stopped believing in the cause. "We need a way to look into dark space."

Shepard grinned and nodded. "Yeah, and a way to bring the reapers into the galaxy exactly where and when we want them." After another second, she sighed and stepped up to the door. "We need to find at least one of the other keys. The Conduit was only the greatest of the five. Four more of them are hidden out there, waiting for us to find them."

Garrus frowned, his brow plates dropping low over his eyes, options appearing and disappearing as fleeting as smoke. "They could be anywhere out there. How the hell would we find them in all of dark space, even if we could see past the galaxy's terminus? They could be anywhere, just more black against the darkness" Maybe he'd made a mistake leaving C-Sec. He chuffed, the low sound drawing a cocked eyebrow from his wife. If only ignoring the reapers could prevent the war.

The door opened, letting Shepard step out. "Guess you'll have to add that to the list of things to discuss during our big war council. Maybe the geth and chia can find a way to use the Citadel to take a look out there. It makes sense that they'd be at the other end of their main entrance." She shrugged and palmed the door control. "I feel like a complete doorknob constantly asking the geth to be our techies, but until the homeworlds, especially the quarians and salarians, stop being a pain in the ass, we don't have much choice."

"Everything would be a lot easier if the governments believed in the threat," he agreed. His next thought disappeared from his head as Shepard's arms slipped around his waist to start undoing the fasteners down the front of his tunic.

"Yes, everything would be a lot easier, but we'll worry about that in nine or ten hours." She rested her hands over his hips and turned him around, a warm, loving smile accompanying her gentle fingers as they continued down his tunic. "Right now, I'm just going to get you out of your clothes and tuck you into bed with your regen frame."

Garrus closed his eyes, breathing in the warm perfume of her, savouring the soft touch of her
fingers as they brushed over his plates, removing the heavy fabric, then the light shirt beneath. His hands migrated to her sides, resting just above her hips, talons enjoying the play of her muscles beneath them as she moved.

"Maybe we don't have to put the regen frame on right away?" he asked, tilting his voice into a wheedling slant at the end. Lifting his hands to her hair, he brushed a few stray locks around her ears. "We still haven't had a chance to spend any intimate time alone." He brushed her cheek with the backs of his talons.

Despite a sly grin curling one corner of her mouth, Shepard shook her head and moved on to his leggings. "You just about bled out because you tore a major vein, my love. Until the doctor signs off on sending your blood pressure through the roof and performing gymnastics, cuddling is the best you can hope for." And then, just because a healthy dose of cruelty lived inside the adorable, pixie frame, she laid open the waist of his leggings and pressed a heavy kiss against the seam between his plates.

When he tried to pull her up into his arms, to relieve a little of the heady ache she'd stirred, she pushed him backwards onto the bed.

"Lay down and get comfortable, Callor. Once this regen frame goes on, you'll be completely at my mercy." A sharp, evil cackle followed, her delight a gift.

She helped him settle and then attached the bulky frame to both legs, effectively immobilizing him from the waist down. Climbing up beside him, she stretched out along his side, her skin warm and bare against him.

"I thought you weren't supposed to be spiking my blood pressure," he said, wrapping his arm around her.

"I'm not doing anything, just lying here all nekkid and warm and squishy."

"Squishy is definitely not sexy." His caresses slipped lower down her side, still wandering in a lazy spiral pattern over her skin. When they reached just above her hip, she jumped and giggled, pushing him away.

"Not there, it tickles. Besides, we're supposed to be discussing our fairly imminent—dear God, we aren't ready to be parents—addition and how to tell our families."

"It tickles?" he asked, ignoring the rest of what she said. He captured both of her hands in one of his and gently raked his talons down her side, subvocals thrumming when her muscles leaped under her skin.

Cackling and cussing in equal measure, Shepard reared off the bed, fighting loose from his grip and swatting his hands away. "Yes, it tickles. Stop it." Fists on her hips, she slapped a stern frown over her laughter. "Garrus Vakarian, you stop it, now. You're still healing, and we're supposed to be talking."

He chuckled and leaned in to nuzzle her ticklish spot, her thigh so soft against the thin membrane of hide over his keel. When Shepard jumped, squirming like an eel on a dock, he stopped, eyes sparkling as they stared down at her. "That's an excellent spot to know about." After a moment, he sighed and nodded, reality and his immobility rearing their ugly heads. "Fine. Yes, we're supposed to be talking, but even though Nihlus told us what he wants, it should be a three way conversation."

Faux apologizing for his frivolous behaviour, he leaned down to kiss her navel, his hands turning their attention to kneading their way back down her sides.
"I agree Nihlus needs to be here for all parenting discussions." She sighed, eyes crackling with humour as she nodded, still solid and stern. "And you, sir, nearly bled out yesterday. You need to just lie still and let the frame do its work. No more fooling around." Despite her words, she leaned down, nuzzling into the curve of his neck before kissing her way up the sensitive hollow to just beneath his jaw. "I mean … how would we explain tearing up all of Karin's hard work? You know she'd hold you captive in medbay for days."

Garrus sighed, his even more dramatic than hers, but pressed into her kisses. "So, I'm just supposed to lie here, all helpless while you take advantage of me?" Despite the teasing, he knew she could see the raw, naked yearning beneath it. Everything about his tiny, impossible derra set loose an itch he wanted desperately to scratch even though he truly wasn't healed enough for anything rigorous.

"I was considering taking advantage of my husband's weakened state in a whole catalog of ways, but … " Shepard shook her head as he nuzzled her breasts. "... I doubt very much my beautiful Callor's body has healed as much as his libido appears to have. So just behave."

Garrus answered with a throaty rumble that lifted Shepard's skin into high, tight bumps. Releasing her hand, he answered her concern with a tender smile. "I'm sure I'll be fine." He brushed her cheek with the backs of his talons, his stare soft and warm as it rested on her face.

Shepard smiled and sat up, pushing him gently down into his pillows. "You just lay back and stay still. Let your regen frame do its work. If you think you're getting out of helping me move Miranda's sister, you're sadly mistaken." Lifting herself up onto her hands and knees, she leaned over him, staring into his eyes for a second before kissing him.

"It never crossed my mind." His whisper brushed her lips, soft puffs of warm air. "You're not going anywhere without me if I have any say in it."

She peppered kisses down his chin and neck between every word. "I ... wouldn't … let … you … if ... you … tried." Giving him a flirty grin, she closed her eyes.

He followed suit, taking a moment to sink into the safe, adventurous, lusty happiness singing along his spine and out to every nerve ending.

After a second, she whispered, "No matter what, I'll hunt you down and find you if it takes my last breath."

Garrus chuckled. "That's a little creepy, kahri."

"Yup." Without opening her eyes, she kissed her way down his belly, pausing anywhere his muscles jumped. "Ticklish, are we?" she asked when she reached the outer wing of his plates. Testing her theory, she sucked on his hide, nipping lightly. A soft shortle of pleasure greeted his grumbly little groan. "Oh, this is a good spot, isn't it?" Looking up into his face, eyes alight and teasing, she reached up, raking her fingernails down the thin curve of his waist and the hollows of his pelvis.

Garrus jumped, electric jolts of pleasure and reflex ripping through him. "Spirits, woman!" A soft, rolling keen accompanied the helpless thrust of his hips, his body arching in one long, drawn out spasm.

"Why, General Vakarian, look at you." She backed a little further away. "Helpless, little ol' ball of putty in my hands. I don't think I can be trusted with all this power." Her grin practically screamed, 'Damn, but isn't that the truth?'. 
He laughed, leaning up to settle pillows behind his head. "Are you planning to misuse that power?"

She grinned and crawled up his body to kiss him, her lips sucking gently as she pulled back, a mere hair's breadth between them. "Every single way I can, but not until after you're healed. We have a daughter to think about now, Callor. She's going to need her daddy around for a good, long time."

His lusty purrs softening to something deeper, Garrus closed the distance, his tongue teasing as he nuzzled her lips. "I think Mari will recover five cycles when we tell her."

Shepard stretched out along his side, leaning against him, her calf hooked over his closest leg. "Yeah, I think both sets of family will be over the moon." She cuddled in, tucking her head under his chin. "I'm happier about her than I could have imagined a day ago."

He rumbled his agreement, her cheek so soft against his neck. "I admit, there's a big chunk of terror mixed in with the happiness, but she's a gift, kahri. The most perfect gift."

Nihlus's signature knock banged against the door. While Shepard sat up and turned to holler at him to come in, she didn't dive for the covers like she would have even a month ago. A soft vocalization of devotion rolled from Garrus's throat. Her acceptance of karifratrus and everything it meant … her courage astounded him anew at every turn.

A soft rumble of confusion rolled from Nihlus when the torin hit the top of the stairs. "Am I interrupting?" He hesitated until Shepard flopped back down on the bed and patted the mattress behind her. "I figured with Garrus being imprisoned ….." He walked down the stairs in slow motion.

"Get in here, yah big dummy," Shepard said, her voice heavy with false annoyance. "We were just talking about Illium and telling the folks about Izzy."

Nihlus laid down behind Shepard, then leaned up on an elbow, to nuzzle her shoulder. "That is why I came up." He paused to brush his mouth plates down her arm. "I have business that will keep us on Illium for a couple of days, so I thought we should invite them to meet us there."

Something in the twinkle behind the Spectre's gaze made Garrus think he knew what Nihlus had planned, but he remained silent. Nihlus would reveal his secrets in his own time.

"The doctor can travel with Mari and Pari on the Aurean," Nihlus continued, "and then we can tell them about Izzy in person." He craned his neck to meet Shepard's gaze. "We could even bring in most of our contacts—the Aurean has more than enough room—and we could hold the war council on the way back to Omega."

Shepard rolled over on her back between them, humming softly in agreement. "Then we could do all our crew swapping on Omega and head off to our different assignments." She slipped her hand into Garrus's talons, squeezing tight. "What do you think, General? Does it sound like a plan?"

Garrus rolled over a little, twisting until he could see Nihlus over Shepard. It did sound good, mostly because it meant giving them an extra day to figure out how to break the news. Spirits, life had just begun moving so fast, that part of him worried it couldn't be real … that he still slept, living in his beautiful dreams.

Then Shepard turned to press a moist kiss against his mouth. "You okay, General?"

He nodded, his teeth clenching for a moment as his body braced for the coming fight. "Fine, and it sounds like an excellent plan. It's time to finally get this dreadnought prepped for its final run on the relay. The sooner we get this war started, the faster we can give our baby girl a safe, peaceful
galaxy to be born into."

(A-N: Love you, can't talk. Andromeda! Expect some Andromeda lore to show up in FI. That is all ...
... second PT! Woot!)
He spun, catching his assailant's wrist in his hand, twisting her arm up behind her back.

"Ow! Spurin!" Solana stomped on Nihlus's foot and broke loose. "So not all right to break your little sister's arm." She shook out the assaulted limb, then spun on her talons and marched over to Thane. "You have to take my part in this, Krios. Arm breaking crosses the line."

**Acuta Eus**: a chip made from a combination of grains and spices. Turian doritos.

**Caris** - Beloved, precious, cherished.

**Dilan** - fiancee

**Morumplacus** - Restless spirit, undead, ghoul. From ancient turian folklore.

**Inluvis** - The second gestational period in turian pregnancy. Between 8 and 16 weeks. Slang: Little one, in the sense of being young and underdeveloped.

**Obluvis** - One who is senile or absent-minded. Slang: Idiot

**Coillas (Coillasi - plural)** - The chains that hold turian bonding robes closed. After the ceremonies, they are wrapped and fastened around the wrists of both bond-mates.

**Fratrin** - Brother, but one of honour, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus.

**Filitrin** - Sister, but one of honour, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus.

**Cisera** - A non-alcoholic, foamy cider made from the juice of more than twenty varieties of edible cactus analogues.

**86 Days ASR (0900 Ypres time)**

Nihlus checked his chrono: the *Aurean* didn't arrive for another five minutes, bringing their families from Omega. He stepped out onto the balcony, leaving Thane at the threshold of the dock's security checkpoint, and closed his eyes. Taking in a long draught of the sweet, blossom-scented air, he smiled, mandibles high and wide. Spring on Illium worked truly remarkable magic on the heart. Although Nos Astra lived in a perpetual polar twilight, the asari cultivated seasons to match Thessia, and spring meant the glowing purple blossoms of the *t'jotti* trees.

As miserable as he sometimes got during his tenure on Illium, spring never failed to entrance him. He chuffed and rumbled at the poetry. Back then, it didn't take much to brighten his days.
Speaking of … It seemed the last member of his recon party hoped to catch him by surprise. He grinned and forced himself not to give away that he heard her approach.

The soft footfalls padded right up on him, stealthy but light with mischief. He stretched, arching his neck until the muscles groaned and his spine crackled like the bag of *acuta eus* he’d forgotten on the mattress the night before … at least until he rolled onto it. Shepard complained about laying on imaginary crumbs all night and after waking that morning.

Talons closed on his mandibles, pinching the mandibular nerves just hard enough to send a double jolt of pain lancing along his jaw and up into his ocular orbits. Tightening his mandibles against his face, Nihlus clenched his jaw to brace the tendons. In a lightning quick move, he pulled his arms up, and then out to push down on the hands holding him. He spun, catching his assailant's wrist in his hand, twisting her arm up behind her back.

"Ow! Spurin!" Solana stomped on Nihlus's foot and broke loose. "So not all right to break your little sister's arm." She shook out the assaulted limb, then spun on her talons and marched over to Thane. "You have to take my part in this, Krios. Arm breaking crosses the line."

The drell shrugged and leaned against the balcony railing. "It seems very active for being broken."

Sol chuffed. "I should have known better than to try to break the unbreakable male hormone brain damage solidarity wall." A dramatic sigh later, she shrugged. "So, are we going to spy on the Eclipse, or what?"

Nihlus grinned and waved an arm to beckon them into the crowds moving from the docks to the trading district. "Come on, *inluvis*, let's get this over with. We have a dinner party to get to."

Sol jogged up next to him. "So, we case out the Eclipse headquarters to see if they know anything about tomorrow's operation?" She nodded without waiting for him to answer, and dug into one of her pockets, sorting for a moment before pulling out a small package. "I got this for you, because I'm sneaky as a *morumplacus*, and Thane is, well, Thane, but you, *caris*, are as subtle as an armoured yawg."

Answering her with a glare, Nihlus took the package from her talons and ripped it open. "Very nice. Thank you." He turned the cloaking device over in his hand and whistled. "Very, very nice. Spirits, Kasumi is going to make it her life's mission to steal it from me."

Letting out an ill tempered grumble, Sol flicked her mandibles. "Oh, don't gush over it, it was supposed to be mean." The irritated flicking turned to a wide, lightning quick grin. "Besides, I needed to get you a bonding gift, didn't I?"

That time, Nihlus grumbled. When he spoke, however, he loaded his tone with a heavy dose of sincerity. He didn't want any secrets escaping before their time, not after putting so much effort into them. "I don't know what you think you've figured out in all your scheming, but keep it to yourself, Sol. Please." He clipped the cloak onto his omnitool, then balled up the package in his hands.

"Hey, don't be such an *oblvis*." She butted him in the ribs with a gentle elbow, her signature—and oddly gentle—scent of woody cleanser, gun oil, and armour cleaner overwhelming the blossoms in the wake of her movement. "I am an impenetrable wall of silence." After a moment—apparently spent proving her ability to remain silent—she butted him again. "I know you love her, and you love Garrus, but does the arrangement with the three of you make you happy enough to wrap your *coillasi* around her wrists?"

Nihlus tossed the packaging into a trashcan, then slipped an arm around his *filitrin's* shoulders. "I
didn't know happiness like this existed, Sol. I'd never been truly happy before Garrus and Jane … you and your parents. It's a revelation, particularly with the horror of the reapers hanging over us. The three of us …" He shrugged, struggling to give voice to the warm pressure in his chest. "They are where I'm meant to be."

After giving her a squeeze, he released her and stepped away, glancing back at Thane. The most talented and trained infiltrator needed to take point. For all her teasing, Sol had the right of it: when the Council needed covert, they'd called on other Spectres. "Let's see what the Eclipse are up to."

A solemn nod answered his silent question as the assassin stepped past him, making a path through the crowds without drawing the slightest amount of attention. People parted like metal filings pushed away from an invisible magnet. Nihlus could escape notice when he wanted to, but Thane's gift left the Spectre in awe.

They threaded their way across the trading floor and up the stairs into Eternity. Operative Lawson planned to meet her contact, Lanteia, at 0900 in one of the back rooms. If the Eclipse intended to eavesdrop on the meeting to confirm Lawson's game plan, the gang would need ears in the room. In turn, he intended to use their hardware to track them. He doubted they'd conduct surveillance of such a risky nature from a main base of operations, but covert investigations unraveled one thread at a time.

"I'll do a quick scan on my way to the head." Sol tossed back over her shoulder as she split off on her own vector. "Order me a large cisera. All they had stocked on the Aurean was puala juice and something called cola." She shuddered. "Humans are weird."

Nihlus grinned and headed for the bar while Thane made a slow sweep of the room under the guise of admiring the view. The assassin … retired assassin …. Nihlus frowned, a slow, curling sliver of guilt burrowing in behind his keel. He needed stop identifying Thane as an assassin. None of them—he, Garrus, and Shepard included—remained who they'd been before Archangel, and the drell retired even before he set out for Omega looking for his son. He never talked about why, but it didn't take anyone as perceptive as Garrus to see tragedy behind Thane's eyes.

Nihlus cleared his throat. Tragedy … and vengeance. He knew both far too well to miss it in another's stare.

After ordering their drinks, Nihlus turned to lean a hip against the bar, watching the drell at work for a half second before looking away to do his own. He didn't see any Eclipse uniforms in the bar, but he wouldn't have considered anyone in uniform anyway. Involved with the sort of money behind Lawson Sr., careful didn't begin to cover the amount of attention the Eclipse would put into the minutia of their op.

He winced as the music changed one thumping techno beat for a slightly different one. Reaching up, he pressed the heel of his hand against his aural canal on that side. Something in the music felt like a pin in his head, probably a security feed. His aural implants hated mixed signals.

"Your drinks are ready, handsome."

Speaking of signals …. The asari smiled, all flashing white teeth and stars twinkling in lavender eyes.

His replying nod and smile lacked even the false pleasure he once showed to be polite, suddenly longing for coillasi around his wrists. Funny how he only wanted to hear that word from one set of lips … for the rest of his life. His younger self, the one who loved Saren, would have preened. Regret burned, an aching thirst that sent his hand to his thigh. What an obluis. Of course, he'd
never admit that self-knowledge to Sol.

Drinks in hand, he crossed the room, taking a booth with a clear line of sight to all but the far end of the bar. He sat in the corner and took a long drink from one of the glasses of cisera before placing it at an open spot for Sol. He'd missed his little sister while she helped their parents move to Omega, and he hoped to eventually convince Garrus and their pari to let her serve on the Aurean. The three of them—including Thane—made an excellent team.

"So," Sol said, sliding into the seat next to him, "there is a strip mike under the door frame." She picked up her glass, looked into it, then swapped it with his. "Subtle. I almost missed it."

He grinned, but self-congratulations lasted only a second before Sol chuffed, shattering it.

"Not your lame gag, I meant the strip." She followed a long drink with almost a minute of pleased sighing that began to draw attention. When the salarian two tables over began to make that disturbed clucking sound, Sol stopped.

"We'll have to backtrace their signal, get into their computers remotely if we can … infiltrate their base if we can't." He finished his cisera without tasting it, only registering the dry, tartness on the back of his tongue. Feeling Sol's eyes on him, he braced himself for incoming snark.

"What do you think I was doing in the head all that time?" She sighed her 'dear spirits, without me, he'd forget to breathe' sigh. "I backtraced it, but they're using top of the line hardware and security that made a fool out of my poor, old omnitool," she said, long, elegant talons patting the inside of her wrist. "Now it's locked itself in a corner of the extranet, reconsidering its life plan."

"We have EDI, do we not?" Thane asked, sitting down. "Two observers watching the door to the room, a human and a salarian." He glanced up at the speakers flooding the space with music. "I hear something in the music as well." Frowning, he closed his eyes and cocked his head, turning it a little. "There's a slight feedback in the sound system. It might be club security, corporate espionage … ."

"... or our good friends in yellow." Nihlus leaned back, one hand dropping to his lap. "I noticed it when I was at the bar. Finish your drinks and we'll head out, ask EDI what she can do."

86 Days ASR (1147 Ypres time) (A closet somewhere in Nos Astra)

"Why?" Sol asked, the words nothing more than a hissing breath between clenched teeth. "A closet?" She wriggled, jabbing an armoured spur under Nihlus's fringe. A soft curse met his gasp of pain. "Sorry, but you got us stuck in here, senux." Continued shifting and shuffling on his shoulders emphasized her malcontent, as if he'd trapped them in a cleaning cupboard on purpose. She sighed again, finally balancing on his shoulders. "Why do missions with you always turn into something weird and scary?"

Before he could formulate a scathing enough reply Nihlus froze. Tarc, he might just have screwed up as badly as Sol thought he had. Marching footsteps approached from the right, stopping outside the door to their closet. He glanced toward the open panel in the ceiling, but saw no sign of Thane. He tightened his grip on Sol's ankle when she moved for her omnitool, no doubt to scramble the door's lock, but in the dark, even low power mode could give them away. When she nodded, he loosened his grip.

They'd just better not get caught. Not only would it let the Eclipse know their ambush the next day had been compromised, he knew the others would never let him live down being caught in a closet. He swallowed. They did make for quite the spectacle with Sol dangling around his neck and
cleaning supplies piled up to his knees. Premature embarrassment set the plates down the back of his neck twitching.

"Pretty sure Captain Enyala is just getting paranoid," one of the mercs grumbled. "Maira in T'Sair's platoon said they didn't find any evidence of the computers or the base being breached, and I had a really great night out planned."

Another merc approached the door. "The captain's being a few million credits worth of paranoid. I don't blame her. The client's loaded, he's here in person, and if she lets him get killed, he's not going to be hiring us again, is he?"

"Not to mention she's hoping to avoid getting dead," a third voice—female salarian by the pitch of it—said. "The client's supposed to be one ruthless bastard."

"That too." The door control beeped. "Locked. Let's keep moving." A long, nasal sigh ended in a grumble. "If we get this section covered, we might be able to salvage our day off."

Nihlus let out a long breath as the boots marched off. He glanced up, but couldn't see anything past Sol's knees. "Thane? You ready up there?"

The drell's answer came in the form of Solana's weight disappearing off Nihlus's shoulders. He looked up to see Sol's feet disappear through the hole. Two arms reached down, yanking him off his feet the moment he grabbed hold. Landing balanced on a wide, steel girder, Nihlus reeled, both hands scrambling for something solid to hang onto. His right found a metal column, the left smacked down on the top of Sol's head.

"Not the head." Sol grabbed his hand, bracing his forearm along her own until he found his feet and pulled away.

"Thanks." He nodded toward the far end of the space—a life support service node by the looks of the equipment—and gestured for Thane to take the lead. They needed to find a way out before Captain Enyala's net of paranoia closed around them.

"EDI, is the route clear ahead?"

Nihlus cocked a brow plate as Sol asked the question. She hadn't made any opinion known about the AI, so he'd assumed—wrongly so, it appeared—that she didn't trust EDI enough to treat her as a colleague. He hurried along the girder as far as he could, then jumped to the next and the next.

"I am reading no Eclipse in your immediate vicinity," EDI responded. After a short pause, the AI said, "Continue through the hatch five metres, then turn left."

Sol chuffed and followed Thane out the hatch and down the left hand branch of the maintenance shaft. "What tipped them off? Did you register anything?"

Nihlus watched his little sister, admiring the professional operative in action. Even during their last adventure on Illium, she'd stayed in the little sister role. Understanding flashed, illuminating the reasons behind Sol's actions. He'd needed the little sister the last time. He didn't need loving support this time, but a pro doing her job.

His mandibles flicked, and he turned his attention back to the task at hand … namely getting back to his family without any extra holes punched through his hide.

After a good thirty seconds, EDI replied, "I see no Eclipse alerts as a response to your presence within their base or my access to their computer network. The bulletin and extra security is in
response to the arrival of a high value client." Another pause. "At the next junction, take the right hand shaft thirty-five metres."

The three of them moved silently through shaft and tunnel, trusting EDI's directions to get them clear. Finally, Nihlus dropped down through a ceiling panel into a small back corridor that led to a service elevator to street level. The hallway stood silent, the Eclipse security teams having cleared the perimeter, moving in toward the center of the base.

"I just arrived." A dark voice and thick accent shattered the silence, sending sharp slivers of dread slicing through Nihlus's armour and flesh to sink into bone.

The Spectre held his breath and raised a hand to stop Sol and Thane before they entered the corridor. He opened his omnitool, but when he tried to access the man's tool and comms, a series of massive walls rebuffed him. Not willing to accept defeat so easily, he sent a message to EDI. Surely, the AI could break through the tool's security.

"Working," EDI replied through his comms.

"I have the Eclipse running a security drill. Everything is on schedule. The Ypres arrived this morning. Shepard is accompanying Miranda to meet her contact at 0900 tomorrow. Everything's on schedule."

Nihlus crept forward, heart pounding against his keel, every nerve keen-edged and tingling: a billion proximity sensors on high alert. Pressing his face against the sliver of light around the closet door, he blinked against the painful brightness. Once his eye adjusted, he peered through the crack, searching to see what particular variety of tarc they'd fallen into.

An expensive blue suit … an off-white dress shirt with what Shepard called a … um … a clerical collar and a light blue crossover tie … short, meticulous hair … Miranda's elusive billionaire father, he'd bet a crate of his favourite acuta eus on it.

EDI's voice spooked him, breaking through his concentration, as he tried to hear the rest of that call. "I've successfully penetrated the firewalls, Spectre Kryik. The accounts belong to Henry Lawson. Both his comms and omnitool use advanced, up to date Cerberus security protocols."

So, Miranda's father still maintained ties to Cerberus. Tarc. Cerberus's web tangled through their lives on so many levels … more by the second … or maybe he just hadn't noticed them before. How many more lurked where he couldn't see them yet? Nihlus stepped back and signaled for Sol and Thane to follow. They needed to get clear. He needed to talk to Shepard and Garrus, get their take on Lawson and Cerberus.

"Hey!" Sol's elbow jabbed Nihlus in the side. "Where are you?" She sat sideways in the driver's seat of the car, brow plates low over her eyes. "You haven't said a word to anyone other than the car since we got out of there."

Nihlus let out a long breath that whistled a little as it bullied its way through his clenched jaw. "Cerberus is tied up in this war so much deeper than we suspected. Every time we come up against something lately, it's got Cerberus fingerprints all over it." He turned a little to face her. "I know they were behind what happened to Garrus and me. Now, I'm thinking they're behind so much more."

"The Eclipse in the base we uncovered during our last investigation were working for whoever is behind the black orbs," Thane said from the back. He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees.
"Could the same force be backing Cerberus?"

Sol frowned and flopped back against her seat, her expression turning thoughtful. "Or they could be the other side, moving in to take away the leviathans' resources. Cerberus has a really dark history." She slouched into the empty space between her seat and the door. "The Council is on the reapers' side, so they're backing the collectors as well." A sharp clicking sound chased an equally sharp chuff. "Yeah, I don't buy Cerberus doing anything for anyone other than humans. They're netichiks waiting in the branches waiting for Shepard and the rest of us to wander beneath, and by the time we see them coming, we'll just be dry bones on the ground."

Nihlus smothered a grin, but didn't succeed completely. She had Shepard's gift for prolonged, graphic imagery. "EDI is into Lawson's comms and omnitool." He faced front as the car chimed their arrival at the apartment. "She and the geth will worm their way in and strip the leaves off those branches."

"I will return to the Ypres for the night," Thane said, the words drifting out of the shadows in the back seat. "What time should I report in the morning?"

"Don't be crazy," Sol said, beating Nihlus to the punch. She contorted between the two front seats. "There's more than enough room at the apartment. My parents will take one room, the happy trio will go upstairs, Jane's mother and sister can take the other room, and we can camp out in the sitting room." She shrugged. "I don't want to camp alone." Nodding, her last word given, she turned front. "We could even camp out on the balcony … watch the stars."

Thane's wry chuckle tugged at Nihlus's mandibles even as the assassin replied, "Nos Astra creates too much light to see the stars."

"Details." She chuffed, the end coming out with a little extra force thanks to the car touching down. "Don't make me demonstrate my hand to hand skills, Krios." Even Sol and her talent for deadpan snark didn't manage to get that out without a heavy dose of humour singing through her voice, widening Nihlus's smile.

"No, indeed." Thane slid forward on his seat, the evening light bright orange and red across his face in the rearview mirror. He met Nihlus's reflected gaze and cocked a brow ridge, asking permission to intrude upon their family evening, perhaps.

Nihlus nodded, then opened the top and doors, waiting for them to get out before he followed, but only as far as the car's front end. "Go ahead in," he told them, suddenly needing the almost-coolness and peaceful almost-darkness. "I'll be down in a couple of minutes."

Surprising him, they both just nodded, then stepped into the elevator, Sol starting a gentle argument about whether or not they'd be able to see the brighter stars, even through Nos Astra's light pollution. Nihlus just shook his head, then turned away, walking over to the wall where he and Al sat weeks before and made their peace.

He pressed his knees into the low wall, unsure why he hadn't just gone inside with the others. Letting out a long, hollow feeling breath, he sat and then eased his legs over to hang free above the city. Everything had changed so much and so fast in the past seventy-five days. Sometimes it felt like drowning, caught and dragged along in a torrential river.

He wouldn't trade it. Not one bit of it. He just needed a minute to stick his head above the water and catch his breath. The reapers and Cerberus and the promise of war scared him; he wasn't a complete idiot. But that particular fear amounted to a drop in a wide sea.
Closing his eyes, he dug his talons into the seam along the top of the wall and took a deep breath. Blossoms … sweet smelling, like fruit, ripe and dripping with nectar. It settled behind his keel, beating like insect wings. Why did the wonderful things terrify him?

"Cikabeknai?" The call came from a couple metres away, soft enough that it didn't startle him. "What are you doing out here?"

He took another deep breath, then turned around to face Shepard, planting his feet back on solid concrete and gravel. "Thinking." He shrugged, just a crooked bob of his head. "Taking a few minutes to breathe before everyone gets all excited about Izzy."

Shepard walked toward him, her steps uncharacteristically pensive. "I think I know you too well to imagine that you've gotten cold feet about all this family stuff, so what's on your mind?" She moved to sit next to him, then hesitated and twisted to sit across his thighs, her arm draped loosely around his neck.

Nihlus shook his head and wrapped his arms around her. "Just how much life has changed in a short time." He nuzzled her ear, the skin satin-soft against his mouth-plates. "It's mostly great things, but it's still just flying at us so fast that it leaves me breathless sometimes."

She kissed him. "Yeah, I get that. Seems like I've been running without stopping since I woke up. Hell … since I saved your gorgeous, reckless ass on Eden Prime." She tucked her head in the curve of his neck, her cheek cool, her hair silky and soft. "It's hard to believe it's just nearing the three month mark since I woke up."

"And now we're a family and getting prepared to make the opening salvos in a war that could destroy everything." Turning his face into her hair, he took a deep breath, letting a few moments of calm settle around them. "I just want to start our lives."

Gripping her tight, the flutter in his chest becoming almost frantic, Nihlus fought to calm his racing heart. His mind spun out a thousand desperate ideas how to avoid the war or end it, but it wasn't cowardice that inspired his landslide of avoidance. He'd face the reapers and give it all the strength he had … more even, because those spurin stood between his family and peace.

Shepard still his mind with a soft kiss. "We'll get each other through it," she whispered, her lips still brushing his mouth. "And then we'll find somewhere quiet—somewhere new and beautiful—and raise our family." Another kiss, that one longer and heated enough that his momentary panic vapourized. "Come on, let's go give the family something happy to focus on."

She stood, leaving his lap feeling cold despite his armour, but then she turned back and held out her hand. He took it, making her tug a little before he followed. For a second, he let himself imagine where they would be and what they'd be doing the following evening, but shut it down, afraid he'd give his plans away in some small way.

Although Shepard said nothing in the elevator, Nihlus felt an expectant sort of excitement around her. That energy grew as the seconds passed until the elevator doors opened and she sprang out.

"Look who I found loitering on the roof," she called, leading the way into the empty-feeling room.

"Nihlus!" Their mari stood to greet him, arms steady as she reached for him, eyes bright and keen. She looked wonderful, better than he'd seen her, even two cycles back when they met. Pulling him in to touch brows, she chuffed softly. "You look wonderful."

"I look good?" He held her at arm's length, grinning at her. Dear spirits, she glowed so bright that it
burned its way up his arms. Despite the pressure in his throat, he managed to chuckle. "Who are you, and what have you done with Treana Vakarian?"

She cradled his face in her hands, her bare palms warm and strong against his mandibles. "I'll explain everything once you three tell us why you dragged us to Illium." Releasing him, she sat back down, expectant gaze shifting between them.

Nihlus embraced his pari, then looked past the Vakarian clan to the Shepards. "Hello, Lucille … Bunny." He leaned over the coffee table and shook Lucy's hand and met Bunny's glower with a nod and a smile. He hadn't really spoken to Shepard's family since the trip to Palaven for the first bonding ceremony, and he felt the need to tread carefully around Jane's mother. She really hadn't been pleased about her daughter bonding with two torini and made it clear she'd set up her tent in the Garrus camp if it came down to it.

"Nihlus." Lucy smiled, the expression bright and genuine, easing back his concern. "It's good to see you again."

"And you." He bit back the urge to make a small hint to the fact that they'd been brought to Illium for more than the announcement about Izzy. That news had to wait for Garrus to take Shepard out of the apartment after dinner.

Speaking of …. He turned, meeting his dilan's bright green stare, the emerald lights in that gaze twinkling with mischief and delight. She'd already curled in next to Garrus, leaving a space for him on the couch. When she patted the cushion in invitation, he took the seat and leaned back a little, letting them take center stage for their news. As much as Izzy felt like his child—as much as she was his child—she really was Garrus and Shepard's to announce.

He grinned as his fratrin and dilan spent a moment staring at one another in a silent war of 'you go first' before Shepard cleared her throat, and sighed, a noisy, grudging admission of defeat. Shepard opened her mouth, freezing like that for a moment before shutting it again.

Nihlus watched her, wishing he could see her thoughts. He harboured no doubts that the news would be met with joy, but he didn't envy them the explanation.

"In six months," Shepard began, prodding him from his thoughts, "you're going to be grandparents." She grinned at Bunny and Sol. "Or aunts as the case may be."

A good three minutes of breathless silence followed, five stunned sets of eyes looking from Shepard's face to her belly then Garrus and back. Nihlus pulled his mandibles in tight against his face as he watched, only his traitorous brow plates betraying his eagerness for the storm to break.

"Wait."

He should have known Sol would beat everyone to the punch. His fillitrin's mandibles flicked several times before she let out a soft, subvocal rumble of awe, surprising him with the depth of love behind it … well, maybe not surprise at the amount of love so much as the lack of teasing.

Sol opened her mouth a couple of times before she managed to say, "You're not out there taking on collectors with my niece or nephew in there, are you?" Stare riveted to Shepard's stomach, she chuffed and shook her head. "I don't know how things work with humans." Her awe slid back and forth between curiosity and confusion. "Can we see it? Can you find out if it is a girl or boy?"

"How?" Lucy whispered, her brow knitted into deep furrows. "You're not … you two aren't …"

Shepard activated her omnitool, bringing up the scan, everyone in the room melting into cooing,
gasping puddles that deepened to concern as Shepard explained about Mordin and his experiment. The explanations complete, the sitting room dissolved into a flurry of embraces and joy.

Nihlus's comms chimed. No doubt EDI getting back to him about the mission the next day. He hesitate for a half second before sending a message to try again in a couple of hours. For the next little while, the war needed to stay outside. In the coming hours, they needed to store up happy memories … bright lights to hold up against the darkness waiting on the other side of the door to swallow them whole.

(A-N: Nihlus and his secrets. He'd better just hope that Shepard appreciates being kept in the dark. :D As always, thanks so much for reading and reviewing/commenting. Loves and hugs and frisky kittens with balls of wool.)
(Previously on Future Continuous: Shepard's return means it's right back to work preparing for the reapers and taking down the collectors. Still, she and her torini decide to make sure there is time for themselves as well. She and Garrus married just in time to get dragged off to Korlus, then taking Legion to bond with the chiastyllia. Now, the day after they laid Mordin's baby bomb on their families, they are doing Miranda the favour of rescuing Oriana from the clutches of Henry Lawson, who is on planet and looking to cause all the trouble.)

**Torin** - Turian for male over the age of majority

**Tarin** - Turian for female over the age of majority

**Fratrin** - Brother by oath and honour rather than one by blood

**Dilan** - Turian for fiancee

**Tarc** - Turian equivalent of shit.

**Nais** - (Asari) pronounced Nah-ees. Asari over the age of majority (40) Plural - Naisa

**Ciscera** - a sparkling, turian cider made from cactus analogs.

**Ungentira** - A large cat-analogue predator native to Palaven.

**Maraquil** - Iconic, predatory seabird analogues native to Palaven

**Preteril** - A tiny, burrowing marsupial analogue native to many dextro worlds.

**Caris** - Dear one. Beloved

**Spurin** - Bastard.

**Haksaya kubenar** - A term of endearment, literally translates as my strong, true heart.

**Cikabeknai** - The reciprocal term of endearment for the above. Literally translates to brave love.

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**87 Days ASR (0845 Ypres time) (Nos Astra)**

Nihlus straightened the already pristine lines of his best black and red suit as he crossed the street, then tugged his cuffs down. Despite the many roles he'd played over the cycles, he didn't know if
he could pull off headhunter … well, at least not the corporate sort. He winced and shuddered. Frankly, he preferred crushing criminals beneath the weight of his Spectre authority, but that day, the gun work fell to Shepard and Operative Lawson.

He glanced at Thane and Sol, both looking as comfortable in business garb as he felt. Sol picked at hers while Thane vibrated at high alert, as if worried that he'd shed his skills along with his leathers.

At least early morning painted the city with bright, rosey-golden hued light, and the opening buds on the trees sweetened the grey bite of the industrial, city air. The crowds flowed in orderly, practiced columns, hurried ripples of life parting around benches and kiosks just to stream right back into the same lines: insects negotiating their grayscale jungle. The sterility of it—the sameness of everything around him—skittered down his back, the endless tide of "normal life" sucking the heat from his cells and the steel from his bones.

"I've never understood how they endure it," Thane said, his voice a coincidental breath of understanding, the subtle wheeze behind it, a commentary on the strangulation of civilian, urban existence.

"They don't know any better," Sol answered, the unaffected calm of her voice belied by the talons that tugged at the throat of her suit. "Not everyone is built for chaos, violence, and uncertainty like we are."

"Dressed to kill and looking yummy, cikabeknai," Shepard's whisper through his radio broke over the rest of Sol's explanation.

Nihlus searched the docking bay, spotting her cheeky grin in a queue waiting for an elevator.

That smile dragged him back to their goodbye at the apartment. Teasing, Shepard had given him a heated wink, her fingertips trickling down his throat, as cool and gentle as rain against his hide. "You're going to have every tarin on Illium chasing after you and most of the naïsa as well."

Teasing him down into kissing range, she pressed her lips against his mouth, words breathing against his plates as they breezed past in the wake of her kiss. "You'd better come back single, because I'm selfish. I'm completely and absolutely not willing to share you with anyone."

He smiled and nuzzled along the line of her jaw, savouring the slight salt tang of her skin on the tip of his tongue as he tasted the hollow beneath her ear. "That seems somewhat hypocritical, haksaya kubenar."

She leaned into him. "Now, be fair, this whole thing wasn't my idea." She squeezed him tight. "But now that you crazies talked me into it, I can't imagine trying to breathe without either one of you. Okay?"

Pulling her in tight, he nodded. "Definitely." Mandibles flaring and fluttering, he thanked the spirits she couldn't read the minutia of turian body language, or he'd have given his secret away.

"Hey! You with us?" Sol's elbow between his plates yanked him out of his thoughts.

When he focused back on the crowds, they'd swallowed Shepard whole. Letting out a noisy breath, he nodded. "Yeah, I'm here. Let's get this done."

"Beta Team reporting in," Garrus said across the mission channel. "Target acquired. Lawson just left his apartment in the Eclipse base. He's shadowed by two squads of Cerberus and private guards. They're playing it casual and trying to blend in, but they're definitely loaded for ungentira."
"Roger that, Beta, but the phrase is 'loaded for bear'. Geez, get it right, already." Shepard cackled for a second before reporting, "Alpha Team is still ten minutes from intercept."

"Is it stupid that I'm sort of pissed off that we don't have an official team title?" Sol grumbled. "We should totally be Shadow Team or Team Hotness or … something sexy." Despite the bitter slant of the sigh that followed her words, her mandibles flicked.

"Team Annoying, Whiney Little Sister?" Nihlus offered, dropping a deadpan stone into the deep, white-noise-quiet of the crowded docking bay.

"Team Amazing Warrior Goddess," Thane countered, earning a ray of pure sunshine from Sol and a grumble from Nihlus.

The Spectre coughed over his words as he glanced at the drell and said, "Suck up."

"And that's why he's my favourite," Sol said and flounced a few paces ahead of them.

After ostracizing him for a handful of metres—just a little longer than she needed to—Sol dropped back next to Nihlus. "I'm not sure how we're supposed to do this," she said after another couple of seconds. "Do we just walk up to this family and say, 'Hey there, heard Cerberus was giving you a job, how about a better one?'"

Nihlus shrugged. As much time as he'd spent trying to come up with a big speech, he still had no clue. It seemed more than a little sinister to mug people at a transit station and offer to whisk them off to a new job.

"Plans change?" he offered after a long pause, his tone casually interested, just tossing the idea out there. "We can play the part of the team sent in to give them the new marching orders and speed them on their way. If we prepare Anderson to deal with their enquiries, we should even be able to get them on the Normandy."

Sol grinned and wrapped an enthusiastic arm around his cowl. "See, this is why we put up with your surly disposition and peculiar odour."

"Thank you, caris," Nihlus said, deadpan. "You're support is underwhelming."

"Our targets?" Thane asked, his hand extending past Nihlus to gesture to three people, clustered together and looking lost. They hovered near the custom doors, their baggage clutched tight as if they expected it to be robbed any moment.

"Looks like it." Nihlus elbowed Sol, prodding her to lift the sign with their surname on it. He shook his head when she tried to hand it off. "Nope, you drew the short straw, you hold the sign."

"I take back all the nice things I just said," she said, practically growling as she held up the sign. Plastering what Jane called a 'shit-eating grin' onto her face, she said, "You're a spurin and you smell like krogan toenail fungus."

"Nice." Nihlus plastered on a smile that welcomed the newcomers and strode toward the small cluster of people. "Good morning. Mr. and Mrs. Ferrer? Oriana." He held out a welcoming hand, shaking their slower, nervous ones. "Nihlus Kryik."

"You're here to see us to our new posting?" the woman asked. She looked back and forth between the three of them, tweaking Nihlus's memory: these people owed their livelihoods to Cerberus and three aliens had shown up to greet them. Spirits, they needed to be smarter.
Oh well, too late to do anything about that, the family would run screaming before Miranda and Shepard made it across from the cargo docks.

Nihlus nodded, trying for confident and businesslike. "Yes, we're here to escort you to an Alliance frigate to take you to your new post on Horizon."

Mr. Ferrer scowled and backed up a step, placing himself in front of his wife and daughter. "I was told that positions awaited us at IPE on Beckenstein."

"Ah, yes," Thane said, his voice smooth and low. "We feared the head office hadn't been able to contact you while in flight." He smiled and held out an arm, ushering the family toward a table in the lounge. "Please, we'll be happy to sit down with you and discuss the details."

"Hey, Team-Stuck-With-My-Annoying-Baby-Sister, where are you?" Garrus broke through, his voice tack-sharp. "Still near the family's arrival point?"

"Excuse me for just a second," Nihlus said, smiling and giving the Ferrers a shallow bow. "Head office." He walked away, losing himself in the crowd while Thane and Sol seated the family. "What's going on?" he asked. "We're still at the docking bay, trying to convince them to come with a bunch of strange aliens."

"Lawson is on his way there. Didn't even try to hide it, so he either knows our plan, or he always expected Miranda to circumvent him." Quick, heavy breaths interrupted the general's words. "He just got in a car. You need to get them out of there, just in case."

"Damn it," Shepard cut in. "We're fighting our way through Eclipse guards, enough that they could well be a delaying tactic." He voice muffled a little. "Miranda, how well do you know and trust Lanteia?"

Both Nihlus and Garrus waited through the discussion that ensued. Less than a minute ticked away, feeling more like a half hour, Nihlus able to feel his cells aging as they prickled beneath his hide.

"Miranda insists Lanteia is trustworthy," Shepard came back, shouting over loud accusations from Miranda in the background. Guess their secret was out. "Miranda, back off. Yes, I didn't tell you the whole plan, but the aim is still to save your sister, so shut up for a second." She let out a growling sigh as the background noise died to a low roar.

"Finally. Okay. Beta Team and Team Sol-Wants-a-Cool-Name: we've overheard Miranda's other trusted contact, Niket, mentioned on Eclipse comms as meeting the family and turning them over to the Eclipse." Shepard made a low humming sound. "Maybe since the fighting started and the family is not in Niket's custody, Lawson just figured it out and is coming to search for Oriana."

Shepard cursed when Miranda started back up, her volume completely not in keeping with her usual calm professionalism. The sound muffled before Shepard continued, "Cikabeknai, I don't care if you have to drug them … or god forbid … tell them the truth; just get them out of there. If Lawson wants Oriana that badly … if Cerberus does, they can't be allowed to get their hands on her."

"I'm right on Lawson's tail," Garrus said, his voice resolute. "We jumped in a cab right behind him, so we'll have your six if he comes after you at the docks."

"Contact Anderson and have the Normandy ready for guests," Nihlus said, returning to the table. "We could be coming in hot."

"Will do." Garrus broke for a second before continuing, "Link your nav data to my tool, so I can
track you if we're coming after you."

Nihlus did. "Thanks. Keep me updated. I have to go explain to three people why they need to run for their lives." He clenched his jaw, studying the three wary travellers, wondering how much they had guessed over the cycles? Had they bothered to trace their employment back to Cerberus? Wondered why their adopted daughter came with so much secrecy attached to her? Well, if they hadn't, they were in for a surprise straight out of the ninth level of _buratrum._

Mr. Ferrer met Nihlus's gaze with a stare of pure steel. Suspicion simmered beneath, bubbling up through in the set of his shoulders and rigid angles of his jaw. Maybe he knew more than Nihlus could have guessed about the shadows that haunted his daughter.

"Something's wrong," Oriana said, the statement hitting cudgel hard, solid and intractable. "Maybe you should stop giving us this story meant to keep us calm and go with the truth."

Nihlus nodded. Good for her, not the _preteril_ she seemed to be at all. Time for the truth and nothing but the truth. "How much of Cerberus's involvement in your lives are you aware of?" He pulled out a chair and sat despite the alarm sinking claws into the back of his neck, insisting that they get moving.

Ferrer's jaw tightened. "I traced our company back to them nearly a decade ago, but it's a subsidiary, and definitely not involved with their more dubious activities." He stood. "Are you going to take us hostage? I assure you, we are not important enough for Cerberus to pay ransom."

"Quite the opposite," Nihlus replied. "I was not entirely upfront with you. My name is Spectre Nihlus Kryik. I'm here with my partner and our team to extract your family to safety." He pulled his chair a little closer to the table and leaned in. "Your daughter, Oriana, was born to a very rich, powerful, and corrupt man named Henry Lawson, and placed with you by Cerberus."

He winced as the blood drained from all three faces. While her parents moved closer to her, Mrs. Ferrer clasping her daughter's hand, Oriana took less than ten seconds to go from pale and shocked to a clenched jaw and a stare filled with fire, her entire body tightening with fury.

Nihlus met that stare with a firm nod. "Originally, our information was that Cerberus arranged your move because Lawson discovered your location, but we've since found that the Illusive Man is in bed with Henry Lawson. Suspecting that she'd be abducted during the move, we arranged for you to come work for our colonization and safe haven program."

"Mr. Bossman?"

Nihlus held up a talon as Kasumi's voice came through his comms. "Apologies, but this will be more information coming in." He lifted his hand to his aural canal. "Go ahead, Ms. Goto."

"I'm in Creep-Psycho-Father's rooms and hacked into everything I could find." She paused, a satisfied chuckle betraying her success before she continued. "He's good: he wiped everything clean." The chuckle again, tickling his ear like _cisera_ bubbles. "Too bad for him, I'm better."

Nihlus's omnitool beeped, a message from the thief popping up with several attachments. He opened the first, a confidential, heavily encrypted email.

"The first thing was an email sent last night telling Creep-Father that Subject Twenty Three's test results came back positive in two of three categories. The adjustments to the genome between Subjects Twenty-Two and Twenty-Three appear to be successful. Further adjustments on Subject Twenty-Four should result in passing grades in all three categories." Kasumi's tone voiced Nihlus's
confusion as he read along with her. "And it finishes with a guarantee that the subject will be apprehended and taken to Site A41 where testing and program integration will commence." The thief's face replaced the document on his screen. "This sounds bad, Bossman. You need to get that girl out of there."

"Spectre Kryik?"

Nihlus looked up to see Oriana's father standing less than a metre away, his stare riveted to the back side of the omnitool's holo screen. "Sir?"

Ferrer scowled. "Raising a teenager has taught me how to read backwards." The man drew a breath deep into his well-dressed barrel chest. "Promise me that you'll explain everything once we've reached safety."

Nihlus nodded, a single, solemn jerk of his head, thanking the spirits for Ferrer's ability to remain calm and see sense.

The man turned back to his family. "Come, we need to save explanations for once we're clear of whatever trouble is tracking us." Arms wide, he shepherded his worried wife and angry daughter between metal tables and through the coffee crowd. "Spectre, our lives are in your hands."

Nihlus scanned the shifting tide, then checked with Thane and Sol before moving into the crowd, setting a line as the _maraquil _flies for the nearest maintenance hatch. They needed to get somewhere he could see the enemy coming. Crowds made his hide twitch. Too many hidden agendas, identities, and firearms lurked out in the masses. Too out of control.

"Why is this man after me?" Oriana startled him with her demand as she jogged up to stride at his side. "If he gave me up for adoption, shouldn't that have been the end of it?"

"That will be up to others to explain," Nihlus deflected. Turning sideways he placed himself between Oriana and a small cluster of brokers too engrossed in their discussion of Alliance colonial futures to step aside. "I was just sent to make sure you and your parents get to safety."

She scoffed, a low, very familiar cough. "And if I don't buy your hired muscle excuse?" Instead of dropping back when he checked his floor plan of the docking bays and detoured toward a maintenance hatch, she shook her head. "Who hired you? Tell me that and maybe I'll trust you enough to let you take my parents somewhere safe."

Equal parts frustration and admiration turned a heated stare at the young woman. "Your twin sister." He answered her open-mouthed silence with a cocked brow plate. "Good enough? Can we get out of here now?"

Oriana retreated back to walk between her parents, deep lines drawn in her brow, bracketing her mouth, and spidering out from the corners of her eyes. "I'm not helpless." She shot the words at him, accusing him of a crime he hadn't committed.

"Don't suppose you are, if your sister is any gauge, and if we don't get moving, you'll have a chance to prove it," he assured her before turning to override the hatch. He pulled it open and lunged through, grateful to finally pull his weapon, the pistol settling easily into low ready. Leaving it to Sol and Thane to get the Ferrers through and lock up behind them, he pushed on.

A message flashed from Kasumi, a map charting the fastest way to a service entrance to the Normandy's docking bay. Sending her a mental thank you, he entered the route and activated his scan to keep an eye on the fifty metres ahead and behind.
They moved quickly through the first tunnel, but the crowds on the trading floor slowed them to an irritating pace when they stepped back out. When Nihlus glanced back, Thane moved up to partly shield the Ferrer's from the side while Sol moved to their opposite flank. The Spectre shook his head. For how little they'd worked together, they formed a seamless unit.

Oriana closed on him from behind. "Something's off here, Spectreman."

Nervous tension, brittle and saline, pricked his nose along with the ozone and sulfur bite of her biotics. He reached out, talon-tips just touching her arm. "Keep the biotics locked down unless we're attacked." Reacting to her gentle, confident scoff, he chuckled. "All right then, why do you say something's off? Besides the crazy DNA donor trying to capture you, I mean."

The young woman shook her head. "Ever looked at a picture and felt as though something was missing? Like the artist intended something to be there, but then erased it?" She shrugged, squinting into the crowd, her head cocking a little to one side. "It's like there is a blank space … no … not blank." A soft, frustrated growl rolled in the back of her throat. "Like there's a piece of the universe that was there, but someone removed it, or shifted it just enough that I can't see it."

Nihlus frowned, and reached up, raking his talons over his fringe. "I'm not sure I understand."

Another little growl, and she stamped her foot. "Dammit." She glanced back at her mother. "Sorry, Mom." Deep blue eyes stared up at him, a combination of searching and frustration begging him to understand. "I'm not explaining it well, but there's something ahead that just isn't right. Please? Believe me?" She grasped the cuff of his sleeve and tugged him toward a side alley.

That stare commanded respect, its source deep beneath layers of instinct and intuition. He'd seen it too many times pinning him down from Shepard's field of green. "Okay." He allowed her to lead him into the alley, while he searched for another route.

"Take the door behind you, bossman," Kasumi said in his ear. Head down a level and left to the end of the street. I'll have a van waiting."

"Nihlus," Garrus interrupted, "we landed ahead of you at a private dock a couple down from the Normandy. We just entered the dock end of the trading floor, and he's heading your way in a hurry. Get off the street."

"He's got to have a way to track us," Nihlus said, leaping into motion. He opened the door and hurried Oriana through. "Sol, fry that door." Without waiting for a confirmation, he locked his hand through the young woman's elbow, pulling her along. Apparently, whatever she felt out there scared the protests and smart-ass attitude out of her, and she followed without so much as a bleat.

Facing an empty corridor, Nihlus jumped into a run, keeping a pace the rest could maintain.

"That's a firm on Lawson's ability to track you," Garrus's voice broke through the hollow thump of boots on tile. "He headed straight for that door, didn't even twitch in another direction. His people are trying to get through, but it's going to take them a bit. Congratulate Sol on a first rate muck-up job."

"We'll scramble the other end of this alley as well, give you some room to whittle them down without any collateral damage." Nihlus slapped his palm against the door control, waiting as the damned thing rotated through its cycle. Muffled, but definitely somewhere close, klaxons blared an alarm. What in the name of …?

"Tarc! They aren't subtle. They're cutting through." Garrus chuffed, but it came through strangled.
"Illium cops are moving in, but he doesn't appear to care. Get moving."

"Kasumi!" Nihlus barked the thief's name as he dragged Oriana through the portal and down a flight of stairs to merge with the crowds of the booking floor. "Lawson has a tracker on us, so we're just going to run for it. Get to the dock." Glancing back to make sure the rest of his tiny squad was with him, he took off, racing down the street, across a court, and up another level of stairs.

"Nihlus." Shepard this time. "Two gunships just bolted out of this docking bay like they had a bloom of over-zealous hanar evangelists on their tails." Breathless, her words punctuated by curses, she shouted to be heard over the din of battle. "I guarantee they're headed your way." A rocket detonated close enough to Shepard's head that it set Nihlus's ears ringing, deafening him enough he missed her next few words.

"... plan: get the family to the Normandy and tell Anderson to haul ass for Horizon. Miranda and I'll follow once we take this Eclipse bitch out. Over."

"Roger that, Shepard. Stay safe. Nihlus out." He shook his head, trying to clear the remaining ringing, but jumped right back into a sprint up the staircase toward the customs floor. The sound of gunfire echoed like fireworks across the tile and polycrrete lounge as Garrus engaged Lawson's mercs.

The door across the cargo lounge opened and mercs poured through, fighting backwards. A high powered bullet tore through an Eclipse helmet, pulling a harsh, "Fuck!" from Oriana. Gore splattered across the white lounge, a jarring reality that tightened the girl's grip on Nihlus's arm.

Civilians screamed and bolted, guns fired, and behind him, Nihlus heard, "Oriana Ferrer, you watch your mouth." If he hadn't needed all his air for sprinting down the alley and dodging a small phalanx of panicked volus, the absurdity of scolding the girl for her curse would have pulled a disrespectfully loud bray of laughter from the Spectre.

"Oriana, stop running," a deep, accented voice called as they reached the other end of the alley. The accent rolled smooth as silk, but something gelid and slimy slipped along the underside … something that made Nihlus shudder as it continued, "These people … these aliens are lying to you."

Nihlus slapped the door control, turning away from the voice in favour of bolting through and down the long customs plaza. Despite struggling to keep pace in heels and a long dress, the young woman dragged behind him without a word of complaint.

"Oriana," the voice continued, still completely unruffled and calm, but colder than Noveria's ass. "You can never escape me. I can track you anywhere." A long sigh. "More than a hundred people have already died because of these aliens interfering in a family matter. Will you be selfish and force me to kill the rest of their accomplices? If you come with me, no one else needs to be hurt."

"Ms. Goto, where are you?" Nihlus demanded, when he slid to a halt at the cab stand at the end of the departures platform. He herded Oriana and her parents behind him, Sol and Thane taking positions on his flanks to give them cover.

"Five minutes out." She cursed. "Sorry, Bossman, but the traffic gods are not with me."

He growled, low and threatening as Lawson entered the door at the far end. "If it comes down to gunplay, Thane and Oriana put up a shield, keep the Ferrers safe as long as you can. We've got five
minutes before extraction." Nihlus stepped out three paces, just far enough to give his team time to react.

"Hand over my daughter." Slowly and without a gun drawn, Lawson closed in on them. The gunfire making its way up the alley effectively cleared most of the people from the customs floor, but some remained hiding behind kiosks or jumping into cabs at the far stand. "You haven't got anywhere left to go. My men will keep your general busy longer than it takes for Ms. Goto to arrive."

Nihlus pushed Ori behind him when she lunged from shelter. "Don't panic," he whispered under his breath and backed a step toward the empty dock. Staring down Lawson, he shook his head, diamond hard, a threat and a promise. "Not going to happen. You're mercenaries are surrounded on all sides."

The indecently well-dressed monster laughed. "Don't take me for a fool, Spectre. Neither you nor your General Vakarian are going to open fire with all these civilians in the crossfire." Shaking his head he made a gesture toward the long fall below the dock. "If I've anticipated this much of your uselessly over-complicated plan, do you really believe I don't have contingencies wired into all your possible escape routes?" The mock humour sloughed from his face, revealing nothing beneath but darkness disguised as a man.

When Shepard escaped from Cerberus, she'd told him and Garrus about the reason for the experiments run on them and Al: to create layers of command units. Dear spirits. Some of those units, most likely the uppermost echelon needed to blend … needed to plan and execute those plans.

_Saren._

Suddenly, Nihlus knew exactly what Ori had tried to explain to him moments before. Henry Lawson reeked of dark energy and corruption. Indoctrinated, mad, ruthless …

_Saren nearly destroyed Eden Prime to access a beacon; how much destruction could Lawson wreak upon Nos Astra to prevent his daughter's escape?_

"He's the missing spot in the picture," Ori whispered, pressing tight and trembling against his right side as her second hand wrapped around his arm. "It's not even a man, it's a skin suit."

Nihlus merely nodded, his mind racing too quickly to even tell her to shush. He needed to get the girl out without the entire customs floor ending up thirty levels down. Lawson had them cornered. No wait out but down unless …. 

"Tell me about these tests," the Spectre shouted back across the gulf between them. "Subject Twenty-Three passed on most fronts while Subject Twenty-Two failed on all but one?" He pressed Oriana back toward Thane. "Subject Twenty-Three would be Oriana? That makes Operative Lawson Number Twenty-two?"

"You couldn't possibly understand my goals … what is needed to perfect humanity … what is needed to face the reapers." He held out a hand, his stare sliding off Nihlus to latch on something behind the Spectre. "Oriana, I can track you anywhere in the galaxy. I will kill everyone between us." He took a breath, sighing a little, but kept up the steady tread eating the distance between them. Although he never glanced behind him, Nihlus could see that he awaited backup. Whatever happened, Henry Lawson didn't intend to die that day. "Haven't enough people died in this foolishness already?"
"What were the tests?" the girl shouted, her tone solid and cocky. She stepped up beside Nihlus again, bold and steady. "You want to use me to create the perfect human? Or, what, turn me into a weapon? Not an incentive. Tell me why I should go with you … without all the threats."

Nihlus clenched his mandibles against his face to hide a prideful grin. Damn, wasn’t she something? He wondered if Operative Lawson knew how little protection and coddling her baby sister needed. Keeping his weapon leveled between the man's eyes, Nihlus allowed the girl to step just past him. One step past him. When she slid her foot forward to take another, he rumbled a warning that she heeded.

"Well?" Oriana prompted. "Is that all you can do? Threaten and lie?" She sidestepped closer to Nihlus. "What you want me for is so terrible that the truth would make me fight to the death to avoid it, right?" She scoffed as her sperm donor hesitated a split second. "You're not my father. My father is the man standing behind me, the one I'll die to protect."

"Kasumi?" Nihlus whispered.

"A minute out, tracking those two gunships though," she replied, whispering as well. "Not sure how this well cargo van is going to stand up to them while it's parked. Once we're away, I'll be able to leave them chewing my vapours."

Garrus appeared in the doorway at the far end, looking exhausted and blood-splattered, but well. Nihlus shook his head ever so slightly, warning his fratrin to stay at that end of the plaza. Before Garrus acknowledged the gesture, Shepard stepped through the door and reached out to grab his arm, holding him back. Operative Lawson followed them in, but just wrenched her arm loose when Shepard tried to stop her.

"Your men are all dead, Father," the operative shouted, so much hatred on the last word that it dripped venom. She shook her head and scoffed when he spun to face her. "What? Not still tracking me as well? I suppose there's no need once Lanteia tells you that we've failed your tests."

She retched, an arm wrapping around her belly. "Once you find out that we won't work into your perfect breeding program."

Shepard leaped forward, grabbing the operative around the shoulders. "Come on, this isn't the time or place." The captain turned on the elder Lawson, one of the ugliest, most furious stares Nihlus had ever seen twisting her face. "Your backup, and most of the Eclipse in this city are all dead."

After a dramatic pause—always the showman—she lifted her hand to her ear. "Normandy, do you have clearance to fire?"

"Yes, ma'am. Firing now," Sparky replied.

Nihlus saw the shots and subsequent explosions reflected in the glass of the large departures board as Lawson's gunships succumbed to the Normandy's guns. Tarc, but wasn't his dilan something else? Lawson didn't stand a chance even though he knew the plan.

Hearing a vehicle pull in behind them, the Spectre took Oriana's arm and backed toward their exit. Knowing Shepard, he'd have a half second to get everyone in the van and gone before all hell broke loose.

Shepard smiled, the expression more terrifying than the last, it slowed his heart … making him wonder for the first time if Cerberus had left something out in her reconstruction. He hadn't expected her to come back exactly the same, but the frozen hatred in her eyes ….
"I don't like slavers," Shepard said, placing herself between her people and Lawson. "Leave before we take the risk that you're bluffing about the explosives."

"No!" Miranda shoved Shepard out of the way and bolted toward her father. "You don't get away with this. You'll never stop hunting us unless you're dead."

A burst of black, chaotic energy exploded from the man in a flare stronger than Nihlus had ever seen. It roared like a freighter decelerating from orbit as Nihlus reacted on instinct, throwing himself down and dragging everyone in reach with him. The odd cold/warm tingle of biotics surrounded him, Thane and Oriana buffering their group against the worst of the blow. Nihlus leaned up, glancing over his shoulder in time to see Miranda gripped by a biotic field stronger than even Saren had ever created.

Nihlus leaped up as Kasumi pulled in next to the platform. "Get them into the van!" he shouted, running toward Lawson. The man turned to look at Nihlus, grinning as, with a casual flick, he sent his elder daughter flying over the edge of the platform. Before he could change direction to intercept Miranda, Lawson hit him with a throw. His keel let out a resounding crack that told him Mordin and Chakwas's careful work had been undone even before the pain registered.

"Nihlus!" Shepard and Garrus screamed in unison as he hit the ground rolling.

He tumbled toward the edge, talons shredding his gloves as he scrambled for purchase, but then he slammed into the side of the van, the sudden stop punching the air out of him. Fighting back against the blackness trying to close in on him, he reached out, trying to find Oriana.

"Please tell me someone caught her," Shepard hollered, making herself heard over the sudden din of overlapping voices.

Nihlus heard thundering feet racing across the tile, and hands grabbed him, practically throwing him through the air. Then a door slammed and darkness fell.

"Did someone catch her?" Shepard screamed again in his comms, her voice thick with fear.

An absent thought wandered through, skipping along the edge of consciousness … when had Shepard and Miranda bonded so tightly? And why was everyone talking at once … and slurring?

"I did," Sparky called through the comms. "You can buy Mordin, the geth techs, and Melenis a cup of coffee when we get back. I never would have been able to hold her without the new amp and all those lessons." He let out a long, trembling sigh. "Okay, we got her onboard. Holy blessed Enkindlers, if no one could need a mid-air rescue from the hatch of the Normandy for a while, that would be awesome, thank you. I'm going to go pass out now."

"Don't you dare, Sparky. You're my hero, and I'm going to kiss all over that handsome mug."
Shepard paused, then cursed. "Bastard. Bloody baby Enkindler Jesus … that shit-faced, evil-ass demon of a whorebinder!"

What? Reacting to the absolute rage in Shepard's voice more than her words, Nihlus pushed and kicked at the darkness, trying to hold it off. "Oriana." The name came out as a gasp. "Your fa … Lawson?"

"Escaped in the distraction, but I'm okay." A warm hand closed around his. "Just take it easy. You've been the hero long enough today. We're heading for the Normandy."

"Where Chakwas will lock you up and throw away the key," Kasumi said, entirely too cheerful. "Later, you can thank me by buying me something nice … and expensive. Don't forget expensive."
Nihlus groaned softly as he lost his battle against the darkness. "I intended to get married tonight."

(A-N: So sorry for the wait, but both I and this stories (and my others are alive and well). Thanks for your support and I hope you enjoy the chapter.)
"I don't want to sleep, I want to snuggle," she wheedled and kissed his chin. Sweet baby Jesus, he smelled good … almost magical. Like the morning. The sun remained low and cool, not warm enough to dry the dew-laden grass sweetening the breeze wafting in the open window. How long had it been since she'd woken up breathing anything but canned air?

**Last time on Future Imperfect:** The gang helped Miranda save Oriana from Henry Lawson, relocating the family to Horizon to help build and run Sanctuary. Nihlus and Miranda got thrown around by Henry Lawson's surprisingly strong biotics. As they took Nihlus back to the ship for treatment, he revealed that he'd intended to pull off the perfect wedding for Shepard.

**Amiala** - Grandmother (Familiar form **Ama**)

**Patrem** - Father (Familiar form **Pari** equivalent to dad)

**Matrula** - Mother (Familiar form **Mari** equivalent to mom)

**Fratrin** - Brother, but one of honour, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus.

**Caris** - Beloved, precious, cherished

**Derra** - Wife. Female bond-mate.

**Verro** - Husband, male bond-mate.

**Obluvis** - plural **Obluvi**. One who is senile or absent-minded. Slang: Idiot

**89 Days ASR (Horizon)**

~Garrus~

Garrus slipped out of bed before the other two woke. The world outside the window remained dark and silent, unwilling to release the cool peace of night. As much as he'd love to curl around Shepard and go back to sleep until the sun appeared, he needed to get his machinations rolling before everyone woke and the day stripped away any chance of secrecy.

Dressing to the cacophonous tune of Nihlus and Shepard's mismatched snoring, he wondered how the three of them got any sleep. The walls practically shook with the vibrations. Of course, it might be a matter of cancelling each other out … like a deafening white noise generator.

He paused, standing over the bed as Shepard muttered a little and rolled over, curling in next to Nihlus. Spirits, where had their life come from? He'd never imagined anything like it. With his former career, he figured on being single, working too many hours to have time for anything more than drinks with colleagues. But wasn't it beautiful, the picture spread before him? And then Izzy
... He couldn't have dreamed feeling so much love.

Leaning over the bed, he nuzzled Shepard's ear, filling up on her scent, the soft whisper of her heartbeat.

"Mmm." Unfocused eyes blinked up at him. "Callor? You okay?"

"Perfect," he whispered against her lips. He kissed her, her breath so warm against his hide that he just drifted there, savouring it. Finally, he whispered, "Go back to sleep, Kahri."

She nuzzled him, the tip of her nose cool against his cheekbone. "I love you."

"I love you, too." He closed his eyes and kissed her again before pushing himself straight.

Nihlus grumbled and rolled over, gathering Shepard into his arms. Tilting his head toward Garrus, the Spectre made a sorry facsimile of kissy lips, smacking his mouth plates together. "Where's my kiss? Don't you love me, too?"

Garrus chuckled. "Go back to sleep, oblavis."

The general crept out the door of the prefab and into the chill dampness of early morning. Making his way across the colony, he smiled and drew in deep lungfuls of air, the scents of grass and budding leaves heavenly after the endless ozone of recycled and filtered air. Spirits, he missed it. Most every day during his cycles at C-Sec, he headed out to the presidium to eat his lunch, preferring the fake sunlight and real grass to the street lights and cement of the parks in the wards.

The gardens Archangel created on Omega didn't manage the same open feeling of paradise, but as a place of sanity and centering, they'd served him well. He hoped they were replanted by the time he returned. Some days his will to continue the battle had hinged on sitting next to the small stream that wandered through the space. For those moments he didn't need to do or be anything. All he needed to do was breathe in the flowers and watch the fish flit through the water.

"Good morning, General."

He looked up, jolted from his thoughts. Still, a genuine smile greeted Oriana Lawson … Ferrer. "Good morning, Ms. Ferrer. Did you sleep well?"

When they arrived at Horizon, Shepard asked the protheans to house the younger Lawson sister and her family down in the lower levels of the prothean base. She believed that the shielding protecting the Crucible might disguise Oriana's tracker signal as well. Garrus hoped so. Bastards didn't come more ruthless than Henry Lawson.

Oriana chuckled, falling in next to him as he continued to the shuttles. "Surprisingly enough, I did, despite discovering I have a megalomaniac biological father who can track me anywhere due to a radioactive marker he embedded in my DNA." She grinned up at him, far more cheery than anyone had a right to be under the circumstances. Maybe it was shock? "Maybe it's because I also found a sister."

Spinning a sudden circle, she threw her arms wide. "Maybe it's because we're here on this gorgeous planet, not a city in sight, and my parents have dived into Sanctuary with so much passion. They're overjoyed to be doing something pure." She shrugged, her smile one of absolute relief. "I know working for Cerberus weighed on them, regardless of how distant the association was."

Garrus gripped her shoulder. "I'm glad, we'll need the facility far sooner than we're prepared for." Squeezing it, he smiled. "But not today. Today we take a day off." Lifting his hand, he waved to
the others already gathered at the shuttles. Yeah, that day, they all just needed to relax.

Miranda hurried to Oriana, and checked her sister over while peppering the young woman with questions.

Oriana chuckled and grabbed Miranda's shoulders. "You're the one he threw off the top of an arcology, not me. I had a wall of turian and drell protecting me the entire time." She drew Miranda into a hug. "Relax. We're here. We're safe, and the sun is starting to come up. It's going to be a beautiful day."

Laughing softly, Miranda nodded. "Very well." Gathering her sister in against her side, she guided the young woman toward the shuttle. "It's been a hard couple of weeks, I suppose we all deserve a party before taking on the collectors."

"Indeed," Garrus agreed, his smile cold, his eyes solid ice as he met Miranda's gaze. For Shepard and Nihlus's sakes he could be civil, if only just. And she spoke the truth. They did deserve a chance to celebrate, none more than Shepard and Nihlus.

When Nihlus called him aside in the medbay, bemoaning the fate of his beautifully arranged wedding venue on the beach outside Nos Astra, Garrus agreed to go and salvage everything before the guards decided they'd been abandoned. When he'd seen the gossamer tents and the flowers … the sheer love Nihlus had poured into making the day special for Shepard, Garrus knew he needed to do something to make up for his fratri's disappointment.

Hence, heading out before dawn to a lake the locals claimed was one of the most beautiful places in the galaxy. For it being far too early in the morning, a good crowd of volunteers stood next to the shuttles ready to get to work.

"I'm here under protest," Bunny shouted above everyone's cheery greetings. She waited until all eyes fixed on her before slamming her arms down over her chest. She stabbed her mother with a sharpened scowl when Lucy patted her back, a gentle rebuke. "What? Am I the only one who thinks the greedy bitch already has a perfectly good husband?"

Garrus shrugged, throwing his arms wide. "I know, why mess with perfection, right?" He gave her a gentle shove toward the hatch. "Just get on the shuttle, problem child." He chuckled at the string of muttered obscenities that answered him and followed her in, gripping one of the handles along the shuttle's roof.

A soft touch brushed the outside of his hand, drawing his attention down to his mari, her stare warm, the love looking up at him tangible.

He took her hand, gripping her talons as the shuttle lifted off. "I didn't know you were coming along." Releasing her, he caressed her face. "You're looking so good. The treatments—" He chuckled and shook his head, love and amazement tangling around the base of his tongue. As much as he'd held out hope for the salarian doctor's treatment, he never expected the difference to be so drastic. The corners of his eyes pricked, emotion lowering his intelligence to blathering level. "You just look so good."

Her mandibles flicked, her smile light and free of pain. "So you've said … ten or twelve times, now." She nodded and shifted a little in her chair, as if testing for any hidden aches. "I am pain-free." A shrug rolled across her shoulders. "I can't lie and say that I'm back to my old self, and I really don't enjoy Omega." She pressed his hand to her cheek. "But it's a small discomfort if spending the next cycle on that rock allows me to be around for days like this."
Garrus nodded. "Izzy is going to need both her amas." The shuttle settled into level flight and he crouched in front of his mari, his hands on her knees. "And I spent far too long away from you." Leaning in, he touched his brow to hers. "Omega may be a dirty old rock, but I'm glad you, Pari, and Sol are so close."

She leaned into him, her warmth a revelation in the moment. Why had he stayed away, letting his entire family deal with the fear and dread of her deteriorating health?

No. He clenched his teeth and nuzzled her brow. That belonged in the past. All it could do was sour the present, and in the present, his fratrin and his bond-mate deserved a beautiful day.

Shifting back into his crouch, he grinned at her. "This production could use a foreperson. You up to the challenge?"

She winked. "Boss everyone around while I sit here and look officious? It's the career I've been training for since you were born."

When the shuttle landed, Garrus and his father helped steady his mari's chair until it hovered above the green, wild meadow. Straightening, he looked out over the glistening grass and the flowers bobbing in the breeze, buds tipped toward the horizon, awaiting the sun. Pristine green-blue waters glistened in the shadow of the mountain, the still depths fed by a glacial river pouring down the side of a distant mountain, its height lost in the wispy clouds.

"Don't let her pretty face fool you," one of the shuttle pilots said, already carrying the first load of supplies off his boat. "As soon as the sun hits overhead, you'll all be swearing that the grass is a mirage, and you're stranded in the desert."

Garrus chuckled at the flowery language coming from the block of a man, his neck hunched down into his shoulders, his body built wide and almost straight down from his shoulders. "Good to know before we're roasting in our suits."

Turning toward the sun, he shaded his eyes and looked at the horizon. They had a few hours before the planet started cooking them. Anyway, he thanked his foresight of bringing all the large fans from Illium. Even under the shade of the tents, they'd need air moving through the evening, especially if they danced … and he intended to dance with his bond-mate and to make sure her new verro danced until he wore through his boots.

"Still protesting, if you care," Bunny called, snatching him from the moment of joy. She marched past him with a duffel slung over her shoulder. Sticking her tongue out at him, she flounced off.

If only she realized how adorable her attitude-filled flouncing looked and how ridiculous. He turned to Kaidan and winked. Garrus grinned as Kaidan nodded and strode past him, following Bunny to the lakeside. The kid didn't stand a chance against Sparky. Well, unless she got him blushing, and he started on fire.

"So," Kaidan called, "you're the whiny, pain in the ass sister?" He jogged up beside the teenager and looked her up and down. "I thought you'd be … I don't know …" He shrugged. "… younger judging by the stories of your temper tantrums." A heavy sigh announced his disappointment. "And … if you were a bad ass, I guess I expected someone more impressive."

Garrus followed, closing the distance as Kaidan upped the chance of being attacked by a rabid nineteen-year-old.

Instead of hitting him, Bunny brayed a single, forced laugh. "Oh, no, the pretty boy doesn't think
I'm impressive." She clapped one hand over her heart and stumbled a little as she said, "However will I ever recover from how few fucks I give?" She shook her head. "Go tell the general that I don't need my sister's friends following me around telling me how amazing she is. I agreed not to kill her."

Kaidan laughed. "Oh, you're going to be a lot of fun." He turned toward her, walking sideways as he said, "Bring it, kid. I can take whatever you can dish out."

Garrus grinned, his heart light, spirits high. It looked to be a wonderful day.

---Shepard---

At some point Shepard must have moved around enough to disturb Nihlus. Little wonder, her dreams chased her in circles, the face of the enemy morphing from the Illusive Man to collectors and the dark, terrible voice that reached into her from the swarm. Now and again, Amalair whispered to her of destiny and sacrifice, those phantasms more terrifying than the ones where she hammered at an invisible wall, trying to reach Garrus and Nihlus … all her loved ones on the other side. Yes, the dreams of being some predestined savior tore bigger pieces from her than the ones where she huddled frozen in a drift of ash, sweating and shaking, obsessed with nothing outside of getting another hit while the world burned around her, the dying screaming her name.

The early, soft gold of the sun streamed across their bed when she woke again. Nihlus had turned over to face her, his arms holding her tucked in against him. Not that she felt any need to complain. Instead, she snuggled in tighter, slipping a foot between his calves.

"Stop wriggling," he mumbled, nuzzling her brow. "Some people are trying to sleep in." Still, his arms tightened around her, one broad, warm palm rubbing her back in sleepy circles. "Go back to sleep. I've got you."

Shepard squeezed her eyes tight and swallowed, bracing against the fist closing around her throat. He did, and he always had. Even in the days when they could barely stand to be on the same planet, he'd always been right there if she needed him. Wiping her sweaty face on her sleeve, she tried to beat down the demon and just be there with him in the moment.

"I don't want to sleep, I want to snuggle," she wheedled and kissed his chin. Sweet baby Jesus, he smelled good … almost magical. Like the morning. The sun remained low and cool, not warm enough to dry the dew-laden grass sweetening the breeze wafting in the open window. How long had it been since she'd woken up breathing anything but canned air?

She drew in another deep breath, savouring the scents of summer and the torin in her arms. Spirits, she could survive forever just feasting on that air.

Letting out a long sigh, she whispered, "It's still early. We're on a planet. There's real sunlight and an honest-to-Enkindlers breeze blowing in our window." She stretched in the circle of his arms, her body letting out a long wail in protest. "It's a perfect morning to get in some serious snuggling time."

He chuckled and tucked her in under his chin. "So it is. And we do have a lot of rushed mornings to make up for." Letting out a long breath, he continued caressing her, the heel of his hand massaging along her spine, his rhythm easing the sizzling of her nerves and helping her relax the muscles in her jaw. "I'd hoped to be waking up next to my bond-mate this morning."

Shepard leaned back into the soft support of her pillows and looked up into his eyes. "That was
your big secret, wasn't it? You wanted to surprise me with a perfect day where we had our date." She reached up, the plates of his face as rough as they were cherished under her hand. "Our day will come, old guy." Her thumb brushed the length of his nose. "For now, it's a beautiful day, and we are all alone in bed." She ducked her head down a little, looking up at him from under heavy lids. Wriggling her brows, she caught the corner of her bottom lip between her canines. "You know ... we could maybe—"

"Have the bed all to ourselves to spread out and go back to sleep?" he asked, leaning up. "Excellent idea." Bracing his hands against her shoulder and hip, he pushed her over to Garrus's side of the bed. Flopping on his back, he stretched out, one arm splayed across her chest. "Oh yeah, that's so much better."

Beating down a grin, Shepard kicked him and shoved his arm onto the mattress. "You're terrible." Throwing back the covers, she sat on the side of the bed, chin lifted, arms slammed down over her chest. When he dragged a single talon pad down the line of her spine, her skin prickled in a delicious, honey wash of goose pimples. Still, she just shook her head. "Nope. You're a poophead. I think I will go find a nice spot in the sun and begin writing my memoirs, Holy, Glowing Enkindler Buttocks: The Jane Shepard Story."

A full, throaty laugh rolled across the open expanse of wrinkled, white cotton, subvocals impacting her skin in vibrating waves of love and joy. Hands snatched her shoulders, talon points pricking ever so slightly as Nihlus tugged her back into his arms.

She landed laying across his lap, the edges of his plates cutting across her wounds, but other than sorting herself, she set aside the pain and the early morning trembling of her hands. Instead, she grinned up at him, stare basking in his eyes' brilliant glimmer. It never failed to amaze her how far he ... how far they'd both come in two years.

Leaning up, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down to whisper against his mouth, "Oh my, look who's getting all take charge and domineering." Closing her eyes, she savoured the intoxicating texture of his hide and plates where they brushed bare skin, and drew in a deep breath of his scent. The usual spice-laden desert breeze drifted over the slight, but masculine, musk of sleep. It crept along her veins, settling into her muscle and bone, offsetting their pained trembling with a slow, delicious pulse.

His mandibles tickled her cheeks as they fluttered. "Like the dominant type, do you?" He kissed her, long and slow, the plates of his mouth pressing into her hers, tongue caressing her lips with an almost reverent touch. "Who would have guessed Jane Shepard had such a submissive, squishy, romantic side?" he whispered.

"I'm an enigma," she replied, leaning up to deepen the kiss for a moment. Tipping her head in a slight shrug, she pulled back just enough for air to move between them. "And I like you. You know, a little bit, even though you're a jerk."

Closing the hair's breadth between them, Nihlus rested his brow against hers. "I thought we were supposed to be snuggling, not playing 'bait the turian.'"

"You were the one who wanted the bed all to yourself." Shepard wriggled loose and sat up. "And now you've distracted me from snuggling long enough that I have to pee." She swallowed a hard ball of guilt at the partial truth, but if she put it off any longer, she wouldn't be able to see or feel anything beyond the pain. Happy or not, her damned body needed to heal a hell of a lot faster.

A lazy hand slid down the length of her spine. "Hurry back, the bed's getting cold."
She tossed a grin back over her shoulder then yelped as her toes hit the floor. "Holy, blessed, mating-tree of the ancestral Enkindlers, this floor is freezing." She ran to the bathroom, hopping over their armour and baggage. The bathroom floor, while no warmer, at least boasted a thick, fluffy bath mat. Once her rimy toes burrowed down into the rug's shag, she doubted she'd convince them to leave it. Of course, walking back to the bed with a rug dragging between her legs hardly painted a sexy picture. In fact it would look far too much like the way she ran to get to the toilet, stripped down to her undies after being away on a mission for eight hours, then dragging a towel back to mop up the inevitable oopsies.

Ahhh … the classy life of an undead Spectre. Maybe Miranda could give her a bladder-size upgrade.

She dug under the folded towels, extracting her case of syringes with care not to make a lot of suspicious non-peeing noises. In fact, since she was hopping around, thighs squeezed together, she really needed to reassess her priorities. She wriggled out of her shorts and plunked down on the toilet, the syringe case balanced on her knees.

The door opened, and she jumped, sending the case crashing to the metal floor. Syringes scattered everywhere as Nihlus stepped across the threshold.

"Nihlus!" She snatched her shorts from her calves and yanked them up as far as she could get them. "I'm peeing!"

He shrugged and crouched to pick up the metal container, placing the painkillers back inside as he gathered them up. "I've seen you wearing a lot less."

"That's not the point." Although, what was the point when she'd squatted beside Marines over holes she'd helped dig and fill in? Grumbling, she glared at him, but didn't press the issue. Maybe her embarrassment leaned closer to his seeing her stash than seeing her tinkle.

Once Nihlus gathered up all the injections, he crouched at her knees and removed one from the case. Hands resting on her thighs, he stared into her eyes. "Which pain are these treating?"

Shepard opened her mouth and took a breath, preparing to give him the standard explanation about the pain her wounds inflicted every second of every day. Instead, Nihlus shook his head and pressed a talon pad over her lips.

"Listen, I'm the last person to tell someone they can't treat their pain any way they need to, and you're as sharp as ever on the field." He stroked the outside of her thigh with the back of his talon. "Anyone further away than Garrus and I wouldn't even know anything was going on."

"Anyone further away than Garrus and I wouldn't even know anything was going on."

"And I love you, always … no matter
what." Another kiss, that one fanning some air onto the fire, before he continued, "I need you to remember and believe that, and don't hide this from me."

Eyes closing, he leaned his brow against hers, the deep … settled … feeling of his spirit taking root in her chest, her heart aching even while the pain and need eased. "In fact, will you do something for me?"

Shepard choked on the storm cloud of tears and snot looming on the horizon. "Anything. Always." The words came out thick, stumbling over her tongue, but a soft flicker of his mandibles told her that he understood.

"I don't think hiding and taking them is healthy for you mentally. It's too close to drug addict behavior. Let me keep them to make you accountable and aware of how often you use them. When you need a shot, let me give it to you. Okay?" His hand cradled the back of her neck, thumb caressing her hairline. "I won't refuse, unless it actually endangers you, and even then, we'll go see Chakwas or Mordin for another solution."

He sighed and leaned in to touch his nose to hers. "There's no judgement at all. I just don't want to start our lives together with this wall between us." He deepened the embrace, whispering against her lips, "And I really don't want you to feel like you're returning to that scared, desperate kid, living to take her next hit."

A soft, grateful sob broke from Shepard's lips as she threw her arms around him. Dear, sweet baby Jesus, what had she ever done to earn the love of two such remarkable torins? She nodded, her words drowning behind the dam that held back the deluge.

"Thank you." He eased his way out of her grip. "Finish up in here, and we'll head down to talk to the docs." Another kiss, a bright grin blossoming in its wake. "Now we're definitely as bonded. We've kissed with one of us sitting on the toilet."

Bright laughter teased a warm blush across her nose. "All right, smart guy, go get dressed. I'll be out in a second."

He stood. "Don't shower without me. We'll see the docs, have some breakfast out under the sun, and then I'll wash your back." A loving hand stroked the angle of her jaw. "I still intend to get some serious quality time with you even if we're not on our honeymoon."

Shepard grasped his hand between both of hers and drew it to her lips to kiss his knuckles. "I love the sound of that." Releasing him, she waved her hands, shooing him toward the door. "Now, scram and let me get off the damn toilet before my legs go to sleep."

Once the door closed behind him, she finished up, pausing to wipe away the blood left behind by the wound on her right thigh. Damn wounds. Someone needed to invent something to heal them and fast.

An hour later, she and Nihlus sat out on the balcony of the house, a variety of fruits, meats, cheeses, fresh bread, butter, and homemade preserves in both chiralities laid out. Shepard stared at the spread, a broad grin greeting the variety of things the colonists and the Sanctuary Project produced.

"I think I need to live here," she said, holding up a scone to inhale the gorgeous, toasty scent. "This is heaven. I just want to sit here for the next hundred and twenty years and eat." She sliced it open and spread an egregious amount of butter across the steaming surface. Doing her best impersonation of a forty-five kilo cat on a sunny porch, she let out a throaty purr as she closed her
eyes to take the first bite. Heaven. Sweet, buttery heaven.

"Oh, my Lord." She groaned around the mouthful, giving Nihlus a crumb-coated smile. "I've changed my mind, caris. I'm marrying this scone."

"I refuse to share my derra with a pastry," her verro said from the doorway behind her.

She shrugged without turning to look at Garrus, feigning nonchalance despite how hard and fast her heart leaped at the sound of his voice. "I guess that means I'm totally cheating on you right now." She took another bite. "Mmm, sweet, succulent infidelity."

Garrus leaned down and nuzzled Shepard's ear, his breath tickling her skin into goose pimples as he replied, "My only solace lies in the knowledge that the scone won't survive the morning."

She turned and pressed a buttery kiss to his mandible. "It will be lucky to survive the next ten minutes, especially if I put some of that apple butter on it."

"This joke is going somewhere disturbing." Garrus stepped around to sit on her right hand side. "Eat all day, if you must," he said, stretching up to survey the dextro dishes, "but I've set something up for supper. A shuttle will pick us up at the landing at 1800." He began picking through the dishes, a slow cascade of happy, pleasure noises building until he sat back and stared at his heaped plate as if admiring a fine work of art ... or a display case of latest mods for his rifles. Probably the latter.

"You're not going to be hungry for your own supper surprise," Shepard teased. Scone forgotten on her plate, she reached out to caress his cheek and down the length of his neck. "Is that where you disappeared to before the sun rose?"

Garrus shrugged but leaned into her touch. "I took the kids for a run out: a team-building exercise."

He dug into his breakfast, glancing up at Shepard then Nihlus. "What did you two do? Sleep in?"

Shepard chuckled and shook her head. "Not as long as Nihlus would have liked. Instead, we headed over to the base and talked to Karin and Mordin about my pain levels." When Garrus stopped and set down his utensil, she followed suit to focus on him. He deserved that. "Nihlus assured me that you knew as well as he did that I was taking extra meds to keep the pain under control."

Garrus nodded and put his hand on the table, palm up in offering. When she laced her fingers through his, he let out a long breath. "From the beginning, yes." He squeezed her hand. "But, you've had real reason, and you're handling it."

Staring into her husband's eyes, Shepard found herself completely speechless. Every single thought died halfway through, washed away by gratitude and love. A love longer and wider and deeper than she ever imagined existed, the absolute trust in his gaze blowing her away.

"Karin adjusted her meds and gave us a better quality medication to use if the pain becomes overwhelming," Nihlus continued. Bless him for buying her time. He placed a container on the table and slid it over next to Shepard's plate. "Jane and I made a deal that when she needs a shot, she'll come to me, and I'll give it to her."

"No secrets," Shepard said, finally squeezing sound through the atom-wide fissure. "Accountability." She picked up the container and held it out to Garrus. "I'd like you to have one as well, but you don't need to if you're uncomfortable with it."

The expression on her husband's face as he plucked the case from her hand said everything she ever needed to know about the two of them. Still his mandibles fluttered, and he nodded. "It's my
privilege." He placed the case next to his plate then caressed her face. "I'm glad you're letting us into this. I know you worry about being a burden or stress, but it's better to know exactly what's going on."

Shepard lifted up to kiss him. "Thank you, Callor. You're the very best husband in the entire galaxy."

"I know." He grinned and pushed her back into her chair, her butt thumping onto the cushion. "Now, sit down and let's finish vacuuming up this amazing breakfast. Big day ahead."

(A-N: And it's still alive. I wish there was a way to have a mailing list to let people know when I get sidetracked or sidelined. I'm sincerely hoping to get this baby back to once a week, at least. We're so close. :D Thanks for sticking with me. I truly appreciate it.)
Future Continuous Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Shepard lifted a hand to block the sun's assault on her eyes, the brilliant orb sinking close enough to the horizon to blind her. Then her verro stepped in to shade her, and his promised supper-time surprise revealed itself in the form of a small pavilion made from layers of gauzy, champagne-coloured drapes. "What's this?"

Derra - Wife. Female bond-mate.
Verro - Husband, male bond-mate.
Obluvis - plural Obluvi. One who is senile or absent-minded. Slang: Idiot
Fratrin - Brother, but one of honour, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus.
Patrem - Father (Familiar form Pari equivalent to dad)
Matrula - Mother (Familiar form Mari equivalent to mom)
Pahir - (plural: Pahirin) Male progeny.
Mahir - (plural: Mahirin) Female progeny.
Cohamentum - Dance of the elements. Performed during turian bonding ceremonies.

89 Days ASR 1800 hrs (Horizon)

Shepard lifted a hand to block the sun's assault on her eyes, the brilliant orb sinking close enough to the horizon to blind her. Then her verro stepped in to shade her, and his promised supper-time surprise revealed itself in the form of a small pavilion made from layers of gauzy, champagne-coloured drapes.

Her heart trembled in her chest, stealing all the air from her lungs and all the strength from her limbs as she looked into Garrus's eyes. "What's this?" she asked, blushing a little at the breeze whistling through her voice.

"Come inside with me, and you'll find out." Garrus glanced over at Nihlus, something passing between them that Shepard caught just the tail of. When her Callor held out his hand, she took it and followed him through the drapes.

What awaited her on the other side stole her breath. A dark rose-coloured chaise stood along the tent wall on her right, and directly before her a mirrored dressing table reflected her slack-jawed, idiotic gaping.
"Holy, glowing Enkindler buttocks, Callor." She turned to look up at him, heart beating hard but steady. "What is all this?"

Instead of answering, he stepped aside, revealing a dressing dummy draped in a long, sheer, blue goddess gown, a chain made of glittering shells belted around the waist. Beneath it, a deep sapphire one piece swimsuit hugged the mannequin, generous cutouts showing the sides and most of the belly. The perfect gown for a beach wedding.

Garrus grinned, mandibles flicking in response to her sheer delight. "It's a little daring for a wedding dress, but I think Nihlus will approve." Using their clasped hands, he drew her into his embrace. "I definitely approve."

"Lucille will have a heart attack," Shepard said, bright laughter bubbling out: sunshine through leaves. "But I definitely approve." Slipping a hand behind his neck, she pulled him down until their brows kissed. "Thank you. For doing this for me, but more … for doing it for Nihlus. He's been keeping a stiff upper lip, but I know he was really disappointed he didn't get to spring his surprise on Illium."

Garrus nodded, just a slight shift of his head against hers. "He asked me to clean everything up, but when I saw how much love he'd put into it …." Rumbling low in his throat, he shrugged, the motion felt rather than seen. "You're his whole heart, Kahri. If I had even a single cell of doubt, seeing that beach killed it off. He loves you as much as I do, and we all deserve to have that love in our lives."

"You're the very best verro and fratrin ever." She grinned, her life opening up before her, the walls fading into translucence. "For a few more minutes anyway, then you'll have to share the title of verro."

"I look forward to it." Rough, perfect mouth plates nuzzled her lips; the scents of cloves and open forests soaking down into her gut, relaxing every muscle. Garrus groaned against her lips. "I'm going to go get Nihlus settled, sic Thane and Sol on him, and then I'll be back."

Shepard didn't let him escape; instead, she tipped her head to kiss him, long and slow, lips caressing and tongue teasing. In that moment, his heart shining so brilliantly that it inspired and blinded her with awe, she wanted to kiss him forever, to sink into the warm waves of love and safety washing over her.

After more than a minute, Garrus grumbled and pulled away. "If we keep this up, it'll be dark before we even get started celebrating," he whispered, his breath lingering, warm and sweet, between them. "I'll be back."

Shepard held onto his hand until distance pulled him from her grip, and he disappeared on the other side of the curtains. Letting out a soft groan, she turned a circle. She took long breaths, struggling to catch up with that latest, sudden twist of fate. Everything … every day … raced by so fast that it kept her breathless and spinning, either floundering through quicksand or sweeping away on the slightest breeze. That morning—Nihlus's intervention—told her just how unstable—how thin and brittle—her anchor chain had become.

No more. She cracked her neck, then her shoulders—that one hurt like a motherhumper—and closed in on the wedding dress with all the caution and due diligence of approaching a wild animal. Fear prickled along her spine as if it might flee or fight back: she knew the impulse.

The powder blue silk trickled like cool water over her fingertips, and she cursed Garrus for his fantastic taste in fabrics. If she didn't control herself, she'd end up standing there fondling the dress
until he came back. Letting out a truly pathetic sigh, even by her standards, she turned away and began to strip out of her uniform, starting with her boots. As she exposed her skin to the heat, it prickled as though she'd contracted heat rash.

Damn, who knew the 'paradisiacal temperature' of Horizon resembled that of the first level of hell? Not one of the scary layers where you had to take razor-wire-yarn crochet lessons from Hitler all day. Nope, the really top of the top layers; the ones for people who stole the pocket change off their dad's dresser, put the new toilet paper roll next to the dispenser, and skimmed icing off other people's birthday cakes.

She slipped into the swim suit, ready to race to the nearest source of water even though it was probably a water bottle—maybe even a chilled one—and shove herself down the neck. She'd lost weight since she died, she could make it. Taking a moment to examine herself in the mirror, she winced at the scars showing through the generous windows in the shimmering, deep blue fabric.

"You look beautiful," a soft voice said from the entry.

Shepard looked past her reflection to watch her mother walk up behind her. Bunny lurked just inside the curtain. Forcing a smile, Shepard shook her head. "I wouldn't say beautiful, but thank you." For a split second, she almost called Lucille, Mama, but the glower on her sister's face warned her off. The hatred in that expression promised violence at the drop of a hat.

Shepard blamed herself. She needed to spend more time with Bunny, build a relationship. Maybe once the kid graduated Archangel, she could come along on missions; they could bond in the trenches.

Or she'll shoot you in the back of the head because you say or do something she doesn't like.

"Come on in," Shepard said, meeting Bunny's stare in the mirror. "Take a seat. It's a party, not a formal inspection." The truth of their situation probably ran closer to benign neglect on her part. Shepard couldn't look at Bunny without being hammered by all the love and pain and worry she'd felt over more than a decade. She adored her baby sister, had sacrificed her body and spirit to save her, and to see nothing but hatred coming back at her sliced far deeper than the batarian whips.

A wave of dizziness slammed into her, sending her stumbling into the dresser. Catching herself against the blessedly solid surface, she leaned into it. She pulled deep breaths in through pursed lips, trying to beat back the tsunami ... trying to beat back the truth. She pressed her eyes closed, letting the dresser support her weight. Bunny screwed up her internal equilibrium, the girl's presence bringing back the nightmare of those twenty-seven hours, right down to the taste of blood and broken teeth.

Stop it. This isn't about Bunny, and it's not about you. It's about giving Nihlus the day he deserves.

Pushing herself back onto her feet, Shepard met her kid sister's stare and forced a smile onto her face. It felt more like a grimace, but when she spoke, she felt good about the lightness jammed into her tone. "Party? Celebration? Good times."

Bunny cursed under her breath and slammed her arms down over her chest. "Yeah, another celebration brought to you by the brainwashed cult of half-dead Shepard. Whoopee."

Shepard felt rather than saw the glare Lucille shot at her younger daughter. Deciding it best to leave the girl to her attitude, Shepard turned back to the dressing dummy. "I have no idea how to wear this." A soft, self-conscious laugh tumbled through her lips, all corners. In the time it took to utter a couple of sentences, all her bliss evaporated into smoke. Removing the belt wrapped around
the dress's waist, Shepard set it aside.

"We'll figure it out." Lucille reached around her to slip the dress off the mannequin. "There's not much to it, so it shouldn't take too much engineering skill. The trick will be making sure you don't look like you're getting married in some hippy, nudist ceremony." She waved for Shepard to turn around before the captain managed to put any thought into the not-so-subtle dig. Lucy waved once more, that one steeped in brusque efficiency. "Come on, now. Back facing me, and let's get this production underway."

Shepard chuckled, that one feeling like the heaving hiccups that preceded throwing up. Tears prickled in the corners of her eyes. She'd hoped and struggled so long to find Bunny, and then she'd been gifted with Lucille as well. And now … now she just wanted them to leave and allow her to enjoy her day. And, of course, wanting them gone festered, forming a cancerous tumour of self-hatred. The malignant growth sunk roots deep into her heart, consuming the organ a little at a time.

Garrus ducked into the tent, plowing straight over Bunny. "Oops, sorry about that, kid," he said, grabbing her shoulders to keep her on her feet. He closed the couple of metres to stand in front of Shepard and reached up, his palms warm and comforting as he cradled her face between them. Sweet baby Jesus, they felt like heating elements against the chill freezing her from the inside out.

Without loosening his stare's hold on Shepard, the general cleared his throat. "Ladies, would you mind if I claimed the honor of helping my wife dress for her bonding ceremony?" His mandibles tightened against his mouth a little when Bunny scoffed, but otherwise he remained unreadable and fixed on Shepard.

"Of course, General," Lucy said. "Perhaps since you purchased it, you're more qualified to figure out how to cover an entire woman with a few scarves."

Instant, intense fury blazed through Shepard's chest, searing away all her previous guilt. Shepard jerked, trying to pry her way from her verro's grip, but his hands didn't budge. Still, Shepard struggled to get loose, her anger burning hotter by the second. How dare Lucy? If her mother and sister needed to turn their venom loose on her, fine. Turning it on Garrus … no damned way, not after everything he'd done to free them.

"Thank you," he replied, his tone even but veined with the slightest hint of frost. "I appreciate it."

As soon as the curtain closed behind them, Garrus drew her into his arms and pressed her tight against his chest. "I'm sorry, Kahri, I didn't think they'd be such jerks." He shook his head. "I thought you three might be able to make a family memory or … something."

Shaking her head, she buried her face in the curve of his neck, breathing in the strength of his spirit, molten gold pouring through her. "I'm sorry she talked to you like that; you deserve so much better."

His talon pads traced the line of her spine, slow and gentle, up and down. "So do you. You deserve every good thing this universe has to offer." He chuckled, subvocals as deep and solid as granite. "We'll just ignore the fact that the galaxy keeps throwing crap at us." Nuzzling her bare shoulder, he rumbled deep in his throat, the sound reverberating through her. "You have family now, Kahri. You have a family that loves you without any conditions or reservations, and we're here for the long haul."

Burrowing in tighter, Shepard kissed tender hide at his neck. "I couldn't ask for a better one." After a couple of seconds, she pulled away. "Come on, let's get me into this absolutely gorgeous dress and scandalize my mother."
A soft chuff drew Shepard's attention to the entrance, the set of turian toes just poking through telling her who waited outside. "Mari? Come in, please."

Garrus drew back the curtain to reveal his mother, the tarin holding a garment bag across her lap. He grinned. "I suspected you knew why he called everyone to Illium," he said, taking the bag when she held it out.

"I'd like my mahir to wear our bonding robe at both her ceremonies," Trea said, smiling up at Shepard. She passed Garrus a small case, then beckoned to Shepard. "Allow me to do the honors?"

"Of course." Shepard crossed the short distance and pulled up her shirt to take a knee next to Trea's feet. As it had at her ceremony with Garrus, his family's acceptance amazed and humbled her.

Trea took a sprig of rylamia from the little case then settled it into Shepard's hair, the comb-like leaves holding it in place. The tarin smiled, her eyes glistening with emotion as she reached out for Shepard's hand. "Beautiful." Trea pulled her in, touching brows. "My pahirs are the luckiest of torini."

Shepard shrugged. "I don't know, I'm feeling pretty lucky right now." She stood and leaned over to kiss her mother-in-law's brow. "Thank you, for everything."

Shepard followed Garrus from the tent, pausing just outside to take in the scene that Garrus had hidden behind the shuttle when they came in. Another small pavilion stood closer to the lake, a match to her own. Nihlus's dressing room, no doubt. Then, on the beach stood another, much larger tent, all the curtains drawn back to reveal tables and a dance floor.

A gasp launched her words as she said, "Holy frigging Enkindlers, big guy, this is amazing." She slipped her hand through his elbow, hugging his arm tight. "You must have shanghaied everyone to put this together this morning."

He shrugged and nodded toward the shore. "I may have grabbed a few people here and there."

Shepard balanced on tiptoes to kiss his mandible, then allowed him to lead her to the large tent. She dragged her bare feet through the grass and some ground-hugging greenery that reminded her of clover. Blessed Enkindlers, her toes hadn't experienced such pure bliss since the sand on Illium. After a second, she looked up at her husband. "Thank you for doing all this, Callor. I mean ... for me, sure, but mostly for Nihlus. He's longed for family his entire life."

Garrus nodded toward the shore where two large rocks stood at the membrane between sand and grass. Anderson stood in front of them, family, friends, and crew ranged in a loose semi-circle a few metres back. "They all wanted to help. Mari was in heaven acting as foreperson, bossing everyone around."

"Yeah." Shepard shook her head, glancing over where Trea sat. "She's amazing."

The shade under the pavilion covered Shepard's face and shoulders with cool, blissful kisses. Once out of the sun, she took in the finer details of the space. Flowers ... dear, sweet, baby Jesus, the flowers. Her fingertip traced the pink veins of a satiny lily petal. Lilies of all shades filled the air with perfume, brilliantly coloured heads nodding in the breeze of eight or so large fans set around the perimeter. Centerpieces made from candles of different heights sat unlit on each table, their flames awaiting the sun's surrender to the deepening twilight.

Garrus guided her to the left, stopping before they left the shade for the long shadows and slanted sunlight beyond the tent. Shepard leaned into her husband's arm, the reality of the day hitting
home. For as long as they remained able, those two torini would hold her safely between them, fighting at her side for the shared hope of peace.

"All right, everyone," Sol shouted, drawing all eyes to Nihlus's dressing room. "Make way for my fratrin, the best dressed senux obluvis in the galaxy."

Nihlus walked around the large pavilion, his hide more red than chocolate as it reflected twilight's lilacs, reds, and oranges. Heart stopped, Shepard watched him, struck breathless by his beauty as he stepped up to the large stones. After an impossibly long second, he turned to face her, his mandibles fluttering a little as their gazes met.

He grinned, and despite the heat his appreciative smile sparked in her gut, she knew he was going there. Oh yeah, smart-ass ready for take off, course set for cocky jerk, full speed ahead. The Spectre cleared his throat, the sound tugging at the corners of her mouth. "If anyone sees her making a run for it, tackle her. I'm not crawling through sewers or caves today."

"Nah, there aren't any windows for her to climb out, this time," Martin said, his grin even wider and more shit-eating than Nihlus's.

"All right, all right," she called, elbowing Garrus as he chuckled. "You two are endlessly hilarious. Congratulations. Now stop it." She grinned at Nihlus and gave him a broad, teasing wink. Sweeping a flourish with the arm not clutching Garrus, she posed. "I mean, come on, I'm standing here, looking incredibly gorgeous, so shush, and just admire the view."

Speaking of admiring the view, Nihlus looked glorious in his favourite suit, the deep red glinting between the black embroidery as it caught the sun. Trea's paint job on his markings gleamed brilliant white against his chocolate hide. Still, as beautiful as he looked, nothing stirred her heart like the sight of the joy in his eyes. Oh, merciful, sweet, baby Jesus, that happiness grabbed her heart and threw it, playing handball against her ribs.

She turned to look at the sunset, inhaling the long ribbons of colour down into her gut. Letting them curl through her, she slowed her heart rate, the burden of all that joy lifting enough for her to breathe.

Anderson cleared his throat, a gentle roll of sound and a question. Was she ready? She tugged a little on the front panel of the bonding robe, a tiny bit disappointed that it covered enough of her body to make Lucille happy.

And then Shepard took the first step across the open expanse of grass. Life had gifted her with an abundance of love, of course she was ready. As terrified as she was of hurting either of her verros, she knew that the three of them belonged together. Somehow, they'd see the war through and settle down, get two cats and three ponies and make ridiculous amounts of money selling fake scandals to the tabloids.

Shepard Spawns! Delivers four alien babies, all four jailed on drunk driving charges within hours of birth, see page 3.

Then Garrus placed her hand in Nihlus's and stepped behind her, taking every single thought in her head with him. Nihlus's eyes gleamed, that breathtaking green making her swooned as it had the first day in the Normandy's cargo hold. Her Spectre gripped her hand in bare talons, his thumb caressing along the line of her knuckles.

Bunny spoke the truth when she accused Shepard of being blessed with an embarrassment of riches. She smiled up into those remarkable eyes, amazed and awed by the love that stared back at
her.

Anderson spoke, and they both answered his question, but after she agreed, she couldn't have told anyone what she agreed to. She felt fairly sure it had something to do with the pair of them taking one another as bondmates. Still, everything outside the two of them—no, the three of them: she felt Garrus's presence behind her as keenly as her own breath—faded into a bright haze, fog illuminated … transmuted into magic by the sun.

"Jane?" Anderson's voice broke shattered her perfect bubble again. The soft lapping of waves against the shore filled the emptiness as the world waited for her to do or say something.

Tearing her stare from Nihlus's, she looked at the Captain, blinking back the dry burning in her eyes. How long had it been since she blinked? "Sorry, what?" Turning toward the chorus of laughter, she leveled an exaggerated scowl on their family and friends. "Oh, shush. How's a girl supposed to listen when she has someone so gorgeous standing right in front of her?"

Anderson cleared his throat: a jovial, smothered cough. When she met his gaze, those deep brown eyes smiled at her, filled with love and joy and … and … what was that? Pride. Yeah, she saw pride and acceptance of the woman she was. No wishing she could act another way or fit into any sort of mold. Anderson loved her for better or worse.

"Jane?" Damnit, he'd spoken again. This time he took mercy on her and followed up with, "Your vows?"

"Oh, yeah, of course." She focused back on Nihlus. "Vows." She shrugged. "They're not going to be poetry because no one gave me time to prepare, but I'll do my best." Taking his other hand as well, she squeezed his talons, his hide alive and electric against hers.

Nihlus smiled, but all the teasing had faded from his expression, replaced by wonder. For a moment it looked as if he intended to say something, but then he let out a long breath and relaxed into her hands.

Shepard mirrored the breath, then let the words flow, praying they didn't head off in some terrifyingly horrific direction. "I promise you everything we saw in those moments on Thessia. The closeness, the comfort, the family, and yes, my impossible mind and obsessiveness and insecurity. You know this package is far from perfect." Releasing one of his hands, she reached up to caress his cheek. "I promise honesty even when it hurts, and then to be there to comfort that hurt. I promise to drive you completely insane and mostly understand when you want to ring my neck. But, I sorta also love you to death and promise to remind you of that every chance I get."

She stroked his cheek and the length of his mandible once more, then reached behind her for Garrus's hand. When his talons wrapped around her fingers, she continued, "You've been here to catch me when I fall, to hold me up when I couldn't stand, so I will build this family at your side and help keep it strong for all of us: the family that is and the family that will be."

Another long breath whispered between open lips, her mouth beginning to feel like a well-trodden desert path. "Basically, I promise to be your cikabeknai for as long as we live." She squeezed Garrus's hand then released him to caress Nihlus's mandible.

Nihlus leaned down, reacting only by narrowing his eyes when the humans protested, no doubt thinking he was going in for the kiss. Which, of course he was, just not a human kiss. He pressed his brow against hers. "I promise the sort of love we have witnessed through the bond between Tashac and Merol. Not an imitation. Not a repetition, but something as deep and beautiful and lasting. Something unique to us."
Shepard closed her eyes, sinking into the blissful beauty of his words. Spirits, who could have guessed that this torin and the one she met her first day on the Normandy shared anything? The arrogance and cockiness that had filled her with the urge to slap him silly had matured into real soul and a beautiful humility. And so, she just breathed in that beauty as her new husband spoke.

"I promise to support you through every trouble and hardship, fight at your side through every challenge, lift you above every obstacle. I promise to help you raise our children in love and support … to make our family a refuge from the troubles of the galaxy." He shrugged, she felt it through the roll of his brow against hers, then said, "The rest we'll figure out as we go."

"With the exchange of their oaths and promises," Anderson said, his tone betraying a battle against emotion, "and with the support of their family and friends, I declare this marriage sound. Nihlus … Jane … you may now share your first kiss as husband and wife, verro and derra."

Shepard tipped her head into the kiss, the entire world disappearing outside the sensation of Nihlus's mouth against hers, his tongue teasing her bottom lip. From behind her, Garrus's happiness warmed her back like the sun, which had disappeared behind the mountains.

Dear, sweet baby Jesus, I'm not saying I believe in you like I used to in my childhood, but if you do exist … please. Please watch over them and keep them safe. And … and please keep me from screwing it up. Please.

She returned Nihlus's kiss with all the passion she'd been terrified of before she died. Heart pounding hard and slow, she savoured the moment and the sensations. Nerves fluttered and tingled in her belly as the passion flared between them; the downside to Nihlus insisting on waiting for their wedding night to make love.

Anderson cleared his throat. "Break it up, you two," he grumbled, his smile shining through the words, "or I'll have Alenko throw water on you."

Shepard pulled away and grinned up at Nihlus. "Wouldn't be the first time." She caressed her husband's cheek, then turned loving mirth toward Anderson. "So, are we done here, Captain? I need to dance with my verros. Tomorrow we're likely to spend the day dodging bullets."

"With the power invested in me by the Systems Alliance, I hereby declare your marriage valid." He waved to the small audience. "Everyone, I am extremely proud to introduce to you, Nihlus and Jane Shepard-Vakarian-Kryik."

Gripping Nihlus's hand tightly in hers, Shepard turned to face their friends and family, every face there glowing with love and joy. Well, most faces. Instead of giving the sourpusses recognition, she focused on Nihlus as they strode from the beach to the large pavilion.

She eyeballed the long tables covered in food, but remained on course for the dance floor. Enough breakfast remained with her to hold her over for a few dances. Spinning on her toes, she turned into Nihlus's arms. His parents never taught him the cohamentum, and he'd made it abundantly clear that he wanted their wedding to follow human traditions.

He bowed, the hand not holding hers sweeping out in a wide flourish. "Beautiful derra, will you honour me with this first dance?"

Shepard curtsied the best she could, affecting a southern belle accent as she replied, "Why, handsome verro, it would be my pleasure." She rested her hand on his waist as the music began to play, some soft, sweet quarian love song. After a moment, she abandoned the proper dance frame and pressed in tight, resting her head against his chest.
"Is this real?" she whispered despite being able to hear his heart pounding behind his keel, despite being able to feel his heat along her body and against her cheek.

A low, rumbling echoed in his chest. If contentment could be a sound, it would be that sound. "It had better be. If it's a dream, I've been asleep for months, and I'm going to be heartbroken when I wake up. These past few months have been the happiest of my life."

"Oh, Nihlus." She pulled back enough to stare into his eyes. "It's got to be real, right?" She glanced over to where Garrus danced with his *matrula*. "We're all dreaming it. That makes it real." She tugged him down into a kiss, then whispered against his mouth, "This makes it real."

Around them, the candles lit at few at a time, the people lighting them hidden by the glare. That light … that golden light pushed back the deep twilight, highlighting the dark purple-blue with spheres of golden brilliance. After a couple of seconds, sweet hints of smoke and beeswax drifted on the breeze.

Heaven. Nihlus had planned it all, and then Garrus and the crew had done their best to build his version of heaven. The perfect day, indeed.

For those moments, dancing with Nihlus, Shepard allowed herself to sink into the deep well of history and silliness and beauty that dwelled between them. Just as surreal and crazy as the rest of her life, their relationship could never have happened any other way. And despite the pain swimming through those waters, she wouldn't change any of it. Well, maybe dying. She nuzzled into the curve of his neck. No not even dying.

Nihlus held her tight, long arms wrapping around her. "I love you, Mrs. Shepard-Vakarian-Kryik." He lead her around the dance floor, the rest of the party giving them the center of the space, even as they joined in. "I've loved you my entire life."

Shepard didn't reply, taking a deep breath and submerging into the still, deep waters. She knew what he meant, the truth of it deeper than their experience on Thessia, deeper than the beacon connection. They'd been drawn to one another years before either event.

The song ended, but she held Nihlus tight, unwilling to step away and feel that absence. Why hadn't they met half a decade earlier while they still had time for their love to mature before war snatched it away?

"Are you okay?" Soft enough that it didn't break the peaceful bubble around them, Nihlus's whisper brushed her ear. His hold on her tightened.

Unable to trust her voice, Shepard nodded. Would she ever experience happiness without terror following hot on its heels? And she was all right. Fear of losing everything good in her life still fell under the 'good' heading, particularly since coming back from the dead.

_Tonight on Necromancy Bulletin; throwing the perfect zombile wedding. So, despite your zombile dysfunction, you've found the perfect mate; we can help you choose flower and candle center pieces to cover that undead odour. Also, don't give up on finding the perfect dress for your colouring just because you've begun to decay a little here and there._

She drew back and smiled up at him. "I'm fine, love." She glanced toward the edge of the dance floor where Garrus helped his *mari* back into her chair. She met Nihlus's stare once more, letting how blessed she felt glow through her smile. "It's the perfect day, *cikabeknai*. The perfect day."

(A-N: Thanks as always for your support. The fact you're still with me and these crazy kids means
everything. I love yah! :)
Nihlus pulled out a chair next to the remains of the dextro buffet table, turning it around to sit while Garrus and Shepard wandered down to the shore to say goodnight. Picking at a platter of amazingly spicy drellak strips, he watched them; their easy affection a solid raft beneath his feet. They kept him balanced and afloat even when the seas boiled under him.

Despite everything he'd said to the contrary, before Shepard returned to them, he couldn't have imagined her loving him enough to marry him. He couldn't have imagined anyone loving him that much. And now his family stood at the water line, their arms wrapped around one another, and his jaws and mandibular muscles ached from smiling so wide for so long.

As if they felt him watching, they both turned to look at him, Shepard blowing him a kiss before focusing on Garrus. They kissed, long and passionate, then embraced, foreheads pressed together. Seeing their goodnight coming to an end, Nihlus stood, wandering over to lean against one of the pavilion's posts.

"Goodnight, Nihlus," Garrus called as they approached, arms slung around one another. When they reached the large tent, the general disentangled himself from Shepard to embrace Nihlus by the shoulders. "Congratulations, fratrin."

Heart aching with happiness, Nihlus returned the embrace, brushing his brow against Garrus's. "Thank you for making this happen. It was a beautiful day."

"You're very welcome." Garrus pulled away and turned toward the shuttle, caressing Shepard's cheek as he strode past her. "See you sometime tomorrow."

"Not too early," Nihlus replied, following up with a merry chuff. If any day deserved a lay-in, it tomorrow was that day. He watched after Garrus until his fratrin stepped into the shuttle, then turned to focus on his derra. "Alone at last."
Shepard nodded as she wiped the sheen of sweat from her brow. "We are, indeed." She turned a circle, looking for something to dry her sweaty hand on, the appendage flop-waving helplessly at her side. "This planet is stupidly hot," she grumbled, then lunged forward, uttering a small victory cry as she snatched a napkin off the cluttered table. "I adore your romantic side, my love, and Garrus's for finding us another gorgeous beach, but dayum, we should have gotten married at the north pole." After dabbing her face and neck, down to the valley between her breasts, she used the napkin as an ineffectual fan. "Sweet baby Jesus and all his Enkindler friends."

Still leaning against the corner pole of the tent, relaxed and completely content, Nihlus watched her fuss, a soft smile fluttering across his mandibles. He could scent her nervousness: her worry about hurting either Garrus or him … about sex being awkward with him after being with Garrus … after his insistence on waiting. Oddly, of all the things he'd worried about over the cycles since they first met, he didn't harbour the slightest doubt that they'd be fine together in an intimate way. No, better than fine. The electricity he'd felt through the kiss they shared overlooking Nos Astra … he'd never felt anything like that connection.

She always likened him to a forest fire burning out of control. When the woman was right, she was right. He kept the flames in check, waiting for the right time and place to turn them loose. He believed he'd chosen well, and now that fire would burn away his old life and set him free.

Shepard wiped her face and neck on the napkin. "Why the hell did they take the fans away?" she said, still fussing. "I mean, who's going to steal fans on a deserted beach in the middle of nowhere?" She dropped the napkin on the table and flipped a hand at the dishes. "Should these be left here like this? Won't bears or cougars or come out of the woodwork to eat us?"

Instead of telling her that the fans had merely been relocated to their tent and that someone would remove the food, Nihlus pushed off the pole and walked toward her, his steps leisurely, teasing her a little with his calm. "Have you sufficiently vented your ire at the universe?" He grinned when she spun, her withering glare sizzling across his plates.

"Maybe." She picked up a clean dessert plate, using it as a fan. "Do you have a means of turning down the heat coming off this sand?"

"I do, in fact." Holding out his hands, he invited her to meet him halfway, but she shook her head.

"No offence, cikabeknai, but you run hotter than the sun at the best of times." Narrowing her eyes, she stared at him, her gaze filled with mischief and love.

"Did you just say that I'm hot?" When she met his teasing with a wink, he chuckled and extended his hands a little further. "I think you're legally obligated to trust me in these situations now that we've sworn our vows."

She appeared to mull it over, then nodded and stepped forward, slipping her hands into his. "Of course. Always." Releasing his hands, she reached up to cup his mandibles in the rough, worn heat of her palms. "I never want there to be the slightest doubt in your mind, Nihlus Shepard." A teasing smile framed the love in her eyes at the surname she'd assigned him. "I trust you completely and without reservation."

After a second, the smile burst into a grin. "And of course, I'm saying you're hot. By every last one of the Enkindlers' glowing backsides, husband, I've had the hots for that smokin' bod for a decade." She pressed in close. "And now it's all mine."

Nihlus guided her hands to his waist, then skated his palms up her arms and over the curves of her back to her hips, savouring the softness of the diaphanous blue silk. "As beautiful as you are in
this, I think you'll find it cooler without." He slid his hands down as far down her thighs as he could reach, catching her skirt on the way back up. Leaning next to her ear, he pressed his mandible to her cheek, a breathy whisper brushing her neck. "I've been fantasizing about doing this all day."

"Oh, have you?" Nimble fingers made quick work of the fasteners up the front panel of his tunic. "That's quite the coincidence." Tipping a heavy-lidded glance up to catch his eyes with a sultry wink, she slipped her hands beneath his tunic and light dress shirt to press against his stomach, her touch not timid but definitely careful. "Because I've been fantasizing about doing this all day too."

Hesitating with most of the sheer silk gathered at her waist, front and back dipping just enough to satisfy modesty, he nuzzled her earlobe, catching it gently between his mouth plates. "Mrs. Vakarian-Kryik, will you make love to me?"

Instead of answering, she pulled back a little, her hands covering his, coaxing them up her sides. She lifted her arms over her head to ease his removal of the very beautiful dress. She took it from his hands to drape it over the back of a chair. He watched her, rapt, as she wriggled out of the bathing suit. Once free of her clothing, she stepped back in against him, her body bare but for what amounted to a small scrap of powder-blue lace clinging to her hips.

He admired the sleek curves of her body, seeing beyond the wounds and bones sticking out in places they shouldn't, seeing the work of art … the woman. When he helped her with bathing or applying her medications, he focused on the wounds and worried over how thin she'd become. That distinction kept him from violating her trust, no matter how much he wanted to touch her in a more intimate way.

"You still with me?" she whispered, her hand brushing his cheek, unexpected and refreshing, "because you were right. This is a lot cooler." Shepard backed away, her arms held out to catch the breeze.

"Tease." Nihlus shrugged out of his tunic and unlaced the dress shirt, leaving it and his leggings in place. When he bent to undo his boots and slip them off, Shepard beat him to it. Kneeling in the grass, she took hold of the clasps, then paused, looking up into his eyes. Her soft, devoted smile slipped through his plates to take root in his chest. His heart thundered against his keel: his bondmate. Dear spirits, how could so much beauty have swept into his life on the same wind as so much horror?

"Cikabeknai?" she whispered, gaze still searching his, her fingers still poised on the clasps of his boots. "You okay?"

He caressed her cheek, his talons brushing her hair behind her ear. "Never better. I was just admiring the gift I received today."

A shy smile lit her from within as she shook her head. Looking down, she fidgeted as if the compliment didn't sit well. "Sweet talker." Deft hands beginning to tremble, she slipped his boots off and set them aside. Finished with their task, her fingers wandered up his legs, carefully avoiding his spur—thank the spirits—as she snapped open the straps around his knees. When she reached his waist, she pressed her palms against his belly. Despite her complaints about the heat, her touch felt cool.

Dear spirits, so cool, each point of contact electric, his hide singing with her energy, her unique frequency. A not altogether unpleasant, but certainly too early, pressure because to pulse behind his plates.
He cupped her face for a moment, the embers in his belly growing into flames. "Help me with my leggings?" he asked, giving his mandibles a suggestive flick. Her cheeks and across her nose blazed pink even as she smiled.

"I can. After all, you promised me a way to get cool, and all you've done is get me all heated up."

She finished with the last fasteners and laid the top of his leggings open. Easing them over his hips, she slid them down. Wandering fingers traced the lines of his plates and muscles, lingering wherever he moaned, gasped, and writhed. Spirits, those cool fingertips on his hide fanned the flames until his pulse roared in his head.

"Lift your foot," she said, her voice barely audible through the storm of desire raging through him. Then a flat palm stroking the inside of his ankle, coaxing him to allow her to slide his legging over his feet. When he didn't obey immediately, she pressed her thumb into the arch of his foot. Gaspig, he stumbled, nearly stepping on her as the world tilted, a heady rush of pleasure surging up his body to drown his brain in endorphins. "Dear spirits."

Shepard chuckled when he steadied himself with a hand on top of her head. "You turians and your erogenous feet." She slipped the leggings off the one foot and then the other. "It's a good thing the reapers don't know about that species-wide weakness."

"You going to tell them?" he teased, reaching down to lift her onto her feet. Not that he couldn't have stood to have her stay there, playing him like a stabata in a virtuoso's hands.

Shepard caressed his neck as she wrapped her arms around him, pulling him down until her lips brushed his mouth. "No," she whispered, low and throaty, "I think I'm going to keep that little secret to myself and abuse it as often as possible." She kissed him. "Pick me up and let's get on that cooling down, yeah?"

Nihlus's hands glided over her shoulder blades, thumbs tracing the sharp edge of the bone. Her skin glistened with a light sheen of sweat as he followed the long sweeps of muscles down her back. Cupping her backside, he lifted her into his arms. A ragged breath stuttered between them as she wrapped her legs around him, her sex so warm against his plates.

Tipping her head back a little, Shepard grinned at him, full of teasing mischief. "You sure you'll be okay in the water?" She squeezed his waist just enough to send a blast of need rocketing along his nervous system. "Yeah, see … you just don't seem all that steady on your feet."

"Not steady on my feet, am I?" Growling through his second larynx, Nihlus boosted her up and strode for the water, plunging into the cool shallows in five, long strides. The lake embraced them, soft sand beneath his feet, the water soothing. "I'll show you steady on my feet, derra," he said, offering the spirits a hearty plea for coordination.

"You okay?" Shepard teased, bracing as if to leap to the rescue. Her grin turned to bright laughter as he snatched her close, nipping the curve of her neck. "What? I'm just—"

He nipped her again, harder that time, earning a lusty moan for his efforts. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her breasts teasing the right side of his chest as she lifted into him. He stumbled a tiny bit, taken aback, his plates loosening at the sensation of her hardened nipples along the ridge of his plates. Judging by the sound she made as she dragged them back up the groove, Shepard felt it as well. Without lifting his head from her neck, he walked further in until the low waves lapped around their waists.

"Oh dear, sweet baby Jesus," Shepard moaned. She leaned back, Nihlus switching his grip to her waist as she laid out, floating spread-eagle, their hips the only point of contact. "This feels
Nihlus supported her, happy to be her anchor as he feasted on the beauty of her. He'd never seen her with all the guards pulled down off her walls, ballistas disarmed, gates thrown open. Spirits, she glowed brighter than the stars, soft and silver against the dark water.

She smiled up at him, her arms swirling just below the surface. "Penny for your thoughts, cikabknai?"

He stroked the curve of her waist. "Still just admiring my gift." He fluttered his mandibles. "And thinking I know why goddesses are most often associated with moons and stars." Leaning forward, he caressed her stomach, slow lazy circles, kneading her flesh. "And maybe thinking how honoured I am by your trust."

Shepard tightened her legs around him and held up a hand. "Pick me up, husband." She clung to his hand when he took hers, his other slipping around behind her back to lift her into his embrace. Water cascaded off her, washing down his front, warmed by her skin. He smoothed her hair away from her face, admiring the copper glints caught by the light of the torches on shore. He traced them with a talon. Perhaps, he could preserve the moment forever if only he could manage to capture one.

"I love you," Shepard whispered, brushing soft, cool fingertips along his mandible. Her touch coaxed him to lean into her caresses, her fingers weaving a spell of perfect contentment as she traced the patches of plate on their way to his fringe. Soft but firm, her thumbpad rolled circles into the sensitive flesh where his fringe and back of his neck met.

Her ministrations pulled a low, soft rumble of arousal and contentment through his second larynx. Allowing the water to cradle them, he melted into her touch, one hand spread across her narrow spine, the other underneath her.

"Do you realize that you purr when you're all happy and turned on?" she said, pulling back a little. "I'm sufficiently cool; pick me up, husband." She smiled, the expression suddenly so shy that his heart ached to see it. That smile spoke of too many years behind walls, a prisoner suffering a self-imposed exile inside her skin. The sheer amount of trust it took for her to show him so much of herself … spirits, he prayed he lived up to it.

Nihlus pressed her in tight against the left side of his chest. Eyes closed, he followed the warm, intoxicating beacon of her scent to her neck. Nuzzling under her jaw, his tongue drew a line from the hollow between her collarbones up her jugular groove and along the underside of her jaw. The taste of her … spirits, she tasted of an intoxicating brew of sweat, rylamia, and the iron tang of lake water. He paused when he felt the keen beat of her pulse against his mouth. Breathing slow and relaxed, he nuzzled into it, suddenly needing to feel it, needing that connection.

It seemed such a fragile thing. It fluttered, quickening as he raked his teeth over the skin. But the pulse lied, for he knew within her chest, pounding against his plates, beat the strongest heart ever born into mortal form. And it belonged to him and Garrus.

"Come on," Shepard whispered, between kisses. "I know they had to set up somewhere comfy for us. I doubt they expected us to just throw down on the grass." She shrugged, a soft giggle rolling from her lips, tickling his aural canal. "Well, at least not to make love."

Nihlus chuckled and turned to kiss her. "We're not sparring tonight. I have a bad habit of saying stupid things when we're sparring." Despite the time and healing between them, his heart took a couple of sick, squeamish beats at the thought of that day.
"Ancient history, cikabeknai." She kissed him, her lips soft as they tugged at the rigid plates of his mouth. As if to emphasize how far behind them his unkindness lay, her tongue darted out to flick just the tip of his. "It's all ancient history. Be here, with me right now."

She tried to wriggle down, but he held onto her, carrying her from the cool waters up onto the warm sand and grass, the planet clinging to the heat of the day as tightly as he clung to Shepard.

"Don't worry," he whispered, brushing his cheek against hers, savouring the cool moonlight of her skin, "I've got you. I always will."

Ducking a little, he used a shoulder to sweep aside the gauzy curtains around his pavilion. Inside, fans circulated the air, the entire place a sea of clouds enchanted by a zephyr. He set Shepard down on the rug beside the roomy bed, but kept her held in the circle of his arms.

"Looks like Mari's been busy," Shepard said, nodding toward a deep pot of oil warming over an element. Sighing, she leaned into Nihlus, allowing him to support her weight. "Shall we take advantage?"

He nodded toward the two garments hanging on the one wall. "Their bonding robes." Shaking his head, he tried to articulate how honoured and loved he felt wearing that long, black robe and all its history. His story embroidered in gold thread next to Garrus's … it meant a real family, one that loved him without question.

Gentle fingers pressed against his chin. "You found the family you always wanted." Releasing him, she turned from his arms and walked over to run the cream silk of the other robe through her fingers. "It's a beautiful thing, the way you became their brother and son the moment you and Garrus swore that oath."

Nihlus heard rather than saw her lower the chains into the oil, as he focused on unclipping the finer chains from his robe. Much as he had when Herros brought the robe in to his changing tent, Nihlus let the chains trickle through his talons. He'd never expected to take a bond-mate. Especially after Saren. The example of his parents killed all his desires to take a bond mate, and then Saren gave them a proper burial.

Then, after Saren's betrayal, this impossible, infuriating human decided to take care of him the only way she knew how—by torturing him—and suddenly he understood what it meant to be nurtured, if oddly. Everything changed that day on the Normandy. Everything.

"Hey, gorgeous." Shepard's hand rested in the small of his back. "You okay?" She stepped into him, her body so gloriously soft as she pressed against the back of his arm, her hair cool and damp where she laid her head against his arm. "You doing okay? We're getting to some really good bits here. Are you getting cold feet, cikabeknai?"

Nihlus unclipped the chains and turned into her embrace. "No, haksaya kubenar, no cold feet. I was just taking a moment to realize where I am—where we are—and soak it in. Who would have thought?"

Shepard took his hands and backed toward the bed, tugging him along behind her. "I think we put a lot of 'will they/won't they' bookmakers out of business today, and I am sooo okay with that." A soft, devoted smile shone up at him as she released him then held her hand out toward the pot of oil. "You ready to make this official in all the ways that seal the contract just between us?"
Nihlus dropped the chains into the pot, then climbed up on the bed, sitting cross legged. Once he settled, he reached out, talons inviting his mate to join him. He'd never been one for tradition, his parents had ensured that, but right then, he felt the magic of those chains and the oil calling to him. Odd that he'd finally feel fully immersed in, and grateful for, his culture the day he married an alien.

Taking Shepard's hands, he helped her climb up onto the bed, but then stopped her before she settled into the cradle of his legs. He slipped his thumbs under the blue lace clinging to her hips, then leaned up to press his face against her stomach. He nuzzled her belly button, then smiled up at her, asking permission to remove the last barrier between them.

Shepard nodded, her hands resting on his fringe, caressing the length between them. He closed his eyes as her fingers worked their magic, her touch more loving than sexy, but it was a touch he could dive into forever and never need to surface.

Nihlus kissed her stomach, taking a deep breath in through his mouth, saturating his pheromone receptors with the essence of her: lake water, the slight brine of her sweat, and the indescribable scent of her arousal. Spirits, she smelled like nothing he'd experienced before, but he understood why Garrus said hers was the scent of home. It cut through every bit of confusion and anger and resentment in his head, a window through the fog, guiding him home.

He slid her panties down a centimeter at a time, dragging careful talons along the outsides of her thighs. She gasped, her hips pushing closer when he dug in a little. Her fingers played his crest and the rim of his cowl, encouraging him as each touch sent waves of hot, aching need rolling down his spine. His mouth followed a meandering path down her belly, her toned muscles jumping beneath her skin as he nuzzled and tickled her with the point of his tongue.

"Sensitive, are we?" he teased, rolling his tongue around her belly button. Blessed Enkindlers, being able to turn her on formed the most powerful aphrodisiac in the galaxy.

Instead of answering, Shepard arched backwards and pressed his face against her skin. "Don't stop now," she said, her voice breathy, "I'm just getting warmed up." She gripped the rim of his cowl. "Oh dear lord, cikabeknai, that tongue .... You have a hell of a gift."

Nihlus doubled his ministrations until he reached the fine patch of red-blonde hair between her legs. Forgotten as the soft curl of hair tickled his hide, her panties fell down around her ankles. Brushing his cheek against the new sensation, he rumbled deep in his chest and pulled her in tighter. Mouth plates and tongue explored carefully at first, working around the edges until she squirmed so hard he could barely hang onto her.

"Sweet baby Jesus, Ni, the prize is at the center," she said between gasps. She lifted her pelvis, her thighs opening, inviting him to stop playing and get down to business.

And oh, he wanted to. Her scent deepened, beckoning him in. His tongue flicked out, tasting the droplets threatening to escape down her thigh. As indescribable as her scent, her taste pulled him in, his tongue still shy, darting in and out, even as his arms snaked around her tighter and tighter.

Shepard undulated above him, her fingers making love to his face and fringe. "Nihlus. Love." She moaned, deep in her throat. "As much as I could bear you doing that all night ...."

Nuzzling into her one last time, he nodded and then pulled back. Right. They had all night to explore one another. He drew back just enough to look up at her and offer her his hands. She accepted, taking them before she kicked her panties free of her feet.
"Help me get myself twisted into this position of yours?" she asked, squeezing his talons. She didn't need all that much help as it turned out, easily settling into his lap, her calves circling his hips.

The moment they wrapped themselves around one another, forming a single unit, a switch he'd already thought flipped, clicked over. Staring into her eyes, he set her hands down between them, then reached up to cradle her face in his talons. He smiled, seeing the same light in her eyes that he felt in his heart.

"A whole new life, despite the war, despite everything," he whispered. "From now on, it's the three of us."

Shepard nodded, lifting one hand, the fingers spread, to press just under his jaw. "Everything you are and everything that flows from you, I accept as part of me. Everything that I am and everything that flows from me, I place in your care, if you accept it." As she spoke, she raked her nails down over his keel and belly to stop just above his plates.

Nihlus pressed his hand over hers. "I accept it, haksaya kubenar. It's my honor to accept it."

Easing her back until she laid stretched back, bare and vulnerable in his embrace, Nihlus traced the lines of her scars up her belly and over her breasts to her throat, where he spread his talons over the delicate skin. She swallowed, the little bump on the front of her throat bobbing with the motion, driving home just how easily turian talons could kill. Spirits, they didn't make people of any species as brave and beautiful as his bondmate.

Raking his talons over her skin, just short of enough pressure to break the skin, he repeated the oath, offering her everything he was, and gladly. In the machine on Thessia, even though she couldn't do anything to stop the abuse, she threw herself between him and his mother every time. She'd held him and soothed the pain from the old ulua's talons. Shepard had cared for him while he mourned his father. She already possessed his soul, but to hear her say she accepted him despite and because of everything he was, it gave birth to a whole new, entirely unique peace.

Shepard sat up and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling them together until his keel pressed between her breasts and her lips brushed against his mouth. "I accept it," she said, kissing him between each word. "I love you, Nihlus Kryik, and it will be my privilege to spend the rest of my days honouring our vows."

Reaching over, she withdrew the first of his coillasi from the oil, and held out her hand. When he held his arm up between them, she wrapped the chain around it, then watched the oil trickle down, mesmerized.

"Your hide," she whispered, "looks like it's on fire with the candles reflecting on the oil." She massaged the trails of oil into his hide. "My coillas looks wonderful there." She grinned and traced a single fingertip along the sensitive edge of his forearm plate.

Nihlus nodded, agreeing but unable to squeeze sound past the lump in his throat. Everything slowed—his thoughts, his heartbeat—as he focused on her, on the way her muscles moved under her skin, the ways her expression shifted, and damn it … the way her sex loosened his plates as it moved against them.

Once the second coillas sat securely around his wrist, Shepard wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling herself up to kiss him. Soft lips tugged at his mouth, while her tongue traced its lines. "You're all mine, now," she said. The kiss deepened, her tongue coaxing his into a slow, passionate dance, the two of them pulling the other in tighter and tighter. Spirits, they almost … almost
managed to inhabit one another's skins.

"Your turn," she whispered against his mouth. "I need to get to the rubbing oil all over your body part of this ritual." She kissed his mouth and chin, and then dragged the point of her tongue along the edge of one mandible.

Nihlus pushed her away ever so gently. "You're going to need to stop distracting me, then." He brushed the end of her nose with his, then turned to fish the first of her chains from the oil. As he withdrew the linked shell, he closed his eyes and drew the scent of the oil in deep: rylamia, mint,
and a couple of herbs that grew on the bark and rocks on Palaven. If heaven possessed a smell other than his new mate's, that oil smelled like heaven.

He allowed it to drip all the way over to Shepard's waiting arm. It took two wraps to get it snug enough not to catch or fall right off. He smoothed the oil over her skin, pausing when she hissed as he rubbed it over one of her larger wounds.

"Haksaya kubenar?" Heart pounding, he laid his palm against her cheek, guiding her gaze over to meet his. "Are you all right? Does it hurt?"

Shepard smiled and captured his hand, lifting the slick, sweetly-scented talons to her lips, kissing each one. "I'm fine. It stings a little but fades almost right away. It's okay, keep going." As if to encourage him, she smoothed the oil down her forearm, then smiled. "Mama Vakarian at work again," she said. "She put that numbing tree moss in it. I can feel it working already."

Nihlus nodded, sentiment grabbing his larynges in a choke hold again. Treana, one of the most amazing blessings Shepard brought into his life. Of course, his mari made sure the oil wouldn't hurt. If his birth mother possessed an opposite, Treana Vakarian was that opposite.

Lips tugged at his mouth plate, beckoning with gentle suction. "I'm still only half bonded," Shepard whispered, an understanding smile sitting crookedly on her lips.

"Can't have that!" Focusing his wandering mind back on task, Nihlus took her hand, nuzzling her palm before he wrapped the coillas around her delicate wrist. "There," he said, snapping the clasp closed, "completely married." He caressed the oil into her skin, talon pads skating over her arm, following the smooth curves of her muscles. "You're so beautiful," he whispered.

Shepard pulled the side table closer and submerged her hand in the oil. "So are you." She rubbed her hands together, then began working the oil into his shoulders. "You know, I think this is my favourite thing about being married to turians." A faint pink hue blossomed across her nose as she focused on the task to avoid meeting his stare. "I love the intimacy of it." She shrugged, the blush deepening.

Nihlus leaned in to nuzzle the tip of her nose. "I understand." And he did. While Shepard no longer feared sex, the oil massage didn't come with any pressure or expectation, just shared comfort.

He soaked his hands in oil and massaged it into her back, his eyes slipping closed as his talons followed the silken contours of muscle and bone. Leaning into her, he pressed his brow to hers. Passion's flames still burned hot and insistent, but he tamped them down until they kissed her with an endless calm born of love.

"This is always enough, haksaya kubenar," he whispered against her lips. "Always."

Shepard kissed him, then leaned back. "Hold me, husband."

His hands between her shoulder blades, Nihlus did as he'd been told, supporting her as she laid back, relaxing into his care. His care. Damn. The weight of it hit … the sacred duty of it … but he found the burden light.

Shepard reached behind her back, tugging at his arm until she coaxed it out far enough to take hold of his wrist. Placing his hand so that his palm cupped her breast, she smiled up at him. "I love you so much for that, cikabeknai, but I'm not afraid any more, especially with you. You're my husband, half of my heart, and damn it, Ni, but I want you to touch me. I want you to make love to me."

Gently, even timidly, he squeezed her breast, her nipple a nub of velvet heaven in his palm. He
brushed his thumb over it, his mandibles flicking when she moaned and arched up into his touch. Smiling, he repeated the touch, the sounds she made feeding the fire, the flames roaring behind his plates.

She arched into him, her sex slick against his plates. Holding his gaze, she rolled her hips, grinding into him. Her smile grew to a wanton grin. "Oh my, aren't those moving easily?" Arching her back, she lifted her hips right off his thighs. "You'll need to stick a pillow under me so we line up." She grinned and wriggled a little. "I want you inside me."

Stated that boldly, her need took him by surprise and his plates parted. He snatched a pillow from behind him and pushed it under her backside. Once he got it sorted and flattened, Shepard relaxed down into it.

"Oh yeah, that's the spot right there." She bounced a little, her grin teasing as she sorted herself. "Do you want a guided tour?"

Pulling his mandibles in tight, Nihlus massaged his way down her side and over her hip bone to her center. Raking his talons through the soft dusting of hair, he met and held her gaze, reflecting the desire and love he saw there. His thumb glided between the slick folds of her sex, pressing a little on the swollen nub.

She surged up in his lap, a loud mewl of pleasure tweaking his mandibles back into a grin. "Holy mother ...." When he chuckled, she reached up, half-heartedly slapping his arm. "Stop laughing, husband, and just keep doing what you're doing."

"Just demonstrating that I don't need a guide." He swirled his thumb, trilling deep in his throat when the nub responded to his touch, his wife … his wife lifting into his touch, moaning and inarticulate with hunger.

"Oh, for the love of the Enkindlers," she managed to say between gasps, "stop teasing."

Nihlus pulled Shepard into his embrace with one hand while the other settled their bodies together. He slid out from behind his plates, and then everything turned to pure sensation. Shepard's arms wrapped around his neck, her body embracing him in fire and silk. She lifted into him, opening to him, her breath and hands searing as they pulled his mind and heart into those miraculous spaces between.

Her muscles contracted around him, strong enough to make it his turn to holler and jump. Fiery bolts of lightning tore through his nervous system, simultaneously tying his muscles into agonizing knots and flooding his brain with bliss. She squeezed his length again when she leaned over to soak her hands in the oil, and his entire system shorted out, overstimulated to the point where he could only moan and try to ride out the dizziness.

"Nihlus?" Shepard's hands grasped his face. "Are you okay?" After a second, he saw realization hit. "Oh no, I did this to Garrus too." She pressed her brow to his and froze, remaining still except for her breath. "I'm sorry, love." Nihlus raked his talons through her hair. "I'll be okay, just need a minute." He nuzzled her lips. "We've got all night."

Shepard drew a line along his center fringe spike, the oil tingling as it soaked in. "I'll leave it up to you how fast to take it." She kissed him. "But, can I say, that you feel amazing inside me. If it wouldn't blow the front of your head off, I'd be spurring you like a bronc rider." She kissed him and worked the oil into his head and neck, her fingers tranquil but passionate.
And oh, how they coaxed away the knots tied in his muscles. The scent of the oil combined with her touch eased the last of his tension. His mandibles fluttered, a susurrus of contentment rolling over his tongue, as once again he realized that he'd feel that touch every day for the rest of his life. Just as suddenly, he realized that the war might make it impossible to spend every day with her and that the rest of their lives could be any day.

"Sh," Shepard whispered, her voice as gentle as her touch. "Stop worrying, and lay those hands on me, husband. Just be here with me." She pulsed her inner muscles ever so gently, a soft sound tumbling from her lips as he finally entered her deeply enough to seat and he began to fill her. "Oh. Great. Father. Of. Light."

Nihlus pulled her in tight against his chest, his talons playing along either side of her spine. Her muscles felt like rock, solid and unyielding. That physical proof of the weight and pressure she carried wrapped his heart in thistles of fear and nettles of sadness.

"Cikabeknai," she whispered, pressing her mouth to his, "please, just be here with me."

Smelling the sweet brine of tears, Nihlus nodded and kissed her. Fear turned to passion as their tongues danced, all barriers of skin and bone disappearing until he felt nothing but her, saw nothing but her. She returned his kiss with equal fervour, lifting into him, her entire body coaxing him toward release. Hands gliding over his cowl, she teased the 'oh so sensitive' inner border between plate and hide.

Nihlus disappeared, escaping the prison of his body and mind. For those few precious moments, the pair of them became one being of light and sensation. His hands and mouth explored every centimetre of her body within his reach, delighting in the transitions between soft flesh and bone, all so deliciously covered in sleek satin-textured skin. When his palm brushed her breast, she leaned back, urging him in. Accepting most happily, he laved the nipple with his tongue, swirling around that velvet nub, teasing it with his teeth.

She showed her appreciation for his attentiveness with a symphony of sounds, the tempo and pitch growing more urgent. Her hands made love to him until his vocals rose to entangle with hers. Soaring, Nihlus and his wife clung to one another, mouths pressed together, open and panting, sharing the same air, uttering the same half-articulated oaths of love and forever.

Then, with a cry that echoed off the pavilion walls, Shepard came, her muscles clenching into a rictus of pleasure. Her body's grip on him drew a matching cry, the sound climbing up his throat and exploding through his teeth. Gradually, their rigor relaxed into slow, heavy pulses, both easing down onto the mattress to land in a happy tangle.

Coherent thought took another fifteen minutes, those moments spent trailing his talon pads over dewy skin.

Shepard leaned over him, looking down into his eyes. "That was very well worth the wait, cikabeknai." She kissed him, then wriggled into his arms, burrowing tight against his chest. "I love you, Nihlus Kryik." Kissing his mandible, she sighed, then said, "Just as much as Garrus. Always." She brushed his face with tender fingers. "It only gets better from here."

Nihlus pushed himself up until his mouth met hers. "I love you, haksaya kubenar. Always." In the silent depth of night, the flickering candles and breeze from the fans witnessed his oath, and he saw the understanding of it in his wife's gaze. Always.
(A-N: These two have come so far, so it's sorta lovely to get a chance to post this chapter for them, and you, along with Eva Soulu's amazing art that Natalie Tashar commissioned for me. It's just breathtaking. Soooo beautiful, and I gaze at it often with such joy and gratitude. So, a fitting birthday present for me (Yep, born on N7 day) and N7 Day present for you faithful readers. (even if it's a little late thanks to wild family party and being a lazy loser.) Thank you so much for still being with me and these crazy kids. I love you all.
The chirps and trills of the Horizon bird call symphony greeted Shepard as the waters of sleep and rachni song parted. She stayed buried beneath the thick comforter, listening to the music echoing through the chill, damp air, the dreamscape and reality separating reluctantly. She shivered and pulled a stray leg back under the duvet, tucking it into Nihlus's heat envelope. Sweet baby Jesus, the mountain nights cooled off enough to match the daytime heat.

**Verro** - Husband, male bond-mate.

**Derra** - Wife, Female bond-mate.

**Marida** - Mother in law

**Parida** - Father-in-law

**Diume** - My joy. A term of love specific to family.

**Caris** - Beloved, precious, cherished

**Itarnuptas** - The six week period following turian bonding ceremonies where the two new bondmates celebrate their bonding and move in together.


**Obluvis** - plural **Obluvi**. One who is senile or absent-minded. Slang: Idiot

**Tapek Menru** - Literal translation: The long defeat.

**Haksaya kubenar** - A term of endearment, literally translates as my strong, true heart.

**Cikabeknai** - The reciprocal term of endearment for the above. Literally translates to brave love.

**Kepala** - The ridges of carapace that cover the top of a Prothean's head.

**Feodusi** - The Prothean government's scientific branch. **Senarium** - sub-branch tasked with finding and securing the five keys to dark space including the conduit.

**The story to date:** Nihlus and Shepard have just been married, taking a short break in the build up to war. The chiastyllia and Legion—and all the geth—have formed a symbiotic relationship, the geth imbuing the tiny organisms with will while the chia offered them a way to form a truly sentient, fully realized intelligence including emotional awareness.

Shepard and company have taken down a collector lab on Thessia and turned another on Palaven over to the government. They suspect other, species-specific husk labs exist on the remaining
homeworlds, but have not yet located them.

**Note:** I've probably said this before, but … saying it again. Even though Bioware named Garrus's dad in Andromeda, Herros has been Herros in my head and heart for 5 years, so … yeah, I'm not changing his name.

Also, apologies to anyone with different canon for the Ryders … including Bioware. I'm basing it on my understanding of the ingame info. Information from sources other than the game and wiki might not be represented.

**91 Days ASR 0330 hrs (Lake Remar, Horizon)**

The sounds of life flowed through the peaceful dark of sleep, their current coloured in gentle pastels. Shepard breathed them in, aware and lucid as she stepped into the stream of the rachni queen's song without waking. She welcomed the river, allowing it to sweep her away; it had been too long since she felt Amalair's reassuring presence.

Nihlus appeared next to her, his hand already gripping hers. She looked up into his face, a broad smile and twinkling stare gazing down on her, as warm as the sun. Squeezing his talons, she closed her eyes, the barrier she kept erected around Tashac's prison melting away into the dreamscape.

"It's time," the ethereal voices of the rachni whispered through their queen. "Their sour, yellow note moans through the darkness between galaxies while their needle men and abominations weave its taint through the light."

Shepard took a long breath, unsuccessfully trying to ignore the tremble of her diaphragm. They'd known how short time ran since the beacon downloaded its contents into their brains, but oh, hadn't it been easy to pretend years remained for them to prepare?

Tashac pressed at the thin barrier between consciousness and dreaming. Through Nihlus's grip on her hand, Merol's softer presence coaxed her to relax and trust them. While nothing guaranteed victory, the more knowledge they possessed, the better their chances.

Not even Shepard's prodigious talent for denial could argue that.

**89410 of Tapek Menru**

Shepard opened her eyes to a familiar vista: the intense blue of the clear water sparkling under a bright, hot sun, the mountains majestic and capped with snow in the background. She shed her torso armour as she strode toward the water. The rackus sound of her mate and children raced up behind her, as bright and cheerful as the sun.

Atit sprinted past her, tiny legs pounding like pistons until he hit the water. The drag sent him into a sprawl, arms pinwheeling comically before he splashed down belly first. Giran giggled as she jogged past, already carrying herself with an officer's reserve and demeanour. The sight sent a soft keen of sorrow warbling through Shepard's chest. The reapers had stolen a great many things from the prothean people, but the loss of childhood innocence and joy cut the deepest. Her children deserved to play and laugh without the specters of despair and death haunting them more persistently than a *gerhund*.

In only a few days, both of her children would leave to begin basic training … at only ten summers old. In those same few days, the odds of her receiving a message informing her of their deaths would eclipse her odds of seeing them again.
The universe no longer looked upon innocence with kind eyes nor did it easily forgive its presence.

Before the reapers began the protheans' long defeat, her children would be preparing for their third primary learning cycle. Now they'd be adults and warriors even before their kepala closed, every moment of their formal schooling focused on war. Once they left her side, all their songs would turn to dirges for the lost … for all they'd lost but never knew.

She'd be left a single recourse: hope. She could only hope they'd remember what she taught them, all the tales and morals. And to strive for the joy hidden within every moment.

Her mate's arm slipped around her waist, his naked hip pressed against her armored one. "Stop," Merol said. His smile stretched as tight and thin as his whisper. "Today we play. Tomorrow's worries won't vanish before we catch them."

Shepard wrapped her arm around him, clinging to him even as she nodded. Despite wishing to leave worry behind as often as the galaxy offered her the chance, wishing didn't transform anything into reality. His warmth soaked into her bare torso, heating her through more effectively than the sun, the distant star cold on the back of her neck.

Despite being the center of the scientific branch of the rebellion, the entire system—what her people had become—set her skin crawling. Death loomed there more acutely than even the now-dead planets circling soon-to-be-forgotten stars.

"Hear my words and join us in the present, mother of my last children." Merol chuckled as he reached up to caress her face. Gently, he turned her to look at their children, the pair splashing one another with abandon. "We will enjoy these last, precious days with our Giran and Atit. We must, as these memories need to last forever."

She smiled despite the hand that gripped her heart—squeezing until the organ cried out—and nodded. "You're right, haksaya kubendar, as always." Nudging him away from her side, she released him. "I will follow directly in your footsteps."

Before she unclasped the girdle of her armour, her comm implant chirped in her head. Letting loose a long sigh, she lifted a hand to her jaw. "Jacar. Proceed."

"Kanetah Jacar, the Senarium assembly just pronounced their ruling on the Inusannon blueprints."

Shepard tensed. Her team believed the blueprints discovered in an inusannon ruin belonged to a weapon of terrible power. The feodusi had taken possession of the plans less than a full day earlier. The haste of their deliberations informed her of their decision before she asked. As she suspected when her team turned over the design, the council members responsible for weapon development would declare that it be built with all haste and then deployed regardless of the consequences. Now, she could hold onto only one hope of restraint on the part of the prothean government: lack of resources. The long defeat dragged on, the transportation networks so crippled that they'd struggle to find the resources to build something so massive.

She swallowed a curse more profane than she felt comfortable allowing her children to hear. "Report. What is the feodusi's decision?"

The line remained silent but for the sounds of the aide's computer interface. "The feodusi decided to divert all planet-based and robot mining equipment from harvesting hydrogen and helium 3 in this system to mining and refining platinum and iridium on the terrestrial planets. They say fuel for non-existent ships is of lesser import than the materials required to build the inusannon transmitter."
Shepard stiffened. "Transmitter? It's not a weapon?" With the design's energy requirements, her team speculated it formed some sort of beam weapon, but a transmitter? She opened her mouth to ask another question, but then glanced toward the lake and her family playing in the waves. "Send me their entire package. I want to go over their arguments and reasoning myself."

Merol turned to face her, his expression slowly melting into a frown to match hers. It lasted the space of a single breath before he shook his head and waved her over. Right. She nodded once before looking down at her onboard armor computer, acknowledging the received file.

"Thank you for keeping me up to date, Binav. Jacar, out." When her aide signed off, Shepard stared at the computer interface for a moment. The file beckoned to her, insistence she dig in, searching for routes to fight the construction of a possible doomsday weapon before they had time to research it.

Then a cheery chorus from the lake chased off the desire, and dragged her from her armour and into the cool embrace of the water.

Time shifted around her in the manner of dreams and memories, the day of laughter passing in the flow of a few breaths. That evening, the children tucked into their beds after a difficult bedtime, she and Merol sat curled up together on the short couch and went through the information on the transmitter/weapon schematic. The data found with the plans clearly said that the inusannon had not commenced construction, the plans missing components that appeared hypothetical, the planners guessing at the power and computing needs.

"The assembly will build it before they understand it," Merol said, his voice soft but rough with concern. "I need to burrow into these plans and find something to slow their charge. Our knowledge remains so limited that we may build the very tool the reapers need to cleanse those of us who remain."

She nodded. "The feodusi will build it, and we won't be there to counsel them toward wisdom and restraint. We will be half a galaxy away chasing the remaining keys."

Closing the file with a thought, she then opened another, the one she should have spent her evening unraveling. It compared data between several solar systems going through the throes of an early death. The technology keeping the last two keys hidden consumed an enormous amount of energy from the very suns they hid within, sending the stars spiralling into an early death. When their children left for training, she and Merol would set out for the most promising out of several systems. The reapers couldn't be accused of making anything too simple.

"The reapers placed shield facilities in far more systems than they needed," she said, glancing up at her mate. A smile greeted his intense scowl, his eyes narrowed as he processed the transmitter data. She reached up, tracing his jaw with gentle fingertips, sending a soft, mental interruption through his train of thought, "Cikabknai?"

Merol shook his head, tearing his thoughts from the stream of information pouring through the tactile interface, the data changing at the speed of thought as he adjusted and made computations. Her touch whispered through the meld between mate and machine, her thoughts slowly easing him from his genius. She smiled as his eyes focused on her a little at a time. A gasan of complete genius, he threw himself into the deepest part of a problem, submerging into its depths until nothing else existed.

It took him a moment before he nodded. He'd heard her despite his immersion. "Yes, I am certain we record ten false positives for every key. We owe the discovery of the last key purely to chance." He wrapped a hand around her wrist, his consciousness pressed to hers as he examined
the data on her OAC. "Here," his words appeared in her head, calling her attention to three systems at opposite corners of the galaxy from each other. She smiled. She suspected those same systems. They all displayed slight deviations from the energy profiles of the others. If they'd discovered a weakness—a trend—in the reaper's methods, it might make the last keys easier to find, but it also struck another method of hiding the keys from her team's idea list.

The reapers only needed to hide the keys from a few generations of whomever lived in that future galaxy. The senarium needed to hide the keys from the reapers for fifty-thousand years or more. Doing so required either craft or inspiration of a miraculous sort.

She pointed to the star system with the highest reaper presence. "We'll recon this system first." Once they discovered a key, they left it in place. If they removed the keys, the reapers would know and come after them. They fought a long defeat in truth: no hope of snatching victory from reaper jaws. All they could do was prepare for the reapers' return to dark space and hope enough protheans remained to carry their knowledge and experience forward to the young races.

Merol sighed, the sound leaving his lips with enough weight that she felt the world shift beneath them. "Methods of keeping the keys from the enemy's grasp are becoming scarce."

"And we dare not allow ourselves to imagine the possibilities," she agreed, wrapping her fingers around his hand. "They are still many long months from their victory." And if either of them faced capture or indoctrination, whatever plans they set would become the enemy's weapon.

All they could do was wait until the reapers finished the harvest.

A handful of the monsters remain to clean up the last traces of their devastation when she formulates her plan to hide the keys as they are recovered. Unlike the reapers, she intends to use completely different methods to hide each key, forcing them to adapt. While the Vanguard and its prothean husks can access a wealth of scientific knowledge, they possess no creativity or imagination. What the husks are at the time of their conversion only diminishes with the reaper influence, becoming drones to perform the reapers' work.

Luckily for the young races, she and Merol were not drones. She drew in a deep breath, releasing it slowly. One key at a time.

91 Days ASR 0445 hrs (Lake Remar, Horizon)

One key at a time. First, be sure you can either use them or destroy them.

Use them?

Patience, brave ones. Patience.

The chirps and trills of the Horizon bird call symphony greeted Shepard as the waters of sleep and rachni song parted. She stayed buried beneath the thick comforter, listening to the music echoing through the chill, damp air, the dreamscape and reality separating reluctantly. She shivered and pulled a stray leg back under the duvet, tucking it into Nihlus's heat envelope. Sweet baby Jesus, the mountain nights cooled off enough to match the daytime heat.

Curling in against her new verro, eyes closed, she savoured the sensations of his rough hide caressing her skin and his breath on her neck. She willed the moment to wash away the bleak chill of saying goodbye to their—no, Tashac and Merol's—children. Surely, she could allow the beauty of their first morning as bondmates to last another hour or so.

Yes. Despite her eagerness to discuss the rachni queen's help with finding the remaining keys, and
even though it would amount to a miracle, she hoped Nihlus got a chance to wake on his own. She lifted the duvet just enough to see his face, his mandible relaxed against the pillow. Sweet baby Jesus, she loved him. She'd fallen completely years before, seeing him pull that single child out of that flaming slaver den. Oblivious as always, she'd dismissed it as a hopeless crush.

She took a deep breath and relaxed down into the mattress. She'd never imagined being married to him. Even if she had, she'd never have been able to imagine his presence being a place of such peace and safety. The precious peace lasted three seconds before her comms squawked at her. Damn. So that's what woke her up. Enkindler cursed thing. She slapped at her ear.

"What, dammit?"


Groaning, she pushed aside the duvet covering her head. "Damn it, Anderson." She grumbled and half sat up, eyes still pressed closed. "There's no way it's morning, so any crankiness you hear is due to the ungodly hours you keep, not coitus interruptus." After another breath, she cracked one eye, taking in the purple, pre-dawn light. "Oh, damn, it is almost morning. Fuck you, morning."

Anderson's chuckle ended abruptly. "It is." Another noisy sigh guillotined the small talk. "I'm sorry for the early wake up, but I received intel from Hackett that I knew you'd want to move on." He paused, his gravitas kickstarting her pulse. "Earth security services reported what the admiral thinks are multiple husk sightings. Eyewitnesses described them as, and I'm quoting the report here: 'weird, twentieth century television, protomolecule zombie shit.' Sounds like husks to me." He paused before continuing. "I've forwarded the details. If the reports are accurate, they might lead you to the collector base on Earth." He cleared his throat, a rumble she knew and understood all too well: We'll talk about this later.

"Yeah, that's husks for sure. Okay, so when and where?" Shepard rolled onto her back and stroked her hand down the outside of Nihlus's thigh. "Wake up, old guy, the galaxy needs us again."

Anderson cleared his throat. "I'll expect you aboard the Normandy at 1200. We'll give you a lift to Earth." The captain chuckled as Nihlus let out a roar of complaint. "Think you can manage that deadline?"

Shepard shook her head when Nihlus rolled over and gathered her in against him, trapping her in heavy, sluggish arms. "We'll see what we can do. Shepard, over and out."

Nihlus nuzzled her ear and pulled her in tighter along his length. "This war can't end soon enough," he whispered, his voice thick and rough with sleep. "Rachni conference calls while we sleep, husk wake up calls …." He shook his head and burrowed further under the covers.

Shepard tugged the duvet under her chin, sealing out the cool, damp air. "I hear you." Letting out a long breath, she nestled into his heat. "Anderson says the husks were sighted on Earth. If it's true, they might lead us to the collector lab."

"No." The Spectre groaned and shook his head. "It's too early to think about shooting our way through another collector base. Let's go back to sleep for a couple of hours, then make love, eat a leisurely breakfast, and then worry about collector bases and husks."

Before Shepard could form an answer, she heard a familiar tread on the other side of the pavilion's curtains. "Too late," she whispered, turning to nuzzle Nihlus's mandible, "the dawn patrol has arrived." She waited for those footsteps to stop at the entrance, but they passed by. After a
moment, she heard the telltale hiss of a campstove and the genial clatter of breakfast preparations.

"Good morning, Callor," she called through a wide yawn.

"Good morning, Kahri." Yep, Garrus sounded far too perky for so early in the day. "It's a gorgeous morning out here."

"Go away!" Nihlus stretched until his joints popped, then curled around her again. "Maybe the general will serve us breakfast in bed," he said, loud enough to be heard outside their cocoon.

"Wake up, Nihlus," Garrus called back, his cheer teasing a smile onto Shepard's face, "you're dreaming."

"They're still in bed?" Sol's voice dripped disdain. "Seriously, you people are the laziest unit I've ever witnessed. I'd send you all back to the academy. A couple hours of PT at 0330 should do it."

"Wars are meant to be fought on quarter rations and one hour of sleep per day?" Herros asked, also far too chipper for the hour. He rumbled, his subvocals low and strong enough they raised the hair on Shepard's arms, and when he continued, all the humour had bled from his tone. "Soon enough, diume. Soon enough."

Shepard yawned and dug her way out of the covers to sit up against the arm of the wide settee, duvet clutched to her chest. "I can't even say 'they're your family' any more," she said between two yawns wide enough to send a painful crack echoing from her jaw to the crown of her head.

Leaning over, she kissed Nihlus's brow. "Wake up, caris. The war waits for no one, apparently."

He wriggled deeper under the duvet. "Fucking inconsiderate reaper bastards."

The human cuss words yanked a sharp laugh from Shepard's throat. "Right?" She pressed absent lips to his brow again, plans already spinning like spider silk drifting in the air. "We need to figure out a way to assemble the Crucible without either faction getting ahold of it. It's important."

"Yeah, I just wish we knew what it did. Transmitter of unknown function isn't any more comforting than unknown WMD." Nihlus sighed, the breath erecting an invisible wall between them. Shepard matched it. They didn't have the luxury of living without that professional barrier between them ninety-five percent of the time. She just prayed that once the war ended, they could tear it down and burn the rubble.

"We'll have a lot of protheans to help put it together, even if they're warriors rather than scientists," her verro said, continuing. "That will keep them busy until war breaks out."

"We can't do everything ourselves, so we've got to get Giran access to Tashac and Merol's memories." Shepard tugged the covers up under her chin, the chill creeping underneath and into her bones. "If only we hadn't had to blow the senarium base on Ilos into radioactive dust." She trailed her fingertips along the edge of his chest plates. "Maybe there's another beacon somewhere."

"We need to ask Giran to assign a couple of prothean officers to the war council, too," Garrus called in from outside. "Hopefully, the more we involve them, the less we have to worry about a coup. Also, breakfast is nearly ready." Pans rattled against metal burners. "We have drellak steak, krellar eggs, crispy bacon, a chicken egg sandwich with a revolting side of catsoup that smells like death and is probably made from actual cats, and a pretty amazing sunrise out here."

Shepard grinned at Garrus's extended diatribe against her ketchup—a very effective reminder that
her husbands' senses registered things differently than her own—and glanced around for her robe. It didn't offer much protection from the chill air, but waiting wouldn't improve her situation. Counting them off, she braced herself for three seconds then threw back the duvet and leapt to her feet.

"Hey," Nihlus grumbled, tugging the blankets back over his exposed side. " Didn't all of Garrus's complaining on Noveria teach you how much turians hate the cold?"

Shepard spotted underwear and a pair of sweats sitting on the top of a crate. Offering fervent thanks to whoever possessed such glorious foresight, she slipped them on. She picked up the light shirt and leggings sitting out for Nihlus, and returned to the bed.

"Here you go, old guy," she teased, tucking the clothing under the covers to warm. "I know how hard cold mornings are on old bones." Or on her bones, for that matter. She laughed at his answering grumble. "You've got five minutes to get dressed before I come back to roust you, caris."

An arm reached out from under the white, lumpy mass, and a large hand snatched at her, gentle talons wrapping around her waist. She yelped as he yanked her backwards onto the settee and held her trapped against him.

"Spend the five minutes in here with me, instead." Nihlus emerged from beneath the duvet and pulled her onto his lap. "We can spend five more minutes of proper itarnuptas before we surrender to the war."

Shepard sorted herself and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I suppose I can steal another five minutes from the galaxy." Relaxing into his arms, she rested her head in the curve of his neck. "I feel like we're standing at the edge of a cliff, and when we leave here, we're stepping off into chaos."

Nihlus nuzzled her ear, his breath comforting as it brushed her neck. "We'll get through it." His embrace tightened. "We'll hang onto each other and refuse to let go, no matter what."

Turning her face into the high desert scent of his neck, Shepard kissed him and whispered, "I'm so thankful for you, Nihlus. You make me feel like maybe Cerberus did bring all of me back."

He nodded, but just held her, letting the musical peace of morning envelope them. The soft conversation, laughter, and the savoury scents of breakfast shored up that invisible wall rather than piercing it, allowing them to hang onto their illusions for those precious moments.

A soft knock shattered the cocoon, then the curtain rustled, Garrus's head peeking through. "Sorry to break this up, but the food is getting cold, and we have a conference call in a couple of hours. Legion, Mordin, and Liara all have news." He met and held Shepard's gaze, his mandibles flicking once, that distinct, flutter-snap that broadcast his joy and love louder than words.

Shepard blew him a kiss without moving from Nihlus's embrace. "We'll be right out."

"Nothing says 'congratulations on your bonding' like a couple of hours of conference call." Nihlus lifted her free of the bed, setting her on her feet. His palm stroked the length of her spine. "Do you need your shot?"

Shepard started at that. It hadn't occurred to her. She did a quick inventory, but the pain remained within easy tolerance. "Not yet. I'll let you know if it gets bad." She paused at the curtain, and turned back. "Thanks for checking, though."
Shepard ducked under the tent flap into the watery twilight. "Yep, way too frickin' early." She grinned, catching Trea's gaze. "You turians are going to be the death of me." She strode to the end of the table and bent over her marida's chair to touch brows. Sweet Jesus, Trea looked good. Figuring that the tarin had probably suffered her fill of people telling her how good she looked, Shepard choked back the words. despite their truth.

"Nihlus!" Herros called. "Hurry along, I've got something important to talk to you three about."

"Yeah, coming." The Spectre's tone expressed Shepard's feelings on their being dragged back to the war with an eloquence that spared her having to be the party pooper. Of course, they just poked him harder when he appeared, eyes half-closed, his armour hanging off on one side. Obviously, turians didn't have any truisms about poking bears.

Shepard sat opposite Trea, her verros to either side. When Garrus set her plate in front of her, she attacked her sandwich and bacon with a fervour usually ascribed to the starving. "Oh, dear, blessed Enkindlers, this is tasty." She moaned to emphasize her point followed by a massive bite. "Pure heaven," she said, the words sounding more like 'oohur hehbun' outside her head.

The family teased and talked of easy things, the war blessedly staying outside their pocket of morning while they ate. Shepard sat between her verros, allowing herself to simply feel blessed and happy. For all her 'humour', she couldn't have remembered a single moment where she felt truly happy from the moment her parents died until she met her torins. Even then, fear overtook those moments far too easily before her death.

Note to self: Send the Illusive Man a 'thank you for dragging me back from the dead as a mismatched pile of agonized, Frankensteiinian monster parts, you megalomaniacal bastard' card.

Herros pushed his plate away, metal scraping against metal, and let out a long sigh. "Excellent breakfast, Garrus." He looked to each of them and nodded, as if he hadn't been sure about reporting his news until that very second.

An attentive silence fell, those still eating setting down their utensils to focus on Heros. "When your mother began her treatments on Omega, I received a call from an old acquaintance." He reached across the corner of the table for his mate's hand, closing his talons around hers. "His name's Alec Ryder. He was a military liason on the Citadel early in humanity's tenure there."

"Big man with a booming voice and crushing handshake?" When Herros nodded, Garrus echoed it, his eyes narrowing. He ate the last bite of his steak, chewing for a moment before continuing. "I remember meeting him. He had twins just a little younger than Sol. The three of them used to torment me."

"That's him. He was an N7 at the time, but his insistence on developing artificial intelligence earned him a dishonorable discharge and council censure." Herros settled deeper into his chair. "Anyway, when your mari started her treatments, he heard of the breakthroughs being made on treating corpalis. He hoped the research might have applications for his wife's illness."

"Ellen pioneered biotic implants for humans," Trea spoke up. "She was the major driving force behind the L2 implant, then the L3 once the complications with the L2 became apparent." She shook her head, her mandibles dropping a little. "All that exposure to eezo gave her AEND, a degenerative neural disorder just as merciless as corpalis."

Shepard frowned, her heart going out to the family. For all civilization and medicine progressed, so much remained unknown. Not to mention the illnesses created by their new technologies. Ellen Ryder hadn't been the first, nor would she be the last poisoned by eezo exposure.
"Alec pushed his development of his SAM AI, hoping to marry it with Ellen's implant technology to create a treatment for her illness, if not a cure." Herros's tone told Shepard that Ryder hadn't succeeded in time to save his wife. "Unfortunately, her illness outpaced their research and she lapsed into a coma earlier this cycle. Alec placed her in stasis, which halted the degeneration, and continues to search for a cure." He looked down, a talon scraping at a bit of breakfast on the table. "His children … everyone … believes she died. He didn't want to put them through her loss twice if he wasn't able to effect a cure."

Silence fell over the table for a long thirty seconds before the Vakarian patriarch cleared his throat. "He's been messaging me over the past month or so but instead of asking about Trea's treatment, he's been asking for information on the reapers, collectors, and the geth. He's playing his cards close to the vest, but I think I've got him convinced that your claims and evidence are real." He lifted Trea's hand to his mouth, nuzzling her knuckles. "Yesterday, he asked me to come to Earth. Apparently, he's working on a huge project and wants me to come check it out."

Shepard looked to Nihlus then Garrus. "Anderson woke me up to tell me that husks have been sighted on Earth, so why don't we take the *Normandy* and *Ypres* to the Sol system?" she suggested. "You can accompany your *pari* to see what Ryder wants while Nihlus and I check out the husk sightings."

Inspiration sparked, sharp and a little vindictive. "You guys can take Anderson along just in case Ryder needs convincing. Anderson's word goes a long way even with ex-Alliance, and he just loves a good handshaking op."

"Sounds good," Garrus agreed, "but if you end up fighting your way through another collector base, call for backup." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pressed his brow against her temple. "The more the merrier when it comes to those places."

"Merrier?" Nihlus chuffed. "Says the *obluvis* who wasn't on Thessia." He grinned, his mandibles twitching in a cocky challenge. "How about you go take out a couple thousand husks while I go shake hands and drink good brandy?"

"Aw, poor *senus,*" Sol said and cooed. She stood and circled the table, gathering up the dishes. "It's probably more fun if you're not two thousand cycles old and *obluvis* enough to take banshee talons to the gut." She followed her matter-of-fact statement by tossing a cheeky grin over her shoulder. "I guess I'll have to go along and make sure your poor, rickety old body comes through in one piece."

Content, Shepard settled into the curve of Garrus's armour, savouring the precious moments of normalcy, laughing as Nihlus and Sol bickered back and forth. She took her husband's hand, and watched dawn creep up between the mountains. Despite the lovely show of pastels and the warmth of the growing light, along with sun came the war.

Along with the sun came the war.

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**A-N:** I did it after almost six months … I got their voices back in my head. And now the poop gets deep and real. :D Thanks so much for sending messages to ask about updates … your continued interest in these crazy kids pulled me through a lot.
Future Continuous Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Darkness. Shepard fumbled her way forward, a captive beating at the air, groping to find the walls of her cell. Despite flailing and falling for several minutes, no cement or bars blocked her path. No walls! How could she be imprisoned without walls?

Previously in Future Continuous: During the countdown to war against the collectors. Shepard received intel of strange 'mechanical monster' sightings around Mount Fuji. She and her two verros are on the Normandy, on their way to investigate what might be the collector base on Earth.

Torin - Torini plural. Male turian of the age of majority (15)

Tarin - Tarini plural. Female turian of the age of majority (15)

Verro - Husband, male bond-mate.

Derra - Wife. Female bond-mate.

The Aokigahara - Also known as the Sea of Trees or the Jukai. A massive forest on the northwestern slope of Mount Fuji. Sadly, known as the suicide forest thanks to hundreds of suicides that have taken place within its depths over the centuries.

91 Days ASR 1130 hrs (Normandy, approaching Shadow Sea relay to Local Cluster)

Stopping behind Joker's seat on the Normandy's bridge, Shepard took a deep breath. "Yep, still smells like funky armpits and sweaty asscheeks in here." She laid a hand on his shoulder, the warm muscle beneath her palm obscuring his fragility. "You haven't convinced them to upgrade you to leather? It breathes, you know."

"No. I've tried, but they're immune to my charms. You, however … you need to watch yourself, dead Spectre." He always did give just as good as he got. "If you get too close, I can't be held responsible for your reaction to my manly musk, and you're a married woman." He shot an exaggerated glance at the geth platform occupying the other seat. "Just ask my co-pilot how hard it is to resist my charms."

Shepard laughed and shook her head at Enid, warning the geth away from reacting to Joker's declaration. He didn't need the encouragement. At least he and the geth seemed to get along well enough. Stepping between the seats, she let out a low whistle and reached out, running the backs of her fingers over the beard covering his cheek. "This little experiment became a thing of beauty while I was dead."

He jumped, fending her off with a couple of pathetic, over-dramatic slaps. "No touching. Are you trying to get me killed? You have two huge husbands with long histories of yanking the sticks out of their asses and bludgeoning people to death with them."

Shepard scoffed, adding a little spit for good measure. "Them being the sticks or their asses?
Because really, to bludgeon someone with your ass, you have to have a lot more in back ….” Hazard lights began flashing further up the road, so she let the joke die a merciful death.

Joker shot a glare at her, then glanced behind them as if looking for said husbands. Cocking his head so his beard caught the light, gleaming with red highlights, he whispered, "It is sexy as hell, though, isn't it?"

Shepard chuckled and shook her head. Thank the blessed Enkindlers that some things never changed.

"We're just about to hit the relay, dead Spectre." Joker nodded toward the portal. The relay remained a diamond among millions, but grew larger moment to moment. "You need to quit fawning over me and get ready to go planetside."

"Yes, sir, Admiral Joker, sir." Shepard snapped off a salute sharp enough to decapitate the pilot. After giving the subject a moment to die, she said, "Do me a favour?" Her eyebrows climbed for her hairline when he merely glanced up at her, the question in his stare remaining snark-free. A little alarmed, but encouraged, she said, "Take a slight detour for me, and head for Enceladus on a vector to see the plumes?"

A soft snort answered that. "So now I'm a honeymoon tourist service?" He shook his head and waved a dismissive hand at her. "Go away, your unreasonable requests are disturbing my delicate constitution."

Shepard clipped him in the back of the head, just hard enough to knock his cap forward. "Behave yourself, Flight Lieutenant, I have the Spectre powers to extrajudicial the hell out of your ass."

The pilot scoffed and shook his head as he replied, "Right. Colour me terrified of your undead badassness." He cleared his throat, the cough as uncomfortable a sound as she'd ever heard him make. "And congratulations, by the way. Becoming a mom … that's pretty huge." He glanced over his shoulder. "Good thing you've had all of us to practice on."

"Good thing I still do; I need all the practice I can get," she countered. "And thanks, Joker, it's weird and scary, but also … " She allowed some of the awe and terror to slip the leash. " … just a … a … miracle." Spinning on her heel, she gathered everything back under her control.

She marched toward the threshold, stopping before she'd taken three paces. "Oh, and next time we're back at Omega, get someone to replace your seats. We can't have our best pilots chafing down … " She grimaced and wiggled her finger in the general direction of his ass. "... there, in the place I shouldn't have mentioned. Now I need to pour industrial cleaner over my brain."

"You're welcome!"

Shepard grinned and struck out for the stairs to the crew deck. Now, to get her verros rounded up and into the observation lounge; Joker wouldn't loop back around if they missed the sights the first time. Grinning, she answered the salute from the door guard, then raced down the stairs, a hound on the trail of turian prey. Bless the Enkindlers for the Normandy's size. Despite the vessel's exterior stealth, she offered nowhere to hide inside her bulkheads.

She asked Joker for the detour because neither spouse had spent any time discovering the amazing things the Sol system had to offer. Taking down rogue VIs on the moon didn't count, and who knew the next time they'd get a chance. The plumes on Enceladus made for a great start.

She found her verros in the galley, hunched over a laptop, head to head with Anderson. "Ah," she
said, her tone slanting into playfulness, "that's where all the smoke is coming from."

Anderson rumbled in the back of his throat, but Garrus and Nihlus didn't even twitch. Of course, they could blame their translators scrambling her joke rather than their tech-nerd enthusiasm.

"Holy Blessed Enkindlers preserve us." She crept up on them from behind to get a glimpse of the computer screen. They waited for the geth to test their relay virus, no doubt. Somehow Vortash convinced the batarian hegemony to allow Archangel to test the relay virus on the batarian's 'Alpha' relay. In a million months of Sundays, she'd never have bet on the batarians would be the race most likely to cooperate. It begged the question: just who was Vortash?

"They set to go?" she asked, leaning in between her verros' heads to see the display. The relay spun in the black, building up to shooting the test ship into what should be a near-nil mass corridor. In fact, if the geth virus worked, the device would answer the reaper IFF with the opposite. She shuddered, but pressed a quick kiss to both Garrus and Nihlus's crests. "You two have fun smashing ships, but I need you in the observation lounge as soon as it's over." They grunted absently, agreeing without turning from the screen.

Her left eyebrow climbed toward her hairline as she asked, "What, we're already at the 'yes, dear, whatever you say, dear' stage? Wow, we hit that at FTL."

The flashes of the light on their faces began to speed up; she needed to get to the lounge. Her throat constricted, and her heart raced rabbit quick, leaving her breathless and dizzy. The lounge; she needed to prepare for the ground mission. She turned away from the table, her knees trembling. What the hell? Freaking out made absolutely no sense. A working defense against the reapers should have her giggling manically.

Lounge! Now! Before Garrus's SHEP-dar goes off.

True. If either of her husbands saw her reaction, they'd go all baby spider monkey, and she wouldn't be able to peel them off even using mineral oil and a spatula. At that point it might take the jaws of life. Finally, a shaky breath inflated her lungs, allowing her to count her steps as she walked away.

One … two … three … four … five. Stop reacting and figure it out. Why now? Why today?

At the end of the five steps, she turned back. She'd come down to tell them to meet her in the lounge then suffered a catastrophic loss of focus. After a handful more breaths, enough air squeezed past the constrictor wrapped around her neck to say, "Seriously, meet me in the lounge right after the test. I've arranged for a five minute honeymoon." Shaking her head again when their grunts came out a little closer to 'yes', she turned and walked away. Hopefully they heard her over the giddy, tech-nerd squeeing going on inside their skulls. At least their lack of attention gave her somewhere to focus her crazy long enough to get clear.

"You're not going to watch?" Anderson asked, popping out of the huddle, a ground squirrel from its burrow.

A shudder wriggled up Shepard's spine, the serpent looping around her throat and squeezing. "No, I'm going to prepare for the mission." She swallowed her gag reflex and hurried from the galley, counting the steps at double-time. Still, she heard the relay engage before she reached the elevator.

She paused, one hand buttressed against the bulkhead. Really … what the hell? Why the sudden panic attack? The relay test meant a step forward in the war prep. It might even give them a chance to kick some serious reaper ass and slow the fuckers down. So why wasn't she pressed between her husbands, squealing with her entire tech-nerd soul?
That's easy. That device ... that defense... makes the war real. It's horrifying, and it's real, and it's close enough to make everyone and everything all too fragile. There are trillions of corpses walking around, timers ticking in the backs of their heads, because you won't be able to move fast enough or hit hard enough. That's a bitch of a thing.

Shepard scoffed, kicking a wad of phlegm into the back of her throat. She gagged, but then squared her shoulders—spine set against the tide—and swallowed. Blessed Enkindlers, of course she wasn't ready for the war. Sovereign and Saren seemed like making a cup of warm cocoa compared. Hell, the war looming on the horizon turned even Elysium into high tea with scones and little cakes and cucumber sandwiches ... maybe even teeny berry tartlets and beaten cream for dessert.

"All killing diminishes the whole," Tashac whispered through Shepard's thoughts. "All of it."

Reality slapped her hard enough to sting, hard enough to shove her away from the bulkhead and down the corridor toward the lounge. In her naive arrogance, she believed that if she defeated Saren and Sovereign, she could prevent the harvest. Or at the very least, put it off for another couple of centuries. Even at reaper speeds, traversing dark space made for a considerable commute.

Shepard palmed the door control, practically leaping over the threshold when the portal slid open. Sugar. She needed sugar, and she needed to sit down with Izzy for a few minutes before the briefing. Yeah. She sighed. Sugar and Izzy ... just the recipe to center herself. The base on Earth—if they found it—would present a nightmare. She needed her head screwed on straight to lead her people through it.

She grabbed a soda from the fridge and sat on the sofa facing the vast emptiness, finding it soothing rather than terrifying in the moment. "Oh yeah, baby girl," she said after guzzling orange soda until her sinuses and throat burned, "that's the stuff. We just need a few minutes to pull it all back together."

Looking down, she pressed her palm over her hard, flat stomach, the incongruity not lost on her. Most mothers would be starting to show by that time. Most mothers would wake each morning feeling something ... wouldn't they? Shouldn't she be feeling the miracle of it? She guzzled down the rest of the can.

"Sorry we haven't spent any time with you over the past couple of days. We're not adjusting to the whole parenting role very well." She patted her belly. "I promise, if you were growing in here, we'd never forget to factor you into our plans."

"You wouldn't be going groundside in a few hours." The voice from the door snatched Shepard's attention off the small, quantumly-entangled connection to her daughter. Sparky shrugged when their gazes met. "You're way too much of a mama bear to risk her that way." He grinned and wandered over to sit next to her. "It would drive you insane to stay on the sidelines, and then, of course, you'd punish us for it—driving us insane—but you'd suffer through the confinement for her."

Shepard nodded. She sure hoped so.

For long moments, she stared out, her thoughts weaving random threads between stars. Damn the reapers. And damn the leviathan to an even deeper ring of hell for creating them. It might be nice to spend her days preparing her daughter to enter the universe. No, it would be. It really would.

"They're out there," Sparky said, his words dropping into the still, deep well between them. "It's easy to forget with Sovereign and Saren gone. Thousands of those monsters wait out in dark space
while the collectors weaken us for the kill." He stood and walked to the window. "Most days it's hard enough to believe we'll beat the collectors." He punched the glass with the side of his fist, leaving it there, maybe trying to hold the truth at bay even as it wormed through the glass. "How in God's name are we supposed to defeat their masters?"

"We take it one step at a time, Sparky." Shepard shrugged. He needed answers she didn't happen to have shoved in a back pocket. Her hand itched to reach back and check; hell, it couldn't hurt. "All we can do is keep our eyes on the road ahead, our screaming meemies under control, and our imaginations engaged."

Her lips warmed into a smile as she watched him. He'd changed since her death. She should have noticed. "What's up with you? You're different." Narrowing her eyes, she tipped her head to one side, trying to scry beneath his skin. "You beat the headaches?"

Kaidan returned to sit at her side, folding down onto the sofa so he faced her, one leg tucked under him. "Yeah. A couple of months after the funeral, I took all my vacation time and had my amp changed out to the latest model." He shrugged, his particular, sweet brand of bashful radiating off him, heat waves rising from cement. "I was a lot weaker for a long time, but it was worth it to go a month between headaches." He stared into her eyes, a cocky glint sparkling in his.

Ah, there he is. That's our man, right there.

She grinned, the warmth spilling down her throat and spreading through her belly, out to her limbs. Sweet baby Jesus, she'd missed him. "Spill it."

The spark went nova. "I can reave now." A grin lit up his handsome face. "I'm trying out one of Archangel's prototype amps, and I'm stronger than ever. I can shred an asari vanguard's barriers in seconds." The words slowed as he reached the end of his sentence, his grin folding into something more complex and thoughtful. It remained that way for long seconds before he said, "Collectors use barriers."

Her reply chased a sharp nod. "Yeah, so do the reapers." Where was he headed?

A soft grumble tumbled from his lips, detritus falling away as he sculpted his idea. "Vanguards and krogan battlemasters have far weaker defenses when I use biotic attacks rather than electrical-based attacks. When you overload a vanguard, you can get their shields down, but not as quickly as I can with reave or even warp."

Shepard blew a long, noisy breath out her nose and turned in the seat to rest her arm along the back. "Agreed. They're a constant pain in my ass because of it." She winked. "And you wondered why I kept you close."

He acknowledged her but kept a tight grip on the subject. "If the reapers are weaker to biotics than they are to technology, we need an amp big enough to shoot reave at them in a strength to make a difference." The thoughtful frown sizzled into a wide grin as he held up a hand, his biotics crackling around his fingers. "A ship. Can you imagine? A ship with fifty or a hundred powerful biotics all connected through a communal amp."

"Take it to Samara." She grinned and shook her head. "She had some ideas for biotic weapon applications. If she agrees there might be a way, take it to Legion and see what he and the chia think."

Kaidan nodded, suddenly as serious as he was animated the moment before. "You know, you were right when you told me that you weren't as crazy and reckless as before you died … but you've
gained rather than lost on balance." He shrugged and turned to look out into the black before continuing, "The things that have changed, they're the reason that you're our only hope to reach the end of this war, Captain." He glanced at her, scarcely making contact before turning back. "You don't look at things the way everyone else does. Thank God for that."

Melting down into her chair, Shepard lifted the datapad, already a paragraph in before she nodded at the door. "Let's hope my luck holds. Get the rest of them in here, Sparky. We've got a mission."

"Yes, ma'am." Strong strides crossed to the door and out.

Okay, the mission, glory hallelujah and shake an angry fist at the Enkindlers. Once they reached Earth, they'd drop smack into the middle of a protected world heritage site on the northwestern slopes of Mount Fuji. The site promised to add thirty layers of complication to a mission already doomed to the land of FUBAR, because it was based on intel as sketchy as a toddler's stick figure: is it grandma or the cat? Of course, if she smashed her way through the Sea of Trees, a diplomatic incident awaited at the other end.

The Aokigahara. Damn but didn't it make sense? Indoctrination signals warping minds for thousands of years from somewhere under the mountain. As a kid, she'd owned a book about the most mysterious places on Earth, and that forest—that beautiful, sad, haunted forest—both captured her imagination and terrified her. She'd never been able to guess at what drew people there for such sad purpose, and the idea that it might be linked to reaper signals leaking from their base tied her gut in knots.

Nothing exists that the reapers can't poison.

Familiar footsteps approached the door, drawing her from her thoughts. "It works," Nihlus announced, stepping through the door. "The Aratoht Protocol crushed the test ship into a three meter blob. The relay simply dropped it at the origin for the tow ship to cart away."

Shepard nodded but didn't look back. "Excellent. We'll get at least a few of them before they can cause trouble."

Her verro stepped between Shepard and her view of the void, his shadow slipping over her datapad. "After the demonstration, Liara said that she and her entourage are on their way to meet us at Earth. Apparently, they've discovered something too sensitive to discuss, even over the QEC."

Crouching, he settled his hands on her knees, a welcome invasion of her borders. "We just closed the channel to her when Fedorian contacted us to say that he, a Matriarch Saela S'aris, and Dalatrass Linron are on Earth for a meeting with the AoN."

Shepard looked up, her stare abandoning the stars outside the portal for the ones in Nihlus's eyes ….

Dear, sweet baby Enkindler Jesus, what part of farmland grows that variety of corn? Corny on the cob, coming right up.

... finding his gaze warm and bright. "We should book a couple of rooms in Vancouver, see if we can elbow our way into Hackett's schedule, get everyone together."

Nihlus nodded and leaned in, his brow gentle and solid against hers. "It sounds like a good idea. I don't think the war will wait much past our destroying the collectors."

"Yeah." Shepard sighed, her eyes closing. "Once their most obvious agents are dead, the less overt ones will scour every corner of the galaxy looking for the keys."
The soft rumble of a cleared throat pulled them apart, turning Shepard's attention to the door. Kaidan stood there, face glowing bright red. "Do I have to throw water on you two again?" he asked.

"Everyone else better be right behind you, Alenko." Shepard grinned, then touched her brow to Nihlus's before sitting back. She watched Sparky cross the floor to sit on the couch facing them. His biotics weren't all that became stronger in her absence. He was a good choice for one of the other team leaders. She sighed; as much as she hated to do it, she'd have to use Miranda as well.

Leaving her without enough time to talk herself out of using Miranda, the door opened, Garrus ushering Jack and Sol into the room. He held his mandibles high and tight, telling Shepard the contents of their conversation prior to the door opening.

Ah, little sisters: even when they love you, you want to kill them.

"Believe me, even though a human couldn't hear it, he squealed when the test ship dropped out of the relay." Sol walked backwards, fixing a smartass grin on her brother. "He's such a complete nerd."

Jack nodded, looking very sage as she did. "I know, I've caught him making out with the thanix cannon more than once." A long breath bled between dark red, pursed lips. "I haven't had the heart to tell Shepard that she's actually his mistress." The biotic aped wiping away a tear. "It's just sad."

"All right, you've had your fun." Garrus spun Sol around and pushed her toward the seats, his expression rigid, but from trying not to grin rather than annoyance. "Go away. Now."

"Such a grouch." Still, Sol stomped off and perched herself on the edge of the couch, all feigned angles and spikes. After a moment of stiff-plated silence, she grinned at Shepard, pretense evaporating. In the moment, Shepard understood how much hurt Garrus's separation from his family had created, and how much his finding them again had healed.

Garrus crossed behind Shepard to sit on her right side. He ran his talons over her hair, the touch soothing. "Did Nihlus fill you in?"

Closing her eyes, she leaned into his touch. She nodded, but didn't get a chance to answer before the rest of the ground team filed through the door and began the noisy process of settling in. Maybe, after they completed the mission, they'd manage to wrestle a little alone time from life's tight-ass grip.

Right. Keep dreaming, Sister Shepard-Vakarian-Kryik.

Darkness. Shepard fumbled her way forward, a captive beating at the air, groping to find the walls of her cell. Despite flailing and falling for several minutes, no cement or bars blocked her path. No walls! How could she be imprisoned without walls?

A light. There needed to be a light switch or a window. She shuffled forward five or six steps … or what amounted to steps taken on one's knees. Her right thigh caught on something, the flesh screaming as a sharp—but un-bullet or blade-like—object sank into the meat between plating. A hard, painful grip latched onto her shoulder. Twisting, she fell, slapping at the darkness and stabbing fingers or talons that held her, knocking it away. Wood? She slid a hand down her thigh, cursing the tiny slits of murky fog that promised sight and revealed nothing.

Her fingers discovered wood. Yeah, definitely wood. A branch. She snorted softly. Fantastic, the infamous Captain Shepard brought down by branches. Wait, branches? Where the hell was she?
Surely somewhere so dark had to be an underground cell or crypt.

The last word stabbed through her gut to wrap gelid fingers around her spine. No, stop it. It's not a crypt. Sweet baby Jesus, she needed to breathe and calm down. A trembling breath tightened the grip on her spine rather than relieving it. Where the hell was she? Last thing she remembered, she'd been on the *Normandy*, briefing her teams on the mission.

One hand clawed at the ground, coming away with a handful of loose matter. Particles of the stuff stabbed her nostrils, setting off what Garrus called her fully-automatic sneeze. Mold … damp earth … she closed her eyes and took a deep, purposeful sniff. Leaves. It was dead leaves and loamy soil … and rotted wood … and blood. The ground in her hands whispered; tar-black vapours boring through her gloves, wriggling between material and skin, then beneath. It climbed up her arm and slithered along her jugular to form the suzerain's familiar barrier around her mind.

That meant a reaper signal. Where the hell was she that the spiders felt the presence of an indoctrination signal? And … and why couldn't she remember?

No. Shepard threw herself up onto her knees, clapping and wiping at her hands until the sensation of the slick, black vapours faded. She needed to assess real injury and real danger, not let her imagination run wild.

"Where am I?" She whispered, not certain she wanted anyone to hear her. Not until she remembered how she got there, and that—she rubbed a trembling fist over her eyes, ragged edges of torn skin catching on her glove—would have to wait until she got her back against something and her gun out front.

Vision not improving for the extra dose of pain, she heaved one foot under her, arms flailing as she fought for balance. Once stable, she shoved the pain behind a door and locked it up tight. Nothing felt broken, just bruised, sliced, and bent. She reached up to her ear, triggering her implant, but then thought better of sending shouts out on the airwaves before she knew her location.

*Note to self: Screaming in hostile territory never a good plan.*

Footsteps approached, a barely audible whisper of movement in the moss. "Shush, now." Hard fingers caressed Shepard's cheek, the touch gentle despite leaving behind searing contrails of agony. The specific brand of pain felt familiar, raw and scorched. Burned … she'd been burned? How? Where …? Panic surged up her throat, heavy and slow, cooling lava or treacle, scalding and bitter. Definitely lava.


Taking a deep breath, she reached up, grabbing the thing as it touched her face again. Her fingers closed around a hand. But hard. Metallic? She searched the mist for the face behind the unrelenting grip, but couldn't make out anything more than a dark shape. She slapped the hand away. "Who …?"

"It's okay, I won't hurt you."

Shepard spun on the soft, very uneven, floor. Her actions filled the air with a cloud of rotting vegetation and musty earth. It burned all the way into the center of her head, demanding that she sneeze. Instead the pressure tunneled out her tear ducts. Scrambling, she backed up, finding refuge in the solid bulk of a massive stump.

"I … I can't see." Bolder for having cover at her back, she tested the sound of the words, finding
them altogether too credible. Electricity sizzled along her veins until it stabbed into her heart, jolting it into a full gallop. All the gentle forest sounds from a half-breath earlier warped, insidious: every susurrus of leaf against loam the stalking paws of a predator, every bird chirp a warning, every snapping twig the intractable tread of death.

"Easy now, you're going to hurt yourself."

Stumbling back onto all fours, Shepard jumped around to face the voice. It sounded synthesized. "Who did you say you were?" Her right hand slapped her hip, coming away with her sidearm's reassuring weight resting in her palm. "What happened? Where am I?" She spat the questions along streaks of ice-cold venom. Knees wide, she managed to balance enough to hold the pistol in both hands, the barrel lunging at every sound.

One footstep rustled through the moss. "It's okay. My name is Marion, and I won't hurt you."

Shepard held her breath, tracking the woman despite her reassurances. "What happened to me? Where are Garrus and Nihlus … my crew?"

The woman's armour grated—metal and ceramic grinding against one another—as she crouched at Shepard's side. "You were in an accident. I believe your eyesight will return in time. It's simply a reaction to the explosion's glare."

Shepard drew back, wincing away from the metallic edge to the woman's voice. Something felt off, and more than just the whispers caressing her ears, burrowing through her implants and into her brain. "Who are you? You sound …." She waited, expecting to hear a sharp intake of breath or a sigh … some reaction to pointing out what was likely an implant to correct a disability. Instead … nothing but a protracted pause. "Are you geth?"

"I'm Marion Whittaker, and I pulled you from the wreckage of your shuttle." Gentle but hard hands gripped Shepard's arm, lifting.

"My crew?" Shepard's heart seized as the word 'wreckage' registered. Right, the shuttle … the mission to find the collector base under Mount Fuji. "Where are Nihlus and Garrus? Sol? Thane?" She pushed against the woman's support, managing to scramble to her feet. "There were four people in the shuttle with me."

The woman—Marion—wrapped an arm around Shepard's waist, providing much needed support and balance. "I don't know what happened to them. I'm sorry. Your shuttle was hit by several missiles. I found you in a small section of cockpit, but located no one else, alive or … otherwise." She let out a faint, chittering sigh. "As far as I can tell, it's just you, me, and the trees."

Speaking of … what was a lone woman doing in the middle of the Aokigahara? "What are you doing out here?"

"That's a long, strange story that I don't understand myself." Gentle hands guided Shepard across the ground. "Here, sit down and we'll take a look at your eyes." The unyielding grip eased her down onto a large, flat surface.

Shepard kept her sidearm held tight against her, shielding it from being snatched away while her other hand reached up to her aural implant. "Shepard to Normandy. Come in, Normandy?" Nothing, not even static. Damn, the explosion blew out her implants. How the hell was she going to find her people?

"I'm not sure how I ended up here," Marion said. "One minute I was eating breakfast in my
apartment in Singapore, and the next I woke up in a nightmare." Her teeth chattered, betraying a heavy shudder. "It looked like a laboratory straight out of Frankenstein … or something Clive Barker dreamed up … mechanical monsters everywhere."

"May I touch you?" Shepard asked, her voice shattering into a croak.

"Of course." The woman shuffled closer, dropping her shadow over the thin slit of light that made up Shepard's vision.

Shepard tugged her glove off and reached out, her hand rough as she groped her way up Marion's arm to her shoulder and neck. It all felt the same, cold, hard, and rough rather than the smooth softness of flesh or even clothing.

"Is it okay to touch your face?" the captain asked. Her hand hovered, waiting for a reply … hell, dreading it.

The woman moved to meet Shepard's hand. "It would be unforgivably rude for me to be able to see you and deny you the ability to see me." A synthesized chuckle followed.

Shepard's heart lifted, clinging to the hope that Marion owed her voice to a prosthetic. Husks couldn't speak and geth didn't show emotion. A second later, as Marion's cheek impacted her palm, the battered organ splashed down into her guts. Hard, desiccated, papery skin. As her fingers explored, they discovered the reticulated cable that stabbed into the woman's cheek, the smaller one that invaded her mouth.

*Dear lord, she's a husk.*

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*(A-N: So sorry if this chapter sucks. I've been so off my game lately that I really just needed to stop picking at it and hating on it and get it out there. Thanks for your patience with me. You know I love you guys. *hugs and kittens*)*
"Sister with a broken leg … wife missing. Shepard's out there …. I can't go back and tell the general …." A heavy groan rolled out hot on the tail of Martin's pre-eulogy.

Nihlus bit back a gutful of impatience. They needed to move, not talk. They'd wasted hours fumbling around. They could fill the others in after they found Shepard and solved the mystery of the roaming husks.

**Buratrum** - The realm of the spirits of dishonourable association. Equivalent of hell. It consists of twelve levels, the deepest two of which are so deep as to be unknowable and reserved for evils so horrific as to be unspeakable.

**Torin** - Torini plural. Male turian of the age of majority (15)

**Tarin** - Tarini plural. Female turian of the age of majority (15)

**Fratrin** - Brother, but one of honour, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus.

**Filitrin** - Sister, but one of honour, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus.

**Ylasiun** - The ancient turian version of heaven. The realm where all honourable warriors spent eternity.

**Derra** - Wife

**Verro** - Husband

Previously on *Future Imperfect*: Garrus and Shepard married in a sweet ceremony in his parent's backyard the day after discovering a massive collector base under Cipritine. They then headed off to help Miranda save her sister from an evil Cerberus stooge of a father. Orianna and her family are now working on the Sanctuary project. As soon as they recovered, Nihlus and Shepard bonded.

Now, while Garrus and his father investigate the Andromeda Initiative, Shepard and Nihlus are leading teams to investigate reported husks sighting on the slopes of Mount Fuji. On the way, their shuttle was shot down. When Shepard awoke, she'd been pulled from the wreckage by a husk named Marion. Yup, a talking, aware husk.

And now …

91 Days ASR 2213 hrs

"Shepard? Shepard, do you read?" Nihlus shivered, the black forest pressing in, and turned up the heater in his armour. "Captain Jane Shepard, squawk if you're reading this message but can't reply."
Nihlus turned from his pacing route, a five metre path of trampled bush. He answered the silence with a rumbling keen. Where in the pits of *buratrum* was she? Surely, even if she was unconscious after the crash … well, it had been nine hours.

Nine hours: the sun long surrendered to the frozen dark of night. Nine hours wasted conducting a search while both blind and deaf. He hadn't realized how dependent he'd become on EDI's overwatching eyes in such a short time.

"*Tarc!*" He clenched his mandibles against his face. Shepard was fine.

He glanced over at Sol. A few metres away, his *filitrin* wrapped her right ankle in an instant cast. "You need help with that?" he asked. He'd carried her the four klicks from the crash site, the ankle hanging at a truly gruesome angle.

She shook her head and tried for cocky despite the pained rictus that glued her mandibles to her mouth. "Back off *obluvis.* It'll be a dry day during monsoon season on the flooded coast when I let those meat hooks maul my delicate digits."

A soft rumble from Thane announced the drell's return, the ex-assassin a spectre coalescing out of the darkness. "I located the other half of the shuttle—it landed three kilometers northwest of the main crash—but Captain Shepard was not in the wreckage." The drell offered the Spectre a sharp nod in answer to his worried subvocal. "Large squads of soldiers are searching both sites. It's Cerberus." He hummed, an almost-growl rumbling deep in his throat. "And it's fair to say they know we're here."

Nihlus chuffed. "Fair to say. We made quite the entrance, no doubt due to missiles they launched at us. We were too far from the LZ to be collectors."

"Yeah," Sol agreed, "the park's too busy for Collectors to be wandering everywhere. We'd have a ton of reports from hikers about the scary bug people."

The Spectre paced another lap of his track. "Cerberus." The name came out riding the front wave of a belly-deep growl. "What the *mabul* is Cerberus doing here, shooting at incoming shuttles? If the base is spitting out husks, it has to be the Collectors. What does Cerberus get out of turning people into husks?" After indulging his anger for a moment, he shook his head, trying to break its hold. It served no purpose other than clouding his mind.

"Great," Sol grumbled as she sealed the end of the cast. "Collectors … Cerberus … missing sister …." She stood, testing her ankle as the cast set with a series of sharp clicks. "Can we start today over?"

"Indeed." Thane stepped to Solana's side. "How badly is it broken?"

She chuffed and looped an arm around the drell's neck. A single shake of her head dismissed their concern. "It was dislocated, not broken, but I set it. It'll hurt like *buratrum*, but it'll bear my weight."

"Sol, seriously, are you going to be able to move at speed? Fight?" Nihlus asked, doubting she'd tell him the truth even if she'd shattered the thing into powder. "We're three hours past check in. Anderson will come looking. We can set up a defensive perimeter here and wait for him to evac you." Despite his words, he stepped toward her, offering her his arm. She shook her head, but didn't pull away.

"Thanks, big *fratrin*, but if I try to walk dangling from your shoulders, I'll dislocate the rest of me."
She tipped her head to rest against Thane's brow. "Handsome, silent, and deadly over here's got me."

Thane cleared his throat, snapping that subject off at the root. "I located several tracks amidst the mess Cerberus made at the second site." He paused, his attention jerking to the darkness beyond the radius of their lights. Without a word, he guided Sol over to a log and sat her down behind it before, in swift silence, the drell vanished.

Nihlus vaulted over the nearest fallen tree, using its blanket of vines and moss as cover. Shotgun settling easily in his hands, he followed Thane's lead, watching the north side of their tiny clearing. For a couple of minutes, he didn't hear anything other than the soft twitters and chirps of the forest's nocturnal occupants. Just as he started to think Thane was imagining things, he heard it.

Footsteps. Slow and even, just skimming the foliage. The footsteps of hunters closing in on their quarry.

Closing his eyes, he heightened the rest of his senses to make up for his lack of sight. How many footsteps? A stumble and a quick breath? The almost imperceptible hum of biotics?

"There isn't more than a squad out there," Sol whispered. "Three biotics. Two giants. Four of them are charging heavy overloads. Too organized for mercs."

Nihlus trammeled a snide comeback behind his teeth. According to the galaxy, Archangel amounted to a mob of mercs, and they were pretty damned organized.

"It's them, trust me." The whisper barely registered over the rustling leaves.

"Nihlus Kryik?" A deep, familiar voice caught hold of Nihlus's fringe, dragging him a half step toward the incoming bodies.

"Nihlus? Thane Krios? Friendlies incoming."

Nihlus straightened and let out the breath he'd been holding. "Anderson?" He stepped out of cover without lowering his weapon.

Like a peal of thunder compared to their earlier silence, the squad dropped all attempts at stealth.

Martin crashed through the foliage in two leaps. "Ha! Told you it was them. These eyes see everything. Nihlus?" The kid grabbed the Spectre in a crushing hug. "We thought you guys were all goners when we couldn't raise you on comms. Guess Kasumi was right. Blanket blackout." Dropping Nihlus, he spun toward Sol, sliding a metre on his knees to fuss over her cast. "What happened?"

Sol captured the kid's shoulders, giving him a hard shake. "Spirits, calm down, kid. You're going to kill me flailing around in that mechanical monstrosity." She held him until he calmed down a little. "I dislocated it in the crash, but popped it back in."

Nihlus glanced over at his filitrin on the way to meet Anderson and his mixed squad: it included Miranda's team but not Alenko's. He greeted Anderson with a hurried handshake, looking past the captain to Operative Lawson. "Have you heard anything from Shepard?"

Anderson sharpened. "She's not with you?"

"The shuttle broke apart when we were hit," Sol answered, shoving Martin away from her leg. "Thane found the wreckage, but no Shepard. We've got to find her."
"Sister with a broken leg … wife missing. Shepard's out there …. I can't go back and tell the general …." A heavy groan rolled out hot on the tail of Martin's pre-eulogy.

Nihlus bit back a gutful of impatience. They needed to move, not talk. They'd wasted hours fumbling around. They could fill the others in after they found Shepard and solved the mystery of the roaming husks.

He took a breath, swallowing his frustration. More people could only be a good thing. Besides, Shepard was fine.

Slicing the conversation off before Martin could start a campaign to find Shepard, Nihlus said, "We have Cerberus charging up on us and who knows what hell is waiting under the mountain." He spun to face Thane who'd remained back, out of the light and noise. "You were going to say something about tracks at the other crash site?"

"I located two sets that didn't match the equipment or direction of the Cerberus team," the drell reported. "They led into the forest down slope."

"We've got three missions, three directions." Nihlus sent silent gratitude out into the darkness when no one spoke. Now, who to send where? He turned to Anderson. "Do you have shuttle support?"

Anderson nodded, but his attention clearly remained focused on his own process of solving the list of problems ahead of them. "Shuttle's an hour back at the second LZ. I brought it in when everyone missed their check in times. I found Lawson's team two hours in, shuttle damaged but they managed to land it. No word from Alenko's team, but there wouldn't be."

After rolling all the assets and liabilities around for a moment, Nihlus began to slot them. "Martin, you'll take Sol back to the shuttle. You'll fly out of jamming range and send in our sitrep. If EDI can find a way to establish comms, get it done." Nihlus held the kid's stare long enough to ram home the command decisions Martin would have to make, flying solo for the first time. "Avoid getting shot down if at all possible."

Turning to the Normandy's captain, he continued, "Anderson, you and Lawson will divide up the remainder here and hit the base. If the jamming comes down, see about getting Alliance backup. Maybe if they see what's down there, they'll start cooperating a bit more." Nihlus nodded, their paths set. "Krios and I will search for Shepard and take out any comms and security equipment we find ... make things easier for the rest of you."

Anderson nodded as if Nihlus had just voiced his thoughts, then turned to Lawson, orders falling from his lips with the ease of decades of command. To her credit, Lawson remained silent. Nihlus chuffed. Maybe the Cerberus operative had realized how easily she could be disposed of out there, her body never found amidst the trees.

Sending Thane ahead to scout, the Spectre waited for the rest of them to organize and move out.

Martin scooped Sol up in his arms, but stopped next to Nihlus before heading for the shuttle. "Find her."

Nihlus clapped the kid's shoulder. "She's fine. Don't worry. You just get my baby filitrin out of here in one piece." He paused, dropping his subvocals into a menacing rumble. "I don't want to have to kill you."

Martin scoffed, but surprised Nihlus when he loped out into the trees without leaving behind a
Anderson clapped the Spectre's shoulder. "Take care of yourself out there. We'll be in contact as soon as we have comms."

"You take care as well." Biting back an admonition to stick to recon and call for backup before setting into the base, Nihlus spun toward the spot where Thane had vanished into the darkness.

Five minutes into braving the Jukai alone, Nihlus understood why people called it haunted. The trees breathed, whispers drifting on every exhalation. Their constant movement drew his eyes to his six, three, five … his head on the proverbial swivel. Twigs cracked under invisible feet, shattering the silence of so many lonesome graves. He shuddered, using the action to shake off a few of the scaly, frigid-toed monsters clawing their way up his spinal cord. Thank the spirits, Martin took Sol back to the shuttle. He'd never live down acting like a terrified *drellak* fawn mincing its way through *ungentira* territory.

"Never spent much time in the forest?" Thane asked, a phantasm materializing to walk at Nihlus's elbow. To his credit, the drell didn't show any sign of noticing the Spectre's startled jump. "While not native to this terrain, I find wooded areas calming," the drell said without waiting for an answer. "You appear to find this forest menacing."

"Yeah." Nihlus chuffed, a soft crackle of phlegm rolling in the back of his throat. "I grew up in this sort of terrain, but there's nothing calming about this forest." He hesitated, checking their six. After a second of held breath, he continued, his head cocked to better hear the whispers. "Let's just get out of here."

"The tracks are moving as a pair. One appears to be injured, moving erratically." Thane nodded and trotted back out onto point.

Nihlus followed the drell into the darkness, his world narrowing down to the ghost-pale beam of his flashlight. Stumps covered in moss and ivy reached out into his path, skeletal fingers snatching at his boots. Spirits, he needed to calm the *mabul* down.

The trees weren't trying to eat him, and Shepard was fine.

Shadows, they made their way toward the lower slopes, their progress as painfully slow as it was silent. The trails, when they could find them, weren't hiking trails and hadn't been groomed in a long time, if ever. Roots, vines, and fallen timber tangled into a combination obstacle course and maze. Come sunrise they should be able to pick up speed.

Peering between the blotchy silver trunks into the deep pools of black, he couldn't recall the last time he'd been immersed in such absolute absence. No, that was a lie. He remembered all too well. Haestrom.

He didn't know how Garrus dealt with it and kept going, his entire life just business as usual. One look into his open chest: heart beating, lungs blue and wet …. Nihlus shuddered and turned up his armor heater. It all still lurked half a breath away, clinging chill and damp: a *morimplacus*’s robes. He drank his way through the first weeks, then Shepard returned … impossible but there. Her presence drove back the nightmares, and taking care of her eased him through his days.

Nihlus ran up Thane's heels before he realized that the drell had stopped, his omnitool casting a sickly pall over the greenery. *Tarc.* Of all the times and places to lapse into a self-pity spiral.
"What?" he asked, keeping his inquiry to a pressed whisper. He turned to watch their six.

"Electronics equipment, I believe." Thane picked his way toward a gnarled monster of a tree.

Halfway to it, Nihlus saw the reason for the drell's interest: metal gleamed through the bark, winding up the trunk and into the branches. One cleverly disguised antenna, check.

Thane didn't pause, he just jumped in and began disabling it. "This doesn't look like Reaper tech."

"No," Nihlus agreed, "nor collector tech." He closed in on the tree, keeping his eyes scanning the rest of the forest. "Alliance? Cerberus?" The glare off the drell's flashlight destroyed any chance to see markings.

"Not Alliance; they wouldn't bother making their tech this untraceable." Thane grunted softly. "There."

"Kryik to Anderson. Do you read?" After waiting for a moment, Nihlus shook his head.

Thane turned to face Nihlus, the glow from his omnitool making the shadows dance. "This emitter is part of a larger network. It's possible that taking enough if them down will weaken the signal." He cleared his throat, a rolling grumble. "However, it is probable that Cerberus is registering the failure of this node."

"And dispatching security," Nihlus finished. "Repair too. We'd better get moving."

A thick shower of sparks rained down, pauper's fireworks. "Repair is no longer an option." The drell turned back onto their path, his head set at an angle that practically screamed how much he wished Solana had been there.

"Two of a kind. Spirits, show me mercy."

Thane answered Nihlus's mutter with a warm chuckle.

Something settled in Nihlus's gut as he followed the swift, silent drell. According to Thane, they'd cut Shepard and her companion/captor's lead to less than an hour. Two places showed clear evidence of where their quarry stopped to rest, so either one or both were injured. Nihlus stepped up his pace. If Shepard was a prisoner, her captor could be moving slowly so that Cerberus had time to catch up.

His heart dropped, but he caught it before it splashed down to squelch in the darkness. No more freaking out. No more self-pity. He'd been a Spectre for nearly three decades and a badass for a lot longer than that. Time to finish the mission and meet Garrus in Vancouver. Shepard was fine. She could more than handle herself, even injured. They had far worse to deal with than some forest-dwelling Cerberus before they headed home. He shuddered, that one completely called for: politicians. Dear spirits.

At least he'd get to watch Shepard doing what she did best: torturing the people who pissed her off.

The pair disabled another five emitters before they closed in on Shepard … or what he hoped was Shepard. Whoever they found, if it wasn't Shepard, would want to be actively involved in running their precorin ass off in any direction he wasn't. More than likely, he'd enhance their speed with a hail of bullets hammering them in the ass.

"We're definitely tracking the captain," Thane said in that certain almost-whisper that made Nihlus wonder if drell weren't psychic. An enigmatic smile as his only explanation, the ex-assassin
nodded toward another emitter disguised as a tree. "She seems to be following the network."

Nihlus's nod sliced the air. Of course she was. His derra remained the best Spectre and commando he'd ever known. Under the circumstances, she'd look for a way past the comms blackout. She'd look for a way back to her family, and she'd find it. As soon as Thane found the wreckage without a body, Nihlus just knew. Maybe that's why he hadn't been frantic with worry.

'Or maybe you kept yourself freaking out about something else ... something you could dismiss as fantasy.'

Tarc, even her voice inside his head called him on his crap. A soft chuckle rolled deep in his throat. His derra. Who knew that bond would negotiate so many peace treaties inside his head and his heart? Or that he could love someone so much. His derra. She was fine. Injured, probably, but nothing she couldn't handle herself through.

The familiar shower of sparks let him know the drell was ready to move on. So close now.

Thane moved out, but at true speed for the first time. Trusting the ex-assassin's sense of urgency, Nihlus bolted, hurdling fallen trees, dodging stumps, and hopping roots. Tarc, he'd be lucky to get to Shepard without breaking both legs.

"Nihlus?"

Soft, tentative, his name whispered from behind a tangle of earth and roots. He slid to a stop, talons digging deep furrows through the soft loam. "Shepard?" He took cover behind a stump, the moss bleeding the scents of ancient must and speckled sunshine. "Are you all right?"

A chuckle, laced with shards of bitterness and relief, answered him. "Yes, cikabeknai, I'm alive and kicking. How about you? You sound like you're moving okay."

"I'm fine," Nihlus assured her. "Thane and I came through with a few scratches."

Shepard nodded. "Before you come any closer, I need you guys—hi, Thane—to promise not to shoot my companion."

Nihlus swung out onto the trail, shotgun leading. "What's going on? Are you being held prisoner? Give me your beta recog code, or I'll consider you under duress." He paused, never so glad for her ridiculous code system. "Soggy cornflakes."

"No, love, I'm not a prisoner." She hesitated, muttering under her breath for a second. "Umm ... soggy cornflakes ... . Come on, head trauma ... . Oh! The eighth level of hell."

"The eighth level of hell," he repeated, the words sliding out on a sigh. "Okay."

Shepard stood and stepped out into the open. "Someone pulled me out of the crash and treated my injuries." Nihlus's derra held out her hands, but didn't look at him.

Three lunging steps closed the distance enough for him to see the medigel-coated burns that both reddened and blackened her face. A mewling keen escaped his second larynx before he could stomp it back down into his gut.

Shepard's hands flew up again, as if to buffet her from his rage or something worse. "I know, love, but my injuries are all from the shuttle blowing up in my face."

Nihlus choked down another keen, this one because he realized why she didn't meet his stare. She
"The person who rescued me is a victim of Cerberus experiments as invasive as the one that brought me back and as horrifying as what they did to Al, and you and Garrus." One hand reached out, fingers flexing. "Cikabeknai, please just let Marion explain before you start shooting?"

"Of course." He closed the metres between them in an instant, wrapping his talons around her fingers. "Why would you …?" And then understanding stepped into his peripherals.

"She's afraid you'll shoot me because I look like the enemy." A husk stepped from behind one of the ancient trees. If it speaking—her diction clear if robotic in tone—wasn't quite mad enough, the thing shrugged and actually managed to look apprehensive through all the desiccated flesh, metal, and tubes. "Or one of them, at least."

"Her name is Marion, and trust me, she's still very much human inside that chassis." Shepard squeezed his hand. "Once we get out of here, we need to hear what she has to say, Nihlus. Cerberus is making serious movements to fuck up our war against the collectors and the reapers, and we're two years behind them."

Pulling his derra into a hug, Nihlus pressed her along his length as close as their armor allowed. The entire galaxy could go to hell for a minute or two: she was all right, at least, mostly. The trees and darkness drew back far enough to let air flow through his lungs once more. He pushed her to arm's length, gentle talons checking her over. "Okay, we won't shoot her. How are you, really?"

Shepherd reached up, her hands trembling as they wrapped around his face. "I'm okay. Lots of little dings, and I can't see anything, but I'm okay to keep going." She released him and looked around, her head cocked. "I hear Sere Krios, but where's Sol? Is she okay?" she demanded, her voice brittle to the point of cracking.

"She's fine," Nihlus assured her. "She dislocated her ankle in the crash, so Martin took her back to the shuttle Anderson brought in when all three squads didn't check in."

"Because of jamming, or because we were all shot down?"

"We don't know about Alenko, but Lawson's shuttle took fire as well. They managed to land," Thane assured her as he stepped out of the bush. The drell met Nihlus's gaze with one looking for guidance. "We need to keep moving."

"Yes," Shepard agreed. "Marion can bring you up to speed on the pertinent facts as we move." Shepard slipped her hand into Nihlus's. "We were retracing her escape route to find the security office where she broke out of the mountain. I'm hoping there's comm equipment there to contact the Alliance." She waggled her head a little. "And maybe some intel if EDI is able to do a little digging."

"I'll lead the way," Marion said. The husk stepped around them, giving Nihlus and Thane a wide berth.

"Marion, this is my husband, Spectre Nihlus Kryik, and an associate, Sere Thane Krios." Shepard slipped her arm through Nihlus's elbow. "I swear to you, they're both honorable people and they'll help me find your daughter."

Nihlus cocked a brow plate, a shudder churning its way through his body. Find the husk's daughter? What in the pits was going on under that mountain? Cerberus did this to the woman, not the collectors?
Shepard didn't give him time to consider anything. "If you're not hurt, carrying me will be a lot faster." A soft grunt and wince accompanied the words. "And it'll save my shins."

Every other thought in his head evaporated as Nihlus embraced her. "Always," he whispered, her weight nothing as he lifted his derra to cradle her in his arms.

They moved through the forest far more quickly for Marion's surety and the extra flashlights, taking out another six emitters before the husk lifted a hand to bring the small squad to a halt.

Nihlus understood in the next second as he heard voices from the clearing a hundred metres ahead. He eased Shepard down onto her feet and then into cover. They turned off all their lights, then crept up to get eyes on. A pair of soldiers in white heavy armour loitered half-hidden in the undergrowth.

"They don't appear to be concerned," Shepard whispered, her head cocked. "So either the base isn't under attack, or there are two bases and theirs isn't under attack?"

"How long ago did Marion escape?" Nihlus crouched by Shepard's side, his mouth pressed to her ear.

"Weeks. She's been wandering the mountain trying to get back in. When she escaped, she searched the facility, but couldn't find Amy." Shepard's throat worked for a moment before Nihlus heard her swallow. "The kid's eight, cikabeknai."

His turn to swallow hard as a fist squeezed his heart. Child-sized husks wouldn't be of much use as weapons; only pain awaited Marion under the mountain. He closed his eyes as the image of his baby girl flashed through his head. No. He forced her adorable face to the back of his mind. Still, he allowed a pang of homesickness for the future he'd seen on Thessia. They needed to get the damned war done and over with so his family could get on with their lives. Spirits, he ached for that day.

"You with me, love?" Shepard's hand stroked the length of his neck.

He leaned into her touch and nodded.

"Thane," Shepard whispered, directing the drell through hand signals. A quick nod answered her and then the drell disappeared into the darkness.

Shepard shifted a little. "He's off to dispose of the guards, I take it."

Nihlus pressed in, supporting Shepard against his side. She was fine. She'd always be fine. She would. "Yes."

The first guard disappeared. One second there, yacking at his buddy a few metres away, the next gone. Without a sound. Less than a minute later—not long enough for his partner to wonder why his joke went without a laugh—the second guard disappeared just as silently.

"He's an artist," Nihlus whispered. As much as he liked and respected Thane, sometimes the drell terrified him as well. In an entire galaxy of assassins, no one equalled Thane Krios, even retired.

Just under five minutes passed before Thane reappeared at Shepard's side, only a slight wheeze betraying the drell's exertion. "The door only opens from the inside," he reported. He shrugged. "We've got two sets of armour, but they've got tech wired inside their heads that syncs into their helmets." He paused, a distinctly nauseated expression on his face. "I don't even know that we'd be able to replicate their voices."
"I think this is where I come in." Marion crouched on Nihlus's left. I'll need help getting into the armour, but I can modulate my voice through the synths in the helmet." She let out a soft growl. "They based all our comm upgrades off the same tech."

"I'll go with Marion," Thane said. "Neither of you will fit the armour."

Shepard reached out, Thane completing the contact when he gripped her fingers. Nihlus's derra shook her head. "I don't like this. Be careful. Marion, say no more than you absolutely need to. Once the door's open, we'll be right behind you."

Nihlus watched the husk, searching past the horrific, skeletal features for traces of the woman. An image flashed through his mind, one of the turian husks with red/brown hide, its white familia notas barely visible through the metal.

"Your friend is good with that canon on his hip?" Marion asked, eyeing Thane's Carnifex. Or at least he thought she was: how did one tell where lights in the center of empty sockets were looking? Spirits, how could someone be so essentially damaged and be alive?

He glanced at Shepard. Judging by the extent of her scarring, Shepard could look just like Marion under her skin, a thin layer of flesh disguising the monster. Even so, he hadn't doubted her for a moment.

"None better. Don't worry, Thane'll have your back." Shepard jerked her head toward the forest. "Get on with it, I need to get Dr. Chakwas."

Nihlus squeezed Thane's shoulder as the drell hurried past, a silent vote of confidence. Once they disappeared into the foliage, Nihlus wrapped his arm around Shepard. "You're sure of her?" he whispered into the sweat-soaked hair caked around her ear. As much as he hated asking because of the larger, unspoken questions, he asked.

Shepard turned to press a soft kiss against his mandible. "As sure as I am of myself." She shrugged and curled into him a little. "What husk remembers itself let alone spending weeks frantically searching for its child? She's important, Nihlus. I can't see why yet, but I know she is."

"Okay." He shifted his weight to his other leg. "When we go in, hang onto my belt. I'll go in on the left, clear left and then right. Stick close and use Garrus's shields if we come under fire."

Shepard chuckled. "You've been hanging around your fratrin too much. His overprotectiveness is contagious."

Nihlus chuffed. "You're blind, haksaya kubenar. This isn't overprotectiveness, it's trying to get you home with your head attached rather than being a carry on."

"Details." Chuckling, Shepard blew a soft raspberry. "There's an awkward conversation with a flight agent."

Nihlus nodded toward Thane and Marion emerging from the spot in the bush where the guards disappeared. So far, so good. They both looked the part despite being shorter than the originals. Unable to see the entrance or hear the exchange, Nihlus judged the pair's success by their body language. It didn't take long before they vanished through a wall of foliage; Marion must have been very convincing.

"Okay, we're up," he said, moving Shepard's hand from his arm to his belt. When he stood, moving low through the trees, Shepard stuck with him, anticipating his movements. Gone was all of the hesitation they'd seen while tracking her through the forest. Without a single misstep, she clung
closer than a shadow, one-hundred percent Council Spectre Cpt. Jane Gwendolyn Shepard.

Inside the door, Thane and Marion waited, helmets on, Thane's pistol at low ready.

"I can access base security," Marion announced. "It shook hands with my implants through the helmet as soon as I got within three metres of the entrance. I have access to floor plans, and door locks, and camera feeds." She cocked her head for a moment. "Offsite communication and general server access is in the security wing. I can lead the way."

Shepard moved up on Nihlus's flank a little, her Suppressor in her right hand. "Let's get in there and out before the morning shift starts packing the halls."

Less than ten seconds after coming through the door, the whispers began scratching at the base of Nihlus's skull, threat stalking from every shadow, claws and tentacles slithering out to snatch at his ankles. He shuddered. At least his fear grew out of reality inside the base and its sterile bleached-bone walls: if they captured him, he might not be lucky enough to break a leg part way through their testing. What would become of Nihlus Kryik then?

They paused at a corner, and a firm but gentle hand caressed the length of his neck before urging him forward. Of course Shepard understood. She'd been brought back to life in a nightmare just like that one.

"Twenty metres—" A deafening klaxon blast drowned out the rest of Marion's instructions.

"Our people are moving against the facility," Shepard called. "We're out of time. Marion, use your access to see if you can find Amy. Don't be afraid to shoot your way through the enemy, but your uniform should cover you. Thane, will you go with her? Two will make the search faster."

"Of course, Captain." The drell shifted closer to the husk.

Shepard leaned toward Marion. "Half an hour and meet us back at the entrance if you're coming with us."

"Thank you for your help, Shepard." The husk grasped Shepard's hand. "I never thought I'd find a friend in that wreckage." The husk … Marion turned to Nihlus. "The main security office is twenty metres down and through a set of doors. Another ten metres on, turn left into a main corridor. The office is the first door on the right. The emergency code is 5GSH6499ER2067WXPX79. You'll need a recognized biometric signature."

Spirits, he hoped his suit cam caught that number. "Understood." He waited a second to see the other pair safely away before urging him forward. Of course Shepard understood. She'd been brought back to life in a nightmare just like that one.

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They made it through the double doors before a tide of bodies and weapons swept over them. Platoon and squad leaders moved their people through in focused, orderly lines … too orderly and focused to even notice them. Nihlus let out a long breath, guiding Shepard around the outside, wishing for the first time that he'd adopted Saren's fetish for head gear and capes. Still, not a single head turned their way despite the spectacle they must make.

"Are those upgrades Marion mentioned responsible for the fact no one is noticing us … like, at all?" Shepard whispered. She pressed against Nihlus's back. "Do you think it extends to the unit
"What's your plan?" he asked even as he inspected the security station. He entered the code despite knowing that whatever she did next, it would knock the insanity jar off the shelf.

"Hey there, soldier." Shepard stuck her arm out, fumbling for a second before she caught hold of the lieutenant from the head of the next platoon, spinning the man around. She shoved him into the scanner, pausing just long enough for the door to click, then spun him back out into the tide, headed the right direction.

Nihlus pushed the door open, staying low as he ducked through. He held the door, ushering Shepard through under his arm. Outside, the line never paused, the lieutenant reeling for a moment before stumbling into a wall. What in the pits …? The man—if that's what he could still be called —couldn't process what Shepard had done.

"No alarm? Now, that's horrifying," Shepard whispered, her voice hoarse with a terror that gutted Nihlus on the spot. Her hand felt down his back, latching onto his belt, in motion without hesitation. "What in the holy name of fuck are they doing to these people? It's starting to look like Marion got luc—"

Bullets and shrill screams sliced off anything else Shepard intended to say. Nihlus ducked behind a low dividing wall, Shepard slipping right in behind his shoulder, her rounds hitting with remarkable accuracy. He glanced out, taking stock of their situation. *Tarc*, they should have kept Thane with them. He winced as the screamer upped their decibel level. Dear spirits, someone needed to shut that one up before Nihlus's aural implants blew.

"The main room is a maze of cubicles," he whispered. "Twenty five or so dug into decent cover." He shifted a little, keeping his legs ready to move quick and low.

"We'll just take it slow and by the numbers, *cikabeknai*." She fired off two shots and swapped sinks. "Okay."

Picking white and gold uniforms from white and gold cubicle walls as bodies ducked and dove for cover—some fleeing, some digging in for battle—proved nauseatingly difficult. The whole room seemed to move, rocking like the deck of a floundering ship. He shuffled forward, keeping his weapon at high ready, but silent, letting the civilians get out. "Collateral," he whispered over his shoulder by means of explanation.

"Take your time; the rest of the base is busy." She settled behind his right arm, their guns only recoil distance apart. The aura of confidence—of trust—she exuded, calmed and humbled him. She believed so completely in both of them that he couldn't doubt the outcome. She drew him back out of his head with a soft touch. "Just call the field as it clears."

Someone killed the lights, and the screaming stopped. No one moved for a few seconds, giving the battlefield time to settle in his head. "Shooters at eleven, one-thirty, and four."

"Got it."

Shepard pressed in close, using his body language to direct her. When he leaned out, he let her deal with the ones he'd tagged, and if blood didn't start splashing the walls. Not first shot, and not every shot hit, but as soon as they returned fire, she put them down.

He'd bonded with the most remarkable person in the entire galaxy.

As one body, they settled into the familiar rhythms of battle, fighting their way across the room.
like they knew what they were doing. Although Nihlus continued to call out enemy positions, he needn't have bothered. He knew that through a combination of his movements and her hearing, Shepard saw the battlefield as clearly as he did.

"I think we're clear," she whispered, the room warping her voice as it echoed through the baffling effect of cubicle partitions. "Let's get moving."

"Yeah." A thin specter of acrid smoke, sour sweat, and blood crawled into his nose, making itself a home deep inside his skull. He sniffed even knowing it wouldn't move out any time soon. "Stay here, keep an ear out." Moving slowly, Nihlus cleared the rest of the room before calling Shepard out of cover.

He watched her as he returned across the room, fascinated by the process going on behind her sightless eyes and cocked head. Even before he reached her, she set off toward a door in the back corner. What did she hear? None of them knew how extensive her modifications and upgrades had been. Lawson said that her boss wanted the original Shepard, but then they found the modification chip.

"There's a hum from behind that wall," she said, pulling him from his worries. "That's the comm center. Let's get this done."

Their shuttle shuddered, dropping about a half-metre. Shepard lunged for Nihlus's arm, slamming her knuckles into his armour before wedging them through his elbow.

"Sorry folks," Lt. Cortez called back from the pilot's seat. "It's just a little turbulence. There's a series of thunderstorms across the Pacific." He twisted to look back through the door, realization clouding his expression as he saw Shepard's face. "I don't want you to worry, Captain, there are no more VI autopilot crashes for you," the pilot announced. "From now on, I'm taking you door to door. Safer than a baby in its cradle."

Shepard chuckled, but her grip on Nihlus's arm didn't loosen. "Thanks, Tex. That's great to know." Wriggling in closer, she sighed for Nihlus's ears only. "I need something to take my mind off the amazing bronc shuttle." She looked up out of habit, even though she still reported no returning sight. "EDI, any word from the teams in the base?"

"Admiral Hackett's reinforcements have arrived, Shepard. Friendly casualties are light. Captain Anderson's last check-in estimated another four hours to completely clean out the base. Also, judging by the speed of Mordin Solus's report delivery, he seems pleased with the specimens and data his science team is collecting."

Nihlus laughed and hugged Shepard closer. He could only imagine. That nightmare would be the scientist's version of *ylasium*.

"Excellent." Shepard gingerly rested her head on his shoulder. "Have Marion and Thane met up with Mordin's group?"

Nihlus nodded, also concerned. The pair had been unable to locate Marion's daughter. Instead, they'd discovered a great many projects in various stages of transformation between human and husk. Most proved too far gone: insane, in unbelievable agony, or fully converted and mindless. The moment Shepard heard about more innocent victims, she called Mordin, insisting he put together a team and raid the base for humanitarian purposes. She'd given him orders to transport everyone he deemed fit for rehabilitation to Omega. Marion and Thane would return with them.
Spirits. Nihlus sighed and leaned into his derra a little. As if the reapers and collectors weren't horror enough. Cerberus seemed set to outdo them both. His gut rolled. As much as they needed to go through every letter and number EDI dragged out of the Cerberus computers, he knew it meant the fog of war falling away and a call to arms. They weren't ready. Spirits, they'd never be ready.

Thunder crashed in on them from all sides, the lights in the hold blacking out for five racing heartbeats. The shuttle bucked again, doing its best to throw them from their seats. Sure enough, a second later, Steve whistled. "That was lightning folks, we're going to head up above it before our livers get shaken loose." As the shuttle began to climb, the telltale boom and crackle of a thunderstorm beating against the hull worsened.

Shepard's grip tightened, the child lost in the storm in the Scottish highlands once more. She gulped hard with every jolt, but her voice remained steady when she asked, "EDI, how goes the data mining?"

"I've uncovered a great deal of disturbing information, Captain. There's too much to cover while fighting multiple AI-assisted firewalls, but I believe this extranet speech given by the Illusive Man to Cerberus donors will give you the gist."

"The gist?" Shepard scoffed, the phlegmy cough eclipsing the storm. "Since when do you give gists?"

Nihlus braced for the incoming smartass. Shepard couldn't help infect everyone around her.

"I'm attempting to integrate more vernacular into my speech patterns to better facilitate my ascension to galactic overlord and master," the AI reported in her matter of fact way. Nihlus swore he wasn't just imagining the undercurrent of self-congratulatory wiseass.

"Nice," Shepard said, her voice warm, rolling with unexpressed laughter. In an instant, the thunderstorm building inside the shuttle dissipated, her stranglehold on Nihlus's arm easing. Thank the spirits for EDI.

"Read me that bastard's speech, cikabeknai." Shepard wriggled in closer. "Fury's a good antidote to fear of being blown out the shuttle door."

Nihlus nuzzled the back of her head. "Only if you promise to let my arm have its blood back."

When she laughed and loosened her grip on his arm, he opened the file from EDI. He read down the transcript, ignoring all the preliminary jargon and introductory nonsense. When he found the meat of the speech, he cleared his throat.

"We need not fear the harvest to come, instead we must stride boldly forward to prepare. While the races and Archangel struggle to find ways to destroy what they can not even fathom, Cerberus has already made great strides forward in not only replicating the reapers' technology, but subverting it. Our people on Mars continue to dig into the treasure trove of what the protheans left us, and what they're discovering is nothing less than revolutionary."

Swallowing, Nihlus struggled to find enough moisture in his mouth to speak. How in all the levels of buratrum had he and Garrus and all their sources missed this?

"Nihlus?" Shepard's grip on his arm tightened.

He nodded, then cleared his throat. "Right. Okay." Another rumble and he continued, "All of these fairy tales and myths through the ages haven't just been to warn us or embed the reapers into our collective unconscious." The speech's madness dug frozen, steel talons into his skull, scraping
along the bone. "Instead, I believe they are laced with clues about how we must prepare, how humanity must be enhanced and improved in order to take control of the reapers. Humanity has been offered a manifest destiny … to not only excel but to rule. All we need is the courage to reach out and take what is ours."

A-N: Wow, it's super hard to believe it's been two years, but it has, and I apologize to you, my awesome readers. I'm going to really work on getting this and a couple of other projects finished. Pray for me. :D And I loveses you all.

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